

ROSE

Good thing my daughter is driving: I probably would have blown right past the unmarked storefront in the otherwise abandoned strip on the north end of town. Not until we stand on the sidewalk do I register the penciled mural-in-progress, the lines rising and curling into a wave that morphs into some mythological beast. This reaches up one side of the naked facade, like a tattoo so big and complex it'd take multiple sessions paid for on the installment plan, and might not get finished—let alone shaded and colored in—for years, if ever. “That’s Rex’s. Isn’t it cool?” she says.

I nod agreeably, Rex (what kind of name is that, anyway?) being the friend of a friend who’s signed on to give her whatever tattoo she wants and only charge the shop minimum, thanks to some web of obligation or loyalty I won’t try to penetrate. What she wants, miraculously, is a rose, the very thing I suggested—I, whose advice, in the increasingly rare instances when I offer it, is likely to be summarily dismissed as deriving from some alien thought system. Eye-rolling seems to be out, since she’s officially no longer a teenager. Instead she gapes at me like I just stepped off a spaceship and says, “What does that even *mean?*”

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“I need a cigarette before we go in,” she announces now.

She’s claimed for some months to be in the process of quitting, down to only a few smokes a day. Each time she reports this, I say how impressed I am.

I position myself upwind, but the breeze shifts, so I move to the other side and a few feet farther away—far enough that if someone cruised past, they wouldn’t think we were standing together.

She power-exhales and flicks her ash at arm’s length, as if even she wants to stay clear of the stink. “Sorry, I’m really nervous,” she says.

Understandable. I’d be nervous, too, if I had an appointment with some guy I’d never met to carve a permanent image into my flesh with an electrified needle. But no, that doesn’t even compute, because never in this lifetime would that be happening. Not that I ever imagined I’d be casually standing around with my kid watching her poison herself with tobacco—actually relieved, since it might help her calm down a bit.

The whole ride over she held forth about Rex and the rose: how she’d gone online and found the best photo of this giant, antique-looking bloom, and

he'd used some special software to translate that to the drawing that he'd turn into the carbon stencil once we got there and they settled on the exact size. It was going on her lower back, but toward the side—definitely not in the middle, not a “tramp stamp”—because that would be trashy. She was talking so fast and driving with such a jerky impatience, I might have been afraid she was *on* something if I didn't know better.

The door swings open, and out steps a meaty, muscle-bound, skin-headed guy so heavily tattooed and pierced he could be a walking billboard for the shop's services. He looks at her, then over at me, then quickly back at her. “You Rex's seven o'clock?” he says.

“Yeah, hi. I'm Sam. You must be Crosby.” She holds her waning Marlboro out and away in an almost absurdly dainty gesture, given the company, then extends her other hand for a clasp. When did such manners assert themselves?

I remember her mentioning Crosby, the owner, how he'd “seen Rex's work” and was giving him this great opportunity—his own room at the shop—where before, Rex had been illegally “inking people” at his apartment. Now the handshake lengthens to a different sort of transaction as the guy checks Sam over. She's five-seven without the platforms and thin, though in a healthier way these days. She chose the mini tube skirt, with its wide, fold-down waistband, strictly for comfort. Crosby scans the arresting expanse of bare leg with an air not of lust but of artistic appraisal, like here stretches this spectacular virgin canvas.

Finally she reclaims her hand and tilts it toward me. “And this is my mom.” She proclaims this without apparent chagrin, even proudly, and it's another one of those junctures, an odd little slippage in the gears of reality, self. How did we arrive at this moment? When did I become the mother fit to accompany someone to a tattoo parlor? How have we made it through all the downward spirals and slides, the multiple, apparent bottoms, the interventions, the relapses? Suddenly, it's as if the last half-dozen years of our lives have been sucked backward and away in a vacuum *whoosh*, or like I've been shot out of the mouth of a tunnel, blinking into daylight. I stumble to collect myself, smile, and shake the man's hand, so as not to prove an embarrassment.

We follow Crosby inside to a reception area that's unexpectedly spare, almost clinical, like the waiting room for some low-rent medical offices. Maybe the look is only transitional: it appears that the shop recently relocated here; the erection of partial walls that form a cramped corridor leading back

to the treatment rooms has a flimsy, improvised feel, a budget retrofit of the gutted former interior. Rex's space is little more than a cubicle. Crosby shows us in but doesn't enter, as if it would be tight with the three of us. "Rex'll be right with you." He shuts the door carefully but with enough rattling force that the whole makeshift construction might fold in on top of us.

Probably it's the fluorescent tube overhead, but Sam's skin has taken on a sickly tinge. I don't want to know what *I* look like under this light, post-menopausal me, with limp hair and mottled complexion, these natural ravages sped up by what I think of as our *hard time*.

"I guess this is it," she says.

Does she sound excited or terrified? I'm about to tell her she doesn't have to go through with it, that she could pay Rex the fifty bucks for his trouble and call it a night, when the door opens.

If Crosby's the guy you'd pick from a lineup as the most likely tattoo artist, Rex seems an improbable suspect, more like some off-season jock, in his knee-length denim cut-offs and backwards Red Sox cap. He also looks disconcertingly young, an only slightly manlier version of the baggy-clothed boys that sniffed around our house a few years ago, with their newly jutting Adam's apples and shadowy patches of facial hair. To be fair, though, Rex is undeniably shaving; he sports not a beard, exactly, but a surgical strip slicing down from his sideburns and framing his jaw. I might not be sold on the style, but the execution inspires confidence. So does his all-business air as he sets me up on a stool in the corner, pops open a folding table I wouldn't have figured could fit in the space, then slides the drawing from a portfolio.

He and Sam huddle over the paper for long enough that I start to wonder; my daughter is rarely struck dumb. I'm fighting the impulse to stand and go see when she pronounces, "It's perfect."

Fraught concept, perfection, I think, but can't resist peeking.

"Yeah, check it out," she says, snapping to, like she almost forgot that I was there, that the idea of the rose had been my contribution.

Not that I'm angling for credit especially. The drawing *is* beautiful, precise in this almost mechanical way and yet organic, alive. What brings on my hot flush is how many lines it takes to create the illusion of lavish, dense petaling, full but tight, like there's still more to unfurl, like the bloom will keep opening and opening.

This is not just some piece of art we're admiring; those lines are going *into her skin*.

“Wow, amazing,” I manage before I feel myself swaying and clutch at the table.

“Mom.” My sight clears, and I catch the look: exasperated, beseeching. “You promised you wouldn’t be like this.”

Rex glances up from the picture, confused.

“I know, don’t worry. I won’t,” I say.

I ease back to the stool as they consult on the size. Rex photocopies a series of slightly larger and smaller versions, snips the extra paper from around each image, and presses it to the curve Sam has bared for him. She cranes toward the mirror he angles so she can see the reflection. When prompted, I draw out monosyllables of a neutral persuasion, invested but afraid to commit. What defines the parameters? Part of my brain screams, *Go smaller!* But I’m also aware of the danger, a limit in that direction, a point at which all those lines get too fine, too close together—like one of those time-lapse film sequences, but at nightfall, or in reverse, so the rose is swallowing itself, closing not opening.

Finally they try one more, slightly bigger than the last, and she twists around to flash me a smile blazing with enough certainty, enough courage, for both of us.

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Not so long ago, I was the one who was loaning conviction, telling her I believed in her, that she could do it—get clean. Some days I’d look at her and feel like that faith was almost tapped out. Still, I summoned every last drop, just in case it might tip the scale.

Rex has a job to do: making the stencil, something none of Crosby’s fancy equipment can help him with. He sets up on his work station, placing the drawing on a sheet of carbon paper of that particular shade of deep blue I probably haven’t seen since grade school, back when that was still how you copied stuff. Now he has to go over each line of the picture, pressing hard enough to pick up the imprint but not rip the paper.

Sam stretches out on the table, face down, arms folded, like she’ll grab a nap while we wait. Can she seriously be this relaxed, or is it that old out-of-body trick, her gift for escape—the technique she patented in middle school, pre-drugs, drifting off at her desk each class period? As for me in my corner, I’m having trouble just sitting tight. If there were even a little more room in here, I’d be up and roving about. Then it would be like those intake scenarios, the locked holding areas: her passed out and me pacing.

But that's not what I want to remember now. This is different, a celebration—all that over and done. I run my eyes over her gleaming hair, the long spill of her back, lissome yet solid, *here*; I look and look until it seems real to me. Then, for distraction, I find Rex's hands, inching over the paper.

He stood about eye-level with Sam when she took her shoes off—not tall for a guy—so it's surprising how long and slender his fingers are. Squint past the dragons and the other, more obscure mutations vying for space on his forearms, and his hands have a delicate, classical grace. The hands of an artist, a pianist—of a carpenter, like Sam's father. Expressive, almost feminine hands that made pictures in the air when he spoke, that played over my body with the same restlessness that drove him off when Sam was too young to remember him.

Come to find out that for him, a family was like a house, a post-and-beam cabin, say, in a clearing in the woods: you build it with all the care you can lavish, with what passes for love, and then walk away. Somehow all the pictures of him I'd saved were shadowed or not quite in focus. *Was he handsome?* Sam used to ask. *Do I look like him?* And then, when she got older, angrier: *What was he, some kind of junkie? A drunk? Way to pick 'em, Mom.*

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Now she's older still, and less angry. Witness the rose. She didn't want one with a stem, with actual *thorns*; that would be lame, a cliché, she said. Just the flower itself, for the middle name she used to scorn as too girly but has lately taken up again, inscribing her full, three-part signature in a looping, old-fashioned, teacher's-pet script I would have thought she could no longer access on an apartment lease, a used-car title—these legal trappings of her new, sober life. The name she has declared she wishes were her first; the name I gave her after my grandmother.

Rex turns the paper and rolls his neck. I figure it's merely a pause, like now he'll pen through the endless petal lines toward the center from the other direction; like he's just here to trace, and I'm free to drift and remember. But then he lifts the cutout and holds the flip side—the carbon side—to the light, and apparently finds it good because suddenly he's up and in motion. Sam stirs and mumbles assent as he inches up her shirt and tugs down her waistband in this oddly squeamish, gingerly way, as if the body is fair game but her clothes are live-wired, or he's never worked on a girl before. He performs some sleight of hand with a pair of mirrors so she can confirm the location: no room for error now.

From a metal cylinder he produces a fine, glinting spray (misted oil?) to float down on her. The way the particles hang in the air makes me think of the other Rose, Grandma Rosie: how she'd squeeze an invisible cloud from one of the precious bottles of Shalimar and Joy arrayed on her vanity, then step through it with this blissful, transported look on her face, as if it did more than just make her smell better.

Now the designated patch of skin glistens. Rex covers it with the stencil and presses down, moving his lips in a silent count, like he's mouthing the words to some spell. *Abracadabra, presto change-o*, we used to say, Sam and me, playing magic pretend. At what I take to be *ten*, he whisks the paper up and away to reveal the impeccable transfer.

Sam twists around, but the imprint lies just out of view. "How's it look?"

Rex stands back at his table, messing with what could pass for a dentist's drill. He glances up and prompts, "Mom?" with only a glimmer of irony.

How it looks is *gorgeous*, this perfect bloom, twilight purple. So we can go home now, right? No needles, no pain, no damage that can't be undone.

But Sam's waiting. I swore I could handle this. "Great."

"All right," she says. "Then let's do this thing."

There it goes, that game spirit, ready for whatever's next. Does it grow from one root, the pure openness I delighted in when she was little—no fear—and what blossomed into something darker, more dangerous? No limits, no boundaries, never a moment when the answer's not yes to taking this drink, this pill, this line of powder into her body. This needle and its liquid fire.

Rex, too, is ready. The needle he's chosen is smaller than standard, for all those fine lines. I want to think that means it'll hurt less, but actually it's the opposite because it goes deeper, slices into the skin, or so he explains. Sam's eyes meet mine, and I catch a flicker of worry or indignation: *why didn't he say that ahead of time?*

When the buzzing starts, my gaze flies upward. Still, I see her shoulder jump, an involuntary flinch. My own muscles seize, as if I feel the pain, or can absorb it, take it away from her.

But that's one thing I've learned. You can't take away someone's pain, no matter how badly you want to. Even if it's your kid, you gave birth to her—she's a separate person. And the pain: where does it even come from? You've got this perfect creature with all the natural endowments in a world that can suck but be beautiful, too. Yet she's locked in the bathroom incising her flesh

with a razor blade because it hurts so much to be here. And she only quits when she figures out there are better drugs she can do to stop feeling entirely.

Another, more violent, lurch of her shoulder snaps me back to the buzzing noise, which has been droning along like a bee on the rose. If she doesn't hold still, Rex could slip, make a mess of things.

I force myself to follow the sound with my eyes and look at the actual needle, the bloom, the row of tiny red beads springing up along the petal edge that Rex is tracking. When he stops, he grabs a rag and swipes at the blood, the extra ink. I tell myself it's just a picture, a site, not really a part of her. But then, along with the needle buzz, I hear another sound. I wouldn't call it a moan. Something lower, stranger, more primitive. Nothing resembling her regular voice—the kind of sound you don't so much *make* as let it rise out of you.

Does Rex hear it, too? Or is he so far into his trance that it's just part of the hum for him? Suddenly I'm back in the birthing room twenty years ago, hearing a sound issue from my throat that for the life of me I don't recognize, my own mother maybe hearing it, maybe not, pacing out in the hall because she can't bear to watch me suffering. My mother who labored with me in the drugged coma they used to call *the twilight sleep*. And her mother, Rose, pacing out in that hallway, smoking her Lucky Strikes, probably not her usual three but four packs that day.

I've always known my grandmother smoked. Isn't that what all the perfume was for, and why we lost her so early? But now I see her face again as clearly as the ink and blood of this rose, the way her eyes rolled back and up in her head while she was inhaling, like some part of her needed to be taken over, to go away so badly that it was like breath to her.

"You okay? Need a break?" It takes me a second to realize it's Rex, not asking me but Sam.

"Yeah. No, we better push through," she says.

That's what she told me when she was detoxing, withdrawing from opiates at home on the couch because she wouldn't do one more rehab, and it got so bad I wanted to drive her to the ER. "No, I just need to push through," she said. Push through when the pain was breaking through faster, every deadened nerve in her body roaring back to life, but not just normal life, life in overdrive, so her very skin screamed with it.

"Mom, you still there?"

"Yes, I'm here, honey."

This time, her back seizes almost before the buzz sets the air on edge, and I know what I have to do. Or I don't know, I'm just up and sliding my stool before I can stop myself. I set it mid-spine so I can drape myself over her. My hands find her shoulders with what must be the right grip because she's not flinching or shrinking away.

When the needle sings, I can feel the vibration through her body. I feel her spasm, too, but she doesn't jerk since I'm holding her, meeting it.

"Thanks, Mom." That's Rex again.

Behind the curtain of hair, the lift of Sam's cheekbone is part wince, part grin.

This rose will be something to see when we're finished here.