Yellow Roses

It’s a hot one today, perfect weather for summer drinking at the watering hole two blocks away from campus. The bar is nice, but it’s old. I’ve been working here for about six months now and even though I have to deal with broken taps and drunk frat boys all day, it’s comfortable.

There are a few people here this afternoon. Their chatter hums under the loud country music playing on the jukebox. People aren’t drinking to party or perform, just to loosen up. I stand behind the bar and cut some limes. No one’s sitting at the bar. They’re all grouped up at the tables inside and on the outside patio.

The front door creaks open. I see a friend from class come in. She struts her way to the bar and I give her a wave. Her face brightens up with a smile.

“Hey Harry,” she says. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I thought you knew I worked here,” I say.

She shakes her head. “Nope, I like, never really thought you’d be the guy to work at a bar.”

I shrug. “Well, here I am. You want anything to drink?”

She eyes the taps laid out on the wall and rubs her chin for a bit. Her eyes sweep the back of the bar.

“You guys need any help around here? I worked at a restaurant back in high school.”

I’m not surprised she wants to work here. There’s a lot of clout that comes with working here, not to mention the free drinks.

“I’m sure we could find a spot for you,” I respond. I sift through some papers from behind the bar and hand her an application and a pen. “Fill this out. I’ll be your referral.”

She sits and fills out the application. We gossip for a little while.

“Wait, Slater, uh, actually thought that was a good idea,” she says. “Like, what was he thinking?”

“I don’t know, I guess he thought he could just shoot his shot like that. Some guys are stupidly brave sometimes,” I say.

She finishes the application and hands it to me.

“How would you know?” she asks.

“Just seen how a lot of guys act when they like someone.”

“Well how do you act when you like someone?”

I walk out from behind the bar and get ready to take her application to the office upstairs.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I say, flashing a cheap grin. She runs up to me and gives me a light shove.

“You’re such an ass,” she says.

I regret saying that. It came out before I could stop it.

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It takes only about a week for her to get hired. Her first shift starts with barbacking on a busy Friday night. There’s some big baseball game playing, but I couldn’t pay attention to it.

I show her the ropes: registers, changing kegs, cleaning around—everything. She catches on pretty quickly. While we’re in the weeds, she spills a pitcher of beer behind the bar.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” she says.

I walk up to her and try to keep her spirits up.

“Don’t worry, we’ll clean it up once it simmers down a bit,” I say. “We’ve all dropped something before.”

She looks at me and her eyes go soft. I turn away and get back to serving customers.

There’s a certain way she moves. I could almost see a ghost moving with her. Maybe it’s a ghost that moves with me too. I couldn’t know for sure.

Things start to quiet down towards the end of the night. I’m cleaning up behind the bar and I see her bussing a table. A guy walks up to her, slurring his words.

“Hey Kora, how come you’re so beautiful?” he says.

She chuckles. “You’re, like, too sweet.” Not a hint of embarrassment.

We finish out the night. Outside, Kora and I share cigarettes.

“You’re a life saver. I felt, like, a total idiot once I figured out I left my pack at home,” she says.

“Don’t sweat it. So how’d your first shift feel?” I ask.

She lights up her cigarette. The lighter flicks twice before catching. She takes a drag.

“Better than my last job. My manager was, just, a total creep. He’d always hit on me. When I told him I wasn’t interested, he cut my hours. Asshole. I’ve been struggling with rent and stuff too since I cut my dad off. I keep hoping I’ll meet a guy who isn’t trash, and then, like, boom. Another day at the dump.”

“Hopefully things here go alright for you. Our manager’s a bit of a horny bastard, too, but he knows how to be classy. Thank God I don’t have to deal with that kind of thing.”

“Yeah, you should be thankful. It totally sucks.”

“At least people see you and give you compliments all the time. That’s got to be worth something.”

“It’s old.”

“Alright then, no compliments it is,” I chuckle. She laughs. I feel her eyes linger on me for a bit.

I pretend not to notice. I toss my cigarette and start walking to my car.

“I’ll see you next week, Kora.”

Seems like all I can do these days is pretend.

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Time flies by over the next few months. Kora and I work together frequently. She gets promoted to bartender. We both come in outside of work for drinks sometimes.

We never see each other outside of work on purpose. It always happens on accident.

I feel happy when I’m with her. It’s a nice rhythm. We know each other’s cues well. Passing drinks and splitting tasks runs without a hitch.

I’m by myself working the bar. It’s a quiet night. Only a few people are here. They sit in different parts of the bar alone. A country song I don’t like sings through the jukebox.

Kora bursts in through the front door. She’s drunk. Her black pencil skirt clings to her body as her heels pound the floor.

“Harry, I’m, like, so glad it’s you here tonight,” she says.

She goes behind the bar and makes herself a drink. Tequila soda and lime juice.

She puts her drink on the bar and hugs me. I stand there, limp. I don’t hug her back.

“Harry, I love you. I love you, Harry,” she says.

My heart pounds in my chest. Her breath reeks of lime juice and menthols. I wait for her to let go.

She sits at the bar and we talk for a while. Her phone rings.

“Oh, okay. Yeah, yeah, I’ll be there,” she says.

She leaves her drink half-finished on the bar, lime still floating in it. I don't bother to ask her where she's going.

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A few more weeks pass. It's another slow night at the bar. I come back inside after changing a keg and overhear my coworker Sal talking to some guy I don't know.

"Nah, man, Kora's a total slut. Trust me," Sal says.

"Oh, you hit that?" the other guy asks.

"Yeah, she wanted it bad, too, bro."

"Shit, I might have to slide in there next time she's working, get me some of that fat ass."

Sal's always on the prowl, so I'm not surprised. My stomach starts to ache. The air behind the bar gets hotter. Sal looks my way.

"Sorry for getting on your girl, Harry. You know how it is," he says.

"I don't get with coworkers. Hard rule of mine," I say. "Don't like to shit where I eat."

"Smart man. Smarter than me. For sure," he says. "Class act like always, Harry. But, hey, if you didn't work with her, you'd still smash, right?"

"Nope. Rather not get caught up in crazy."

The other guy chimes in.

"Yo, Sal, this pendejo gay or something?"

"Who, Harry? Nah, he's got ladies lining out the door. He just don't kiss and tell," Sal says.

A customer comes up to the bar. I walk away and get back to work.

Kora knows she can do better. But it's none of my business.

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Classes start back up—another busy weekend at the bar. Things can get crazy at the beginning of the school year, but we still keep a tight ship. Kora and I are behind the bar tonight.

We deal with a blitz of customers, but things get less intense towards the end of the night. While I'm closing a tab, I see Kora at the other side of the bar chatting with some guy.

He doesn't look that attractive, but Kora hangs on every word coming out of this guy's mouth. He whispers something in her ear. She laughs and leans in and puts her hand on his chest.

The music blares, but her laugh cuts through it.

I keep thinking I'm different from other guys. They don't know Kora like I do. Maybe none of us really know her like that.

I don't think I'll get to see her for what she truly is. Not like it matters.

The bar closes and Kora and I clean up. I take the trash out to the dumpster and catch Kora outside breaking down some boxes.

"Harry, you should've seen this total dork I was talking to earlier," she says. "He told me he loved me and shit and tipped me, like, a hundred dollars."

"Yeah, right," I say. I force a smile.

She puts her hand on my shoulder when I try to walk back inside. I turn around and she lets go.

"Hey, what's up? You've been quiet tonight," she says.

"Not a whole lot on my mind, I guess," I say.

We finish cleaning and balance the registers. Kora goes behind the bar and makes herself a drink.

"You want one?" she asks.

I put my hand up and walk out to my car. It’s quieter out tonight than usual. Even the cicadas are tired.

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It’s the middle of the morning. I unlock the back door and go into the bar and start to open. After taking all the caps off the taps and laying down the bar mats, I go upstairs to flip the chairs off the tables and get the area ready.

When I get upstairs, I see the office door cracked open. I walk inside and find Kora asleep on the floor. The office smells of old receipts and faint perfume. Her shoes are off, makeup still smeared on her face from the night before.

I know Kora had been scheduled to close last night. She looks hungover.

I go downstairs and fill up a glass with ice and water. I get back to the office. She hasn’t moved an inch. I put the water next to her, but not too close.

I finish opening downstairs. I see Kora come down with the glass of water in hand, three quarters full. She looks slow, tired, not fully processed.

She approaches me and comes behind the bar. She lets out a yawn and a deep stretch. Her voice is a bit deeper.

“Harry, last night was so horrible,” she says. “These guys tried coming in after close, and like, I had already locked the doors. And they were so drunk. They kept, just, pounding on the glass and yelling at me.”

“Oh man,” I say.

“I’m so pissed I didn’t get scheduled with someone. I wish it would’ve been you.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re just... different, Harry.”

She leans in closer. We stand there for just a moment. There's no sound. No music from the jukebox, no humming chatter, no cars passing by. She looks at me and we lock eyes. It's just a second, but everything slows down. Her face goes soft and her lips part slightly. Her head tilts.

"You can go home. Get some rest," I say, pulling back.

She stands there. I finish stocking glasses. She leaves.

The door clicks behind her.

The bar opens. I stand still.

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Winter break comes around. A few folks are lingering in the bar tonight fending off the holidays. Kora quit a while back. Something about having to move back in with her dad.

I'm half-watching the TV and see Sal come in through the door. He's alone, which is unusual for him. He goes behind the bar and grabs a beer.

"Hey Dirty Harry," he says. "You holding off going back home, too?"

"Something like that," I say. "Pretty boring these days."

"Always is this time of year. Not much to do," he points at his glass. "She's the only one who wants to keep my company. How you holding up, anyway?"

"Not much going on."

"Yeah. You hear about Kora?"

"No."

"You know where she ended up? Cocktail waitress at some titty bar. Crazy, right?"

My face stays flat. "No, not really."

“Crazy is as crazy does, something like that,” he takes another drink. “What was your deal with her, anyway? Guys who get a girl a job don’t do it just for shits and giggles.”

I pick up a glass and clean it with a rag. “Maybe that’s all I wanted to do.”

“Well, you definitely got what you wanted then. That girl was a trip. Craziest one I know.”

“Yeah, same here.”

We watch the television for a while. Some sitcom with too much laugh track noise. There’s never anything good on.

Sal leaves and the bar gets empty way before close. I stand behind the bar alone. One of the country songs I always hear plays.

You were sweet as pie

I wish I could’ve closed in

But all I got was just some yellow roses

I take out my phone and look up Kora in my contacts. I start drafting a message.

I never send it.

yellow roses