

The Cost of Espresso

“You look like you got smacked in the face with a dead cat.” Jodi swung a pot of coffee over a stained mug. Her shift was over, but a familiar face tied the waitress to the diner booth by the string of her apron.

Todd covered the hollow cup with his palm and stared at the raindrops rapidly punching the window. “You look lovely as well.” He exercised a faint smile that faded at the end of his thought.

“I haven’t seen you in a month. I forgot you preferred iced coffee.”

“I’ll actually take a shot of espresso.”

“On the rocks?”

Todd broke his concentration from the diner booth window and looked at the waitress. He knew this was her attempt at exchanging a chuckle. A month ago, the idea of fitting ice cubes in a dollhouse teacup would have made Todd laugh. Today, he did not have the energy to force another smile. “Just the espresso, Jodi. Make it strong.”

“I need a double mini boomerang for table seven on the fly!” She waited for some form of response and after hearing the busboy moan she untied her apron and plopped herself in the empty side of the booth. “So, Todd, tell me about,” she paused to think, “Greece, was it?”

“Italy, actually.”

Jodi knew this. She also knew how to make Todd talk.

“It was perfect. Every week we went to a new city or town. Every week, I fell in love.”

Todd’s phone rang twice and before looking at the screen, he declined the call.

“How was the work there?”

“You know, it actually pays to be a photographer there? People don’t have the latest iPhone so the concept of my career isn’t entirely lost.” His phone rang again. This time he shut it off.

“You’re not going to answer that?”

“It’s a job offer for a travel magazine in Rome.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“It is.”

“So why’d you hang up your phone, darlin’?”

“I can’t take it.”

“Well of course you can’t take a phone call if you keep turning it off.”

“No, I mean the job. I can’t take it.” He looked back out at the window. There was no lightning or thunder, there was only rain.

“What do you mean you can’t take it? It’s perfect! You said so yourself!”

“It’s Jamie.”

“You’re fiancé?”

Todd nodded. “Jamie says if we’re going to be together, we need to be here, close to family.”

“But your family doesn’t even accept you.” Jodi reached across the table and held Todd’s hand.

“Jamie does.”

“So does Italy. If you love it there than you need to go.”

“I love Jamie.”

“You also love Italy.”

“Don’t lecture me about what I love when you’ve never loved a damn thing in your life.”

Todd withdrew his hand and hid it between his lap.

Jodi’s skin only looked rough. Twenty years at that diner saw the skin start to fold. She wanted to be angry. Instead she just looked down. “I know what love is.” She looked back up, hoping their eyes would meet. They intersected in the reflection of the grey glass.

“No, you don’t. Love is sacrifice. Love is putting someone else’s needs before your own.”

“But at what cost?”

Todd only stared at the wet window, and the tear in Jodi’s eye was just another raindrop. The busboy dropped off the espresso and Todd pulled a crumpled-up bill and put it on the table. Without acknowledging the drink or the waitress, he slid out the booth.

“Are you sure you’re making the right sacrifice?” Jodi asked.

Todd stopped at the door and stared outside one last time before he left. He did not have an umbrella.

The waitress stared across the empty booth. She didn’t dare to look out the window for a futile grasp at hope. She knew exactly what she had sacrificed.