

# —DRIVING DEEP INTO THE NIGHT

by Harrison Howe

*The shadows twitched in the hall leading to Sherry's room.*

*The room itself, as still as a held breath, as silent as a tear slipped down a pale cheek. Nothing there to speak of Sherry's fight against the sadness that overwhelmed her life. It resided even in her hollow smiles when she greeted those who came to her door. Then, the memory of a breath, stirring the air in the hidden world of Sherry's room.*

*She called out.*

Dev stepped onto the porch and knocked softly. He took a deep breath, like an Olympian diver on the end of the board, hands clenching around the bunched stems of a dozen cellophane-wrapped roses. He knocked again. Then he turned the knob, opened the door and stepped into the small house.

Sherry's breath seemed to stir the air, her scent on his nose hairs. How many times had he drifted down this dark place, knocking on her door, pressing himself into her curves, feeling every pore on her skin and bud on her tongue?

But tonight was different. Tonight it was as if she were calling to him, drawing him to that room. He couldn't recall having intentions to come here tonight; one moment he was on his way home from work, the next he was in the floral shop with just enough cash in his back pocket to cover the cost of twelve long-stemmed roses.

The cellophane crackled between his fingers. Rose petals swirled past his knees. Thorns pricked at his fingers, drawing blood.

She seemed to be here, right in front of him, drawing him through the threshold and down the hall. She oozed from the dark pockets in the corners, lightless patches that appeared to hold the very essence of her. Her voice curled into his ear canal. But not his name. Never his name. She never wanted names.

But tonight he would tell her. He would slip it into her ear while they lay together. Tonight was love.

Heads turned when Dev stepped into the room.

Sherry said:

*There's no names in this room. Only me. I'm Sherry. Sweet like wine. Taste like wine. You'll get drunk on me, but I don't need your name. You keep it. There are no names in my room. I hear names and it's over. You get your money back and you go. I love you when you're here, you love me when you're here, but you go when you're done. And don't touch the pictures in the hall.*

Howard watched the house, dropping cruller crumbs onto the mound of his belly. Sugar sparkled on his lips. His leg jerked, the way it always did when he was

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nervous, rubbing against the steering wheel. He practiced in the rearview mirror.

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

“I love *you*.”

He sounded lame and desperate, silly and sincere, but he hadn't had much time for practice. He couldn't even recall driving here. It seemed one moment he'd been home, half-asleep in front of the TV, and the next he was in his car.

He looked in the rearview mirror and said, “I love you.” Maybe she would smile. Maybe she would say she loved him, too. Maybe that was why it felt like she was calling out to him without even knowing his name, just her voice reaching out to him, only him. Was that love? Howard thought it must be.

No one did the things she did to him. You had to love someone to do that.

He was forty-six years old and had never known love. He lived with his mother in his childhood home, slept in the same bed he'd wet as a child, the same bed he'd sprawled on to read comic books, the same bed in the same spot under the window for over four decades. If you moved the bed the paint on the wall behind it would be lighter than the rest of the room; the bed's feet leaving divots in the rug, maybe worn all the way through the carpet to the floorboards beneath. Forty years of water marks that slipped in past the sill and left tracks down to the baseboard.

He finished the cruller and got out of the car before he'd even swallowed it, wiping sticky sugar granules from his fingertips. He was sweating though it was cold.

“I love you.”

He left his wallet in the console. Tonight there would be no money. Tonight was love.

“My name is Howard,” he whispered. “I love you, Sherry.”

In the dark, he thought he heard her answer. Bellowing her name, he charged the house.

*Framed faces stared sadly from their places on the hallway walls. Sherry would say these were her “heroes”. None of her visitors knew what she meant. Sometimes she smiled when she said it, a wistful twist of the mouth, eyes downcast. No one knew who was in the pictures. In some there were kids; in others, adults. Maybe Sherry had the man's eyes, the woman's slope of forehead. She's on a porch with a young man, arm linked in his. They are happy. A thousand questions, but no one asked. Sometimes Sherry would run her fingers lightly over the photos as she led them to her room. Sometimes she'd be crying.*

“We're sorry, the customer you are trying to reach is not in service. Please—”

Phil snapped his phone shut and tossed it onto the passenger seat, next to the gift box the saleswoman had wrapped for him. He was almost there, anyway. She had her phone disconnected, so what. She would be there. She was always there, in that room at the end of the hall. She'd meet him at the front door and they'd go down the hall—too narrow to walk side-by-side, her in front, reaching behind to lead him by the hand—and into her room. Sherry's room. Blood surged in his veins.

He told Jenny he'd be right back, just going to the store for baby formula, and some part of him seemed to believe that's exactly where he had been headed, but before he knew it he was traveling east, toward Sherry's house.

He couldn't catch a green light along the Boulevard.