

Mrs. Don Smith

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If she thought about it, she'd realize she's doing a brave thing. In fact, she might even be terrified. But she hasn't really been thinking for at least a month, and maybe much longer than that.

Her name is Rose. She's 62 years old, on a plane to Cuzco, Peru, from Chagrin Falls, Illinois, with only a carry-on suitcase containing no pink clothes. She's a recent widow.

Don died a month ago. His heart gave out. Rose isn't sure she misses him. He's dead and she feels nothing — not even guilt at her lack of reaction.

She is the Cuzcño cab driver's dream-come-true; an older American woman by herself, obviously taken aback by the airport bustle, and on the verge of collapse due to fatigue and the altitude. She knows she is easy prey, but doesn't really care. For what it's worth, this is *her* dream-come-true as well. Cuzco, in the mountains. The Incan empire. She's come to see what remains.

"Taxi? Señora, taxi? Taxi?" They descend upon her, then somehow she has made a choice — she's in the back of a very dusty car, driving through a residential area unlike any suburb she'd ever seen before. Mud brick and ragged children.

"Where you want to go, Señora?"

"The Hotel Cuzco, please — por favor."

"You have a reservation for that hotel?"

"No..."

"Ah, well, you will not be able to go to Hotel Cuzco — is a convention, many important people stay there. I take you someplace nicer. The Hostal Loreto. Lots of gringos stay there. My uncle, he run that hostel. Is right on the Plaza-des-Armas near the Cathedral." He keeps up a running commentary all the way into town, gradually inserting more Spanish as he realizes she's not listening.

Don hadn't consulted her about The Ashes. He'd wanted to surprise her, so he'd seen and brought it himself then, one Saturday afternoon not long after their marriage, they'd gone for a drive. Stopped in front of a house she didn't recognize, with The Ashes written over the gate.

The Ashes, 15 Hemlock Lane, Chagrin Falls, Illinois. They'd gotten a lot of laughs out of that address over the years.

"Why is it called The Ashes, darling?"

"See those stumps there by the gate? Used to be ash trees. Hence: The Ashes."

She never really liked the place. It was too big, pretentious, for her taste. But she did her best with it — made the kitchen brighter, added a breakfast nook, turned the nursery into an oasis of warmth. Otherwise, the place seemed to evade her.

Then the little jokes began. He called her his Phoenix because she was "Rose from The Ashes." His friends thought her name was Cindy, since Don called her Cinderella at the cocktail parties she'd give for him. Long, dreary affairs, but essential for the beginning of a solid career. Everyone called her Mrs. Smith, you know, Don's wife. She'd longed to arrive late and leave early. "Hence: Cinderella."

"This, Señora, is the plaza where el ultimo Inca was drawn and quartered by the conquistadores." The Plaza des Armas. Tupac Amaru, declaring "I will come again" to a people assembled to watch the last native ruler die. Their God, struck down. He was the Inca, they were the Incas.

"And here, like I tell you, the Hostal Loreto." It looks like a tourist shop.

"No, no, Señora, here. En esté lado. The Calle Loreto, old street, not for cars. Just down there is the temple of the sun. And here — this doorway — the Hostal Loreto."

The door opens into a truly ugly courtyard, all concrete. If she'd been less tired, she'd have demanded a better place. Until she sees her room. Number two — a double. Non-descript furnishings, but one wall is of original Incan stonework, in which no two bricks are alike. She can't help spending a few minutes just looking. All those hours spent dreaming over photographs and finally...

A wall, made of stones. There is no mortar — none needed. Each piece in this free-form granite jigsaw fits precisely into the next, literally made for each other. The artisan, hundreds of years dead, took advantage of the original shapes of rock, working pieces till they fit

together to become part of a greater whole, a strong, flexible unmortared wall. A wall that withstands earthquakes.

Rose drops her suitcase on one bed, and is about to drop herself on the other — the one nearest the wall — when she realizes the taxi driver is waiting at the door. What for? He's been paid and tipped. She looks at him.

What he sees is a small woman, very pale, colorless in her skin. Maybe she's been sick, is here for a cure in the mountain air. Her greying hair is smartly cut but messy. Dark eyes, very weary.

What he says is, "You want a taxi maybe later today, Señora?"

"No — no not today. Tomorrow, perhaps."

"That is good, you rest today. What time tomorrow? I can come any time, Señora..."

"Smith. Mrs. Smith. Come by at ten o'clock. I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?"

"Gabriel." She had to smile at that — Gabriel with wheels instead of wings. "Señora Smith, you be careful. Don't go into the market alone. Hay muchos ladrones, many thieves, is dangerous."

"Thank you, Gabriel."

The door closes behind him and she gives herself up to sleep. Safe, for the moment.

Her sleep lasts all day and well into the evening, at which time the only major flaw with the Hostal Loreto becomes apparent — no kitchen. Hence: no room service.

She forces her weary self out of bed, out of her rumpled clothes and into the bathroom where a half-scalding, half-freezing shower does much to revive her. After dressing in the same clothes — an unthinkable thing where she comes from, but here it doesn't seem to matter — she ventures out to brave the night street of Cuzco.

It's 8:30 p.m. and the market is in full swing. She doesn't feel like shopping. Something about the altitude and the disorientation of sleeping all day, travelling all night, has left her feeling alien emptiness. It's a cleaner feeling than the one that invaded her with Don's death. Flashes of faces, of bright weavings and stange trinkets, smells of corner vender braziers, occupy her completely as she plows through the crowds to a tratoria two blocks from the Hostal. She eats, then returns to her bed, exhausted but proud at surviving unscathed her first solo foray in this strange country.

Rose sleeps calmly until the dark hours before morning when the dream finds her.

There is a color, a grey-pink that designers call Ashes of Roses. Don liked it, had thought it looked good on her, so she'd worn it often. "Rose of Ashes' Ashes of Roses" he'd

say when presenting her with another dull pink purse or hat or dress.

In the dream, she sits on an Ashes of Roses chair, wearing an Ashes of Roses outfit, holding a black funerary urn in her lap. A hushed voice whispers Ashes of Roses and she tries to protest No, Ashes of Don, Ashes of Don, not me...

"Don's ashes are Rose's."

And, though she'd try to keep it steady, the urn begins to tremble like a branch in the rising wind until it is torn from her grasp, tips...

Petals — dried, brittle rose petals — cascade out across her knees, her lap, a constant flow that threatens to engulf her, covering her shoulders, her face...

Always at this point she comes close enough to consciousness to lose the dream. But when she lapses back to sleep, it is waiting for her.

Sometime between first light and dawn, she wakes enough to remember later that day the strange thing she does. She pushes her bed against the Incan wall, where she can touch it while asleep. The stones seem to draw the dream-induced restlessness from her body, down her arm where it dissipates, lost in impassive rock.

Gabriel is late. She's risen, washed, dressed — again in the same clothes — eaten breakfast, then visited the cathedral. Now it is past time for Gabriel to come for her, but he hasn't arrived. It frustrates her to waste time in the hostel's grey courtyard, so she returns to her room to write to her children.

Her suitcase lies on the extra bed where she dropped it yesterday. Why not? Everything she needed was in the money-belt at her waist, except for her camera and a bit of money. She opens the suitcase, and ignoring the part that contained the familiar black urn, digs out her note paper. Cream colored (thank God) and very good quality. Mrs. Don Smith, it says.

She sits at the vanity, picks up her pen. Mrs. Don Smith it says.

Don Smith is dead.

Fifteen minutes later, Gabriel arrives to find her sitting at the little table staring at a blank piece of paper, pen in hand.

In India, suttee is now illegal. The living wife no longer joins her dead husband on the funeral pyre. In India.

"You're where? On your way to where? Mama, are you out of your mind?" That was her youngest daughter, Joan. Rose had phoned Thursday night, from Toronto International.

"Now, Mama, don't you think you'd better reconsider this rather ... well ... eccentric matter?" That was Joan's husband, young Up-And-Coming, the logical choice to replace Don at the law firm.

Pause. "Are you sure this is the right thing to do just now?" Jennifer — the elder.

"Yes dear."

"Do you want me to come with you? There'll be another flight next Thursday; if you'd wait, we could go together."

"No dear, I'm coming back next Thursday night."

"Mama, if you'd only wait..."

"No dear."

She'd called just an hour before her flight was due to leave. Any earlier, and they'd have found a way to stop her.

Gabriel drives her to all the Incan sites in and around Cuzco; the Temple of the Sun, Sachsay Huaman — the place with the lightning-shaped gutter carved into the rock. It provided a channel for the blood of sacrificed animals, before the conquistadores came and the world changed. Now, rock is all that was left of the Incan empire, the core, bare bones denuded.

Rose doesn't walk much. It tires her out too quickly. She has her camera with her, but takes no photographs. What she sees she knows no one home would understand. Gabriel tells stories about these places, some of which are true. It doesn't really matter what he says. The steady flow of his guide-patter is vaguely comforting, not letting her drift, but not demanding reaction.

That evening in the market, she is knocked down and robbed while buying postcards from a street urchin. Gabriel told her these kids were from the orphanage, so she should buy from them. And throw out her notepaper.

Somebody bumps her off balance, grabs her camera. Her hands go to her neck where the camera isn't and someone else shoves her harder, snatches the wallet from her pocket. She lands soft, on a woman's weavings for sale.

"Señora, Señora —¿Estas bien, Señora?" Concern colors the eyes of the woman whose wares cushioned her fall. Then there are many arms, people picking her up, dusting her off. "Señora?"

She doesn't know what to do. Tell the police? Spend the night in the police station explaining, explaining? What good would that do?

"Señora, are you all right?" Man from the jewelry booth down the way a bit.

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine."

"You were robbed — we saw it. Did they get your passport? Your ticket, dollars? I saw him take your wallet."

"No, they're safe." Rage takes her, strikes like lightning. "You saw? They ran by you — why didn't you stop them? Those were *my* things!"

"Señora — those thieves... they are from away, not Peruvian. They pay the police: they go to jail one day, they come out the next. And they always know who tells the police." He's startled at himself for telling this stray señora a market secret. He does not like being the object of her anger.

But her rage has already passed, leaving her empty again. What has she really lost this night?

The jewelry seller gets the man at the next booth to watch his goods, and walks Rose back to the Hostal. She has nothing to tip him, which was fortunate — he is a proud man.

Anger returns, a flash flood, in the privacy of her room. Only now it is directed at the notepaper on her desk. Now *there's* a theft to get angry at — Mrs. Don Smith. Rose had wanted to travel, but it was always "next year darling." Rose had a degree in anthropology, but almost no field experience because "I need you at home, darling." She'd thought it was true, and it was, it was! In some ways he'd been helpless without her beside him, opposing him. She'd been ashamed of her selfish yearnings.

Damn you, Don Smith. (Too late for that, dear.)

Damn you, Mrs. Don Smith.

When Gabriel comes for her the next day, he knows she's been robbed. The other drivers told him. So before anything, they go to the black market to change some money.

"They took your camera, too, Señora Smith?" He shrugs. "You took no photographs..."

It is Sunday, her third day in Peru. The morning is green and sunny, as it can be only at 10,000 feet above sea level. First they go to the market at Písaq; though she sees the ruins from a distance, they are too far for her to climb. Later, at the Chinchero market, Rose sees weavings she likes. They're covered with abstracted figures — llamas, horses, birds, even people. Mantas, Gabriel called them, though the woman selling has a different word.

"Compra mi llequia, Señora. Bonita es..."

Rose is looking at a manta that seems different somehow — special. There is a little portrait woven in it, and near that, a figure spread-eagled with a horse at each arm and leg.

"Gabriel, what is this?"

He confers for a moment with the woman. She points out another design on the fabric — a horse with a man on it, and four birds at the corners.

“Señora. This is the last Inca’s portrait, and this is him being drawn and quartered by Spanish caballeros — horsemen.”

“Tupac Amaru. ‘I will come again.’”

“Si Señora.”

“Then this is a very old weaving.”

“Oh no, Señora. It was woven since the revolution in 1969. See, here, it is the Spanish horseman being drawn and quartered by the condor — a symbol for the Inca. Some people think that the leader of the revolution was Tupac Amaru come again.”

She buys the manta.

A strange thing happens on the way back to the car. Rose feels dizzy, so they stop at a quiet place where she can rest on a low wall. Once settled, she hears voices, female, singing in unison, high and clear but very faint — borne on the mountain breeze. A folk dance, she feels sure, though of course she doesn’t understand the words. She asks Gabriel.

“Ah, si Señora, it is a song for dancing from Ayacucho.”

“Can you translate it for me?” The sound, reed-thin, feels directed at her, haunting her.

His hesitation surprises Rose. “Señora, no, I do not think I can. That is quechua, not Spanish you hear, and my English... Besides, the songs from Ayacucho, even the dances are very sad...”

Finally his excuses run out. “Please Gabriel. It’s important to me.”

“Si tu lo quiere,” a concession, then his brow wrinkles, straining to hear and translate, “...wake up, woman ...rise up, woman ... in the middle of the street ... a dog howls. May the death arrive ... may the dance arrive. Comes the dance, you must dance ... comes the death ... you can’t help it ... ay ... what a chill ... ay, what a wind...” Every word is another arrow shaped to pierce her, till the singing trails off. His voice stops.

Only the wind is left.

“Gabriel, I am an old woman.”

“Señora, it is just the altitude.”

“I am an old woman.”

“When did your husband die, Señora?”

She stares at him. “How did you know...?”

“Your suitcase, it was open the other morning, I saw the container... And you are an American Señora alone, very sad. I have eyes, I can see. I am not stupid.”

“No, Gabriel, you are not stupid.”

Then the strange thing happens. He kisses her on the mouth, quickly and without warning. Equally quickly, she wallops him with her new weaving. He grins, she scowls.

“Señora is not old.”

“Gabriel, if you ever touch me again...”

“I will not.”

There is some color in her cheeks.

Don...

Don had cheated more often than she knew. The first time she found out, she left him “for good,” even though she was pregnant with Jennifer. She went home to mother, and made him beg to get her back. After that, he was more careful. And she worked hard at being appealing for him, thought for the longest time that she was succeeding. She expected to succeed — she was, after all, his wife. By the time she realized she was wrong, it was too late. No one knew her; except as poor Mrs. Smith.

She made it hot for him though, made him swear lies right, left front and center. Retaliated in kind a couple of times. But he was a lawyer, he thrived on that kind of strife. He had claimed to respect her fighting spirit, loved trying to break her. “Hence: infidelity.”

The other side of the coin — Don had approved of Jennifer’s divorce from the doctor. Rose didn’t. If it’d been good enough for Rose all these years...

The next day Gabriel drives Rose down the Sacred Valley from Cuzco. She spends the afternoon climbing slowly among the ruins at Ollantaytambo. The Incas fought and won here. One battle. They flooded the valley, cutting off the Conquistadores’ retreat. Slaughtered Europeans just as if they were natives.

Hundreds of years past. This place.

Gabriel’s family lives in Ollantay. They ask her to stay with them but she feels it would be an imposition, so refuses and goes to a hotel. She’s wrong, they would have been honored, but it is doubtful that she would have gotten much sleep. By way of recompense, she takes them out to dinner and it’s several beers past supertime before she gets to the hotel.

“Honey, I’m home.”

No answer. What did she expect from a pile of ashes? She gets out the urn, sets it on a bedside table. Then she turns a chair to face it, and sits.

“It’s time we had a little talk dear.”

Still no answer. There are tears falling unnoticed down her face.

“Dear, I’m very tired. And a little drunk. I have all these important things to tell you, about not taking it with you — about not going with you... but I’m just too tired to bother, dear. Just stay dead, please, don’t come back.”

She knows she is crying now, can hardly speak through the tears...

"Leave me be."

The next day Rose feels numb, shocked into stillness by the intensity of the emotions she felt last night. She is also a little hung-over, which doesn't help. Fortunately, Gabriel understands the situation, puts her on the mid-morning tourist train to Macchu-Picchu, where she has several hours of nothing to do but recuperate. Upon arrival, she checks into the Hotel Macchu-Picchu. This time she has a reservation. The afternoon is spent following a guide, one sheep in a herd.

After the tourist train left for Cuzco, it starts to rain. Most of the other gringos staying at the Hotel take refuge from the weather, but Rose ignores the slick stones and dizzy heights. She is still numb.

Gradually, walking high in the bones of the village, she gains a measure of peace. The place is grey and green. The rain cleaned the sky, there is a condor circling overhead. She couldn't see it before in the fog.

At dawn, Rose returns to the ruins, carrying the urn in a bag and walks halfway to Waynu-Picchu, Macchu-Picchu's sister village on the mountain opposite. The treacherous path commands the whole of her attention.

At a point where the path is the top of a short ridge that drops sharply to either side, she sits. The sun is in her face, her feet dangle, empty space between them and the river, thousands of meters below. She is afraid, then not afraid.

Rose had opposed Jennifer's divorce — silently, but Don knew. He supported it. And he'd been against Joan's marriage to Up-And-Coming. Now, Rose thought she understood. He hadn't wanted their children to echo her — her powerlessness, her unhappiness.

He must have considered her — or really them, The Smiths — a lost cause. Why else would he have kept her so close to him, stifling the very independence that he tried to encourage in his daughters? And he must have considered it simpler to continue, as if life went on forever. But it doesn't.

Ashes of Roses. She knows the bitter taste of failure, of surrender. Who better? Times she'd won, times she'd lost. Times she'd been right, times wrong. The sin lay not in keeping score, but in agreeing to play the game.

Ah, my love, who knows when that had started? In the beginning...

In the beginning she took the lid off of the urn and upended it over the cliff, watched the ashes scatter in the wind.

"Señora? Señora Smith?"

"Rose," she replies without thinking.

"Señora!" It's Gabriel, coming up from Macchu-Picchu, making haste slowly. "All is well with you?"

"Yes Gabriel, all is well."

"I caught the first train this morning, the market train — I was worried. Thieves, the wind, these ruins are peligroso. Dangerous."

"Gabriel, do something for me."

"Señora."

"Throw this far over the side. My arms are too weak." She is in the shadow of mountains, unreadable to him. "It's already empty, see?"

He starts to speak, then stops and takes the urn. Sends it arcing out over the edge, lid flying after.

"Thank you Gabriel. I shall go back now. You needn't worry." As she starts to rise he holds out his hand to her.

"Señora, let me help you."

"No thank you." It's just a smile, but she is transfigured. "I can manage."