

# Sub Rosa

Amber Dawn

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# I

A horseshoe shaped fountain spills its luck in the city centre.

The first seat of the number nine bus is perpetually occupied by an old lady, who watches her days pass through a moving window.

Each April there's an infant twister of cherry blossoms—if I'm picturing it right—on the corner of Second and Main. Commuters are greeted by the pink swirl as they ascend the subway stairs.

If I concentrate long enough I can see streets worked over all day by traffic. Whenever there's a lull in the traffic, those streets turn into corridors for the view: a beach I should have gone too more often. I can picture the so-called dodgy blocks with connect-the-dot trails of bloodstains and happy-coloured 'revitalize the neighborhood' campaign banners hanging from streetlamps. Lately, I can picture them pretty darn well.

And maybe, just maybe, I can see a house where I once lived. Not a storybook house; no glowing windows in the winter night, no doves nesting on the roof. It's a stucco bungalow. Red paint has given up on the front steps and is peeling into flakes. Moss dots the old shingles. The narrow yard is crowded with vegetables—tomatoes in chicken wire cages, green beans climb a chain link fence.

I used to think these places had nothing to do with me. They were unsolicited scenery, the backdrop to other people's lives. Now I would give anything just to stand on those faded front steps and look through the tattered screen door at who or what is inside. I *am* about to give everything for it.

Everything is a place called Sub Rosa: for lack of the perfect word, this place is a street. No other street intersects it. No map will lead you there. No one has directions committed to memory. Sub Rosa is above memory. Or rather, below it. It's amnesiac. Visitors aren't exactly sure how they find their way. They are guided only by the belief that they are entitled to a little fulfillment. They leave knowing only that they are somehow better than when they arrived. Most visitors are men—what we on Sub Rosa call live ones. They drive off in their well-kept cars with glazed grins on their faces. I'm jealous, not of their money to spend, but jealous that for them going home is a simple matter of turning down the correct lane.

I've been on Sub Rosa so long I can't remember where home is anymore. How long is long? I can't remember that either. There's nothing wrong with me, so I've been told. The past is a burden Sub Rosa won't bear. Its energy is spent on being neverland. A fairytale place with a steady rotation of happy endings.

Sub Rosa has been described in more ways than young love, so I won't bother trying to sum it up. No testimony of mine could capture it. If you've ever overheard someone dreamily sermoning about true happiness, they were probably talking about Sub Rosa. A Sub Rosa sunrise is never spoiled by smog or storm. Wind won't blow strong enough to ruin a hairdo. The air gently conveys itself along the street, always clean, always warm. Water for drinking is sweet; water for bathing, soft.

On Sub Rosa we eat diner fineness—gravy-soaked and heavily salted meals—as much and as often as we want. There are no stomachaches on Sub Rosa. Nobody is ever sick or injured or ugly or unloved. Sub Rosa wants you. It wants anyone, no matter how backbroken and bitter you are when you arrive.

It's turned me into true beauty, the kind that's crafted, laboured over; a beauty that city folk endlessly fantasize about.

My trips to the city are rare and always chaperoned. City ills are kept out of Sub Rosa. Hardship is our myth, our campfire story, it's a ghost that quietly haunts us, but rarely materializes. There is a long-standing ban on television and radio. A newspaper is like a virus on Sub Rosa, its tales of trauma are venom. Yes, I'm afraid of the city. Even though the city is largely fuzzy memory, I fear it. All the forgotten details have been filled in with horror stories. And some of the parts I do remember aren't always so picturesque.

The last memory I have of the city is The Legion Pub. I was a girl about to fall—reckless on a slew of free drinks, beer and bourbon mostly, and dancing on a table at the back of the room.

My sugar daddy *du jour* was Nino, though there wasn't much sugar to him. Not much sugar could be found in his shag-carpeted, linoleum-floored apartment either. But I was used to sofa hopping and beer for breakfast back then.

Every night we'd come to The Legion; Nino through the front door and me hopping over the back patio fence, rust rubbing its colour onto my jeans as I'd scramble over. Nino once said that I wouldn't have to jump the fence anymore, that he'd get me fake ID and then we'd hit all the uptown clubs. He told me we wouldn't wait in line-ups, or pay for cover, and bartenders would make all our drinks doubles just because *he* was Nino. He said all this around day two of me staying with him, back when I was his petite sidekick, the strange runaway he discovered, like an uncharted species, near the steelworkers' memorial bridge. For a stretch, he used to show me off to the regulars, get them all laughing at the "cute fucking" way I screamed or swore, spilled beer, and started fights with the pinball machine. "Where do you come from, girl?" Nino would shout so that everyone in the bar heard his question. "I found her under a god damn bridge like a stinking old mattress or a sack of drowned kittens." He always summed up the story with, "... and I took her home

and cleaned her up and now look at her.”

But after I'd been with him for eighteen straight days he stopped asking me where I'd come from. He stopped asking me anything at all. I was not much more to him than a stain on his shirt, something that was already there and so he carelessly continued to wear it.

I started seeking new sponsorship at The Legion. You'd think there I'd have easily secured a new man, a lonely type whose standards had slipped down to the unwashed floor. I was low rent, which is exactly what they could afford. No one made me any offers. If those losers could see me now—the angel I've become—they'd line up just for a look.

No one noticed sweet fuck all around there, anyway. There was a constant bar fight, a cycle of sucker-punch champs and men down, a woman always crying to the unoccupied chair next to her. These, and any actions, were absorbed into the Legion's slow motion. The air in there was a murmuring haze. The carpet was sticky because it didn't want you to move too fast or too far.

I figured I'd be better off trying to keep my place as Nino's side-kick. It was old hat, as far as I can remember, to hang on until the end got worse than ugly. And I thought Nino needed me, or at least he needed someone around. Couldn't stand being alone, Nino. He knew half the people at the Legion like family. After last call he'd gather anyone who'd come with him. “Come barflies and hooches come,” he'd call. We'd cram into a taxi to Nino's for a game of poker and the bottomless bottle of JD always kept under the kitchen sink.

I had assumed my customary role of drink nurse, circling behind the scenes with a bottle, topping up. I learned that some men have poker faces, but no one has a poker back. Hairs can stand shifty on the nape of a neck. Spines lean a little to the left, or the right. Nino's shoulder blades nearly touched, gathering the fabric of his T-shirt when he was bluffing. It didn't matter to me who won, as long as Nino

was too drunk at the end of the night to kick up a fuss. If he went on a tilt I'd hit his glass every few minutes.

The waitress kept offering to teach me how to play, but I refused to sit at the table. “A woman should be able to hold her own at cards,” she said, holding her hand up for me to see, tapping black diamonds with her lopsided French-manicured fingernails. I'd only splash her glass when I poured her another.

I'm not sure why this mean little scene made me as happy as I believe it did. I liked when there were four or five players hunched around the dented pine table and the ante remained sane: fins and tens, twenties whistled at. Mainly Nino took the pot in those games, especially when the waitress dealt. She had a false shuffle and was sweet for him. No one caught on to this except me. The waitress was slick; she juggled the cards like a vaudeville act, too quickly for most drunkards to see. Plus this crew was too macho to suspect a woman of getting their better.

When the table was packed with men, the waitress lay low. When six or seven or ten players sat in, things of value went missing: watches were tossed into the pile, a ring was twisted from an index finger. On day fourteen of my stay, my second Saturday at *chez* Nino, Nino lost his thirty-inch television. It used to be the only object on the north wall; its staccato blue light overtook the whole room. A big man named Short Stack pulled a belly buster straight in the last game of the evening. I remember his lip curled from the weight of the TV as he carried it to the elevator himself. I expected the room to look empty afterwards. Instead there was this rectangular space, highlighted by lack of carpet stain or yellowed wall, which took up as much room as the TV itself did. When I saw that spot, I thought, *Good, Nino will need me around for company more than ever.*

I couldn't have been more wrong. The TV was our liaison, our mutual friend, without whom we had nothing in common. Our day-

times were spent sitting and conversing with the TV. All of our inside jokes and personalized buddy buddy expressions were nothing but commentary on talk shows and televised sports.

Maybe it was the loss of his TV that had made Nino give in to the waitress. They stumbled into his bedroom after cards and I listened from the living room sofa to her sounding like a whole pack of hunting dogs through the thin walls. After, she wandered naked until she found the washroom and peed with the door open. I watched her through half-opened eyes, pretending to be asleep. I couldn't help peeking; I was awestruck by how she moved through the apartment just like normal, like she didn't notice she had no clothes on. Even the dimpled flesh on her thighs trembled at brazenly heavy steps she took. I knew this thundering drunken nude was a threat to my tenancy. There was only one thing to do:

It was 2 p.m.—a decent hour, I thought, for a barfly to wake. I came at him without a shirt. I couldn't make myself remove any more clothes than that; the only time I used to pull my pants down was when I peed. Nino squinted at me as I located his penis under the sheets and coaxed it into an erection. "You ever wonder what this would be like?" I said, taking his half-chub in my mouth. His hands like a freak storm were suddenly all over. Luckily my trusty unicorn belt buckle gave him some trouble and he settled for the tangle of my bra, digging at my nipples like they were coins fallen in the cracks of a sofa. I wasn't doing much better with the blowjob, gagging and drooling as I worked. I gave up too soon and simply held my mouth open to let Nino pump himself in and out until he finished. The best I could do was keep my lips curled over my teeth to avoid scratching him. I spit his semen on his stomach with a retch.

No post-affections, we went straight into our routine: staring at the space where the TV once was, him making phone calls that sounded like the same sound bite looped: "Is that fucking right?"

When did this happen? Not if I have something to say about it." I grabbed the bottle of Windex and sprayed anything inanimate. I remember wiping behind the toilet bowl and feeling like I was earning my keep. We didn't say much to each other. He didn't even look at me except for when he asked me, "How long have you been staying here?" I'd seen that look before. It would only be a day or two before he showed me the door.

My last night at the Legion, otherwise known as the night I was saved, I took my first drink to relax, my second for courage, and on my third I shot my mouth off. I pronounced myself a virgin for all the low lives to hear. Sure, I had sung (and swallowed) for my supper, but my pussy had remained unspoiled. *That explains the shitty blow job*, I imagined Nino thinking as his crooked grin widened, then, *not for long*. A booze-chugging virgin would be just the thing to perk him up; maybe it perked him up too much. He stopped flashing smiles at the waitress and small-talking the men lined up at the bar. Suddenly, I had all his attention. I slipped between pool players or fit myself among the bar stools for a breather, and Nino was there with another drink. He kept pulling me back to our seats, sandwiching me between himself and his pretty friend with the missing front teeth, his hand rooting around under the table for the fly of my jeans. "I wanna dance sexy for you," I slurred and wriggled away from them.

On the table I was far enough from Nino for him not to usher me into a cab or a bathroom stall. Him and Teeth had lined up another round for me. I saw the tall slender glass of whatever-the-piss was on tap and a tumbler of Jim Beam squatting next to it on the table; beer because it was cheap and bourbon because I'd been putting on a good show flinching when I swallowed it. I got my ratings up again, no denying that. Nino and Teeth leaned into each other, mirroring my drinks in waiting: Teeth the tall glass, golden, a smooth swallow, and Nino short, thick, and mean. The triangular scar along the

bridge of his nose a mate to the chip in the whiskey glass. They probably discussed the precise dimensions of my virgin pussy.

In between them and me was a gathering of half-interested onlookers, a few men pounded their fists on tabletops. Most stood around muttering at each other. Their eyes were glassy, like I was a TV set they were watching, and not even a ball game but a crappy re-run. I called out *whoop whoop* and only got a couple of weak parrot-calls in reply. I wanted a bar brawl over me—that was my exit plan. I was a prisoner inciting a riot so that I might escape Alcatraz. Why didn't I just walk out the front door? It never occurred to me.

I swung my hips around like I unscrewed at the waist. There was a guy with a Trans-am baseball cap and the red flannel shirt that I hoped would make a move for me, but he walked over to Nino and gave him a congratulatory punch the arm. Then the pair at the pool table turned in creepy unison and gave Nino the thumbs up. Someone shouted, "Nino's got a ripe cherry." Apparently, Nino had made his claim on my virginity bar-wide news. I wouldn't have put it past him to have had wagers going with a handful of the other barflies; *ten bucks says I pop her tonight; twenty I take it right here in the bar*. Any notion I might have had to give in to him was long gone. I wasn't going to be thrown down on some table like a mismatched hand of clubs and hearts. But how to get out of the game?

I closed my eyes and listened to the music. I could always tell when a song was older than me because it felt as if I was the only one outside of an inside joke, laughing along when I didn't get what was funny. It made no difference that I had learned the words to "Help" or "Stairway to Heaven" or "Hotel California," I was still outside. I wouldn't be able to dance for much longer to those songs, sobering as I did. But if I climbed down from the table it would only be to hear the jingle of loose change in Nino's pants pocket, to taste metallic reflux in my mouth as he sat me back down in his lap. The worst part

was I suspected if I gave it up to him it would only earn me another four days at best. In a month's time, or less. no one at the Legion, including Nino, would even remember my name.

"Somebody?" I said out loud. "Somebody see me."

And a man did appear. He pushed through the front door and slowly made his way around the room. Judging by his deliberate walk as he weaved through the crowd without watching where he was going, he did seem to be coming for me. Wide shoulders. Square jaw. A bit of gold flashed on his left hand, another glint in one earlobe. Handsome, even with my dizzy vision. I lifted my shirt a little to reel him in. This stirred the onlookers, a half dozen more stood up and gave half-hearted shouts. As soon as my stranger was beside me I collapsed into his arms. "Let's go," he said. "Now."

I heard a name being called several times before I realized it was mine. Nino reached his arm out in front of him and grabbed at air; the table I had been dancing on was lying, overturned, on the floor. When I replay this memory I always imagine looking back and knowing that it was the last time I'd see inside of the Legion, or any other hole-in-the-wall pub, that my world was about to change completely. But I truly had no idea what was going to happen next.

The stranger carried me through the front door; it bounced against the doorframe a few times before closing. My shirt remained hiked up as we drove down Park Street. He drove a shiny black car with an Italian name that smelled of leather and perfume. I reclined my seat as far back as it would go and watched the street lamps streak by. "My bra has daisies on it," I said a bit too loud. He glanced back at me as I reached beneath my unicorn belt. "My panties do too," I told him. "Daisies."