

BLACK ROSE

Why did I even bother looking at the clock? It was always 4:15—an hour before dawn. At least now, I knew I'd been dreaming. The first few times, I'd lain there in a lather of sweat, certain that I was stretched out on the bus terminal floor, with Frankie standing over me, the piece still smokin' in his fist.

I'd try willing myself back to sleep but it was no use. Within minutes I'd be razor sharp, lying there in the dark, my brain racing so fast I could almost feel the electrons colliding.

I never tried to read. There was no point. No matter what the subject, all roads ran back to the two of them and my tenuous place in their scheme of things. I'd study the familiar cracks in the ceiling, but even they coalesced into two names, Frankie and Rose.

Then I'd rise up on my elbow and watch her. It never ceased to amaze me how well she slept. She always lived in the present; never existed outside the moment. How different we were - with my Catholic conscience, I could forecast the most infinitesimal consequence of my every action.

Jesus, she could sleep through a holocaust! The hardness around her mouth softened at night and all her masks dissolved. I loved to watch her breasts rising and I would try in vain to synchronize our breathing. At times, I would put my mouth to her ear and whisper worlds to her. It was always the same message - don't leave me!

She said that when two people love each other, there should be no guilt. Occasionally, I would suspend belief and the world would fall away. But mostly, Frankie's tortured face would hover in front of me and I would know my day was coming.

Then the gray dawn would sneak in through the broken shades and the garbage trucks would thunder down the avenue. She'd slowly surface and notice me lying there in a knot of tension. Then with consummate ease, she'd send me into deep and dreamless sleep. I'll love you forever, Rosie.