
Pencil Sketch of a Rose

Samantha Atkins

His voicemail used to say, "Hey there, I'm either in the woods, fishing, or at work. And if I'm at work, I'm either thinking about fishing or being in the woods." He wanted to meet and marry a "good woman" and produce a bunch of blonde-haired kids that he could teach to set up tents and hook bass. He had a bumper sticker on his truck's dented fender that said, "Gun control means using both hands" and always referred to our small town in Southern Indiana as "God's country." Some people called him a "good ole' boy." I just called him Matt.

We met when he was in eighth grade and I was in seventh. He was in Student Council and was going around to all the seventh grade classrooms right before class started to tell us about the upcoming junior high euchre tournament. I was wearing my mom's dusty brown cowboy boots that day, and a pleather green jacket with a snakeskin design. I was reading *Interview with the Vampire* and sitting in the front row. When his turquoise eyes landed on me, I sat my book down on the desk and quickly took off my red-framed glasses.

A couple of weeks after we met, we went to a dance at the 4-H fairgrounds. Parents used to be able to rent one of the little buildings if their kid needed to have a birthday party or a wedding shower or something. The floors were slick, grey concrete and the walls were beige cinderblocks. The local DJ, who had worked for every family in town at some point, was mixing pop tunes in the corner and Matt and I were dancing too close to one another. He leaned in to kiss me and I got so nervous I stuck my whole tongue in his mouth. That's how we fell in love: a wet, embarrassing kiss in a crowded room.

Matt was the second youngest of four brothers that looked like him. They all had the same dirty blonde hair, prominent beaked noses, and long, muscled arms and they all loved hunting deer and touching girls. They also all hated their father, David, who was always drunk and out of work with one injury or another. A small statuette sat on a coffee table in their living room that said, "We are a fishing family," in ceramic letters, but they liked to do other things as well, such as wrestle on the stairs, steal from one another's rooms, and pee off the back porch.

We were "boyfriend and girlfriend" for about a year before we went on our first date. It was Christmas Eve and Matt had just gotten his license and a grey, rusted out Dodge pick-up with no back windowpane. I put on some nice jeans and we drove to the nearest movie theater, a half an hour north in Bedford, the "limestone capital of the world." There, Matt used fourteen dollars of the money he'd been saving to buy us two tickets to The Lord of the Rings. We held hands during the entire movie and on the way home, we sang Reba McEntire's versions of Christmas songs because the radio didn't work.

When he got mad, he clenched his fists at his sides and rocked his weight from one foot to the other, revealing his many chipped teeth through a grimacing smile and panting slightly. He never left home without his camouflage-encased pocketknife and told me he'd kill anybody who tried to touch me. I never saw him cut anyone with the blade, but I once watched him use it to chop up meth on the glass kitchen table at my sister's house, though it usually just cleaned the dirt out from underneath his fingernails or peeled oranges.

We broke up as soon as I realized I was pretty and then we got back together a couple years later when I was tired of exploring what that could do for me, five years since the junior high euchre tournament. My mom was out of town so we decided to eat a bunch of shrooms in the living room and liven up our dull summers. About two hours after we ate them, we realized we were trapped in mushroom land and I started to flip out on the plush, multi-colored area rug. I lay there with my head in his cross-legged lap, convinced God was killing me one minute and that he was French-kissing me the next. Matt gently stroked my hair, reassuring me that Jesus was on my side. I can't explain the rest, but the next day he laughed and asked, "Are you cheatin' on me with God, Beautiful?"

I haven't heard from Matt for a while, but I don't think he's dead. If he were, I would certainly have heard about it by now, both of us being from "God's country," population four thousand, and all. Instead, he is probably working some nine-to-five, using those over-sized hands and swollen knuckles to manipulate iron or dig holes or hammer nails into roofs. But who knows, he might've landed his dream job as a State Park tour guide, or he may have found a way to make money spelunking. If I had to guess, he's probably drinking Budweiser from a dark, glass bottle right now, sitting on a sofa somewhere and staring at a television.

If Matt were a season he would be summer, and if he were a time of the day he would be noon. If he were a country he'd be the good ole' U.S. of A. and if he were an animal he'd be a little dog with sharp teeth. But Matt isn't any of these things. He's just another poor kid from the sticks who, when smoking his Marlboros, lets the smoke fill his mouth and then drift out of his lips in a little grey tuft before sucking it in audibly. The last time I talked to him he was on a cell phone in the back seat of a car, being driven around the back roads by his two drunken friends and rambling incoherently about sin and Socrates. Those friends didn't know that he sketched a pretty decent picture of a rose once, in pencil, but I have it framed and propped against my bookshelf.