

The Names We Don't Ask For

I wipe the counter and watch dark espresso smear into the grains of my worn-out cloth.

Her husband died and she's lonely, her name is Eva. She sits in a corner and doesn't talk much, but she always brings a romance novel. Nora Roberts is her favorite; she says she prefers something a little more "classic". Blonde strands curl at the ends like rose petals and wild tendrils cover the corner of her eyes. She's not an obtrusive person, but gasps are sung from her hidden cove and her pale and purple veined hand lays across her mouth in mourning. She stays for two hours today and says she ought to make dinner, tonight she's thinking lasagna with mushrooms. She had told me, once, that on the nights she misses him the most she plays his old Elvis records and eat his favorite foods. When she leaves, I wonder if she's doing that now.

Their names are Ben and Clara, and they slip me a dollar for remembering. They show pictures of their recent vacation, a cruise around Italy, and I can see it in their golden tans. Ben bought her a beautiful necklace for their trip, a silver chain with sapphire stones, she wore it every night at dinner. When they're done, they find a table in the back and watch each other smile. He brushes his finger through her hair and tucks it behind her ear and sometimes, when its already tucked, he pulls it out just to brush it back again. Her laugh is a witch's cackle, and it absorbs the empty space around her. It's jarring at first, but he never flinches against it.

Nicholas is here for his wife; he pulls his phone out to find her order. I don't tell him I already know because he's here every day. He has purple bags under his eyes, and he always wear the same gray jacket over his scrubs. His jacket is worn with a yellow stain that he swears never comes out no matter what product he uses. When her coffee is done, he scratches the brown and gray stubble on the side of his face and walks to pastry case. I've never known why

he doesn't pay for it when he orders her coffee, or why he pretends he's made a last-minute decision.

They don't know my name.