

MUSE

by Adam Sifre

The bar was dark and a little dirty, and that suited Splinker's mood just fine. It was hot as balls outside, but the air-conditioner was going full tilt, and his skin broke into gooseflesh where the artificial winter hit his damp spots. The beer was cold, but flat. The pretzel bowls were filled with that crappy trail mix - the kind that's all salt and wasabi peas.

It was a Wednesday, and Wednesdays were writing nights. Six pages every Wednesday.

"That isn't too much to ask," Splinker grouched. The bartender, a young girl who relied on V-neck t-shirts and big tits to earn tips, didn't even bother to look his way. Splinker had been there often enough to earn a reputation as a shitty tipper, so no barmaid small talk for him. Just as well.

He checked his phone for the sixth time in as many minutes. *Nothing. Not even a 'douchehead.'* He patted the back of his neck with a one-ply cocktail napkin. Bits of it clung to damp skin. He closed his eyes, and tried to think.

Nothing.

"Dammit."

He checked his phone again.

"Fuck."

"Buy me a drink first, then we'll talk."

Startled, Splinker looked up to see an attractive woman take the bar stool next to him. She had short, brown hair and those big eyes that you see in movies; the ones that always look sad and inviting at the same time. Her perfume reminded him of lilacs, although he wasn't exactly sure what lilacs smelled like. She wore a short skirt, not whorish, but it definitely was meant to get a man thinking in that general direction. Her skin was a beautiful bronze, baked perfectly by a June sun.

She smiled at him. "Well?"

Splinker looked nonplussed. "Well what?"

"How about that drink?"

"Do you know," Splinker asked, "what it's like to need something so bad, it actually hurts when you don't have it?"

The woman gave a throaty laugh and leaned in just a bit. "Maybe we should exchange names before we talk philosophy. I'm Christine."

Splinker glanced at his phone again, thought about texting her — again — then put the phone down on the bar. "The problem with Muses —"

Christine's smile faltered, just a little. "I'm sorry?"

"The problem with Muses," he continued, "is that you have to fall completely in love with them, or it doesn't work."

The woman who was Christine, reached over and took a long, deep swallow, from Splinker's beer bottle. Her lips glistened in the dim light.

"And not just completely in love," Splinker complained. "I'm talking about deep, twisted, unhealthy love." He took the bottle from the woman and drained what was left. "When she's not here, I'm thinking about when I'll see her again, or call her again. I have mental conversations with her when I'm alone. Not the stupid, 'I love you, stay with me' chit chat that a moonstruck lover might have. I have full blown conversations with her in my mind. We talk about what we're writing, how we might change this, get rid of that. We talk about her dog, her parrot, Climate Change."

The woman's smile was gone, but Splinker didn't notice.

"For Christ's sake, sometimes I fall asleep at night, having imaginary *arguments* with her; and when I wake up in the morning, I feel guilty about it and want to apologize to her. How crazy is that?"

The woman didn't answer.

He raised the bottle to his lips again, forgetting it was empty. "The problem with Muses, is that writing no longer becomes a goal for its own sake. I want — I need — to write for her. Because the only way to keep a Muse, is to love her unconditionally and bind her

with the right words. Paper chains; stories strung together. Bound by something as flimsy as words. Imagine!”

The woman — Splinker forgot her name — stood up. “Excuse me,” she said haltingly. “I have to um, go.”

Splinker didn't hear her. He checked his phone again.

“Unconditional love. Do you know how hard that is? It's impossible! It doesn't exist.” He tilted the empty beer bottle to his mouth again, then put it down in disgust. “I mean, look at me. One night without her and I'm a wreck. I can't write, can't even think about writing, really. And that's one night. I'm ruined.”

He threw a few dollars on the bar and went outside. The heat swept over him, making his eyes tear.

“My muse has ruined me,” he confessed to the empty parking lot.

His phone buzzed in his hand.

“Where are you douchehead?”

Splinker smiled.

“Salvation.”

