

# Philip Stephens

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## Blue Rose Motel

They ducked out of the rain blown off the gutter.  
The door clicked shut. "Shh. Listen," Helen said.

"To what?" Ward said, but Helen scanned the room.

Let's just go on."

"You said stop. So I stopped.

Did you want something swank between Des Moines  
And Kansas City?" Helen bit her lip.

"Oh, c'mon. What's the matter now? I mean,  
All I said was I wished you hadn't told me  
This thing you told me before we made the trip.  
Then you got mad."

"Why shouldn't I? You're scared  
Of what your folks'll think."

"No. All I said

Was that I thought it would be easier  
To take this visit, not knowing what I know."

"Why can't you say it, Ward?"

"Look, I can say it.

But this is not the time to have it out.  
My parents find out how you are, they'll think—"  
"I know what they'll think. They'll think some white trash  
Has got her money-grubbing claws in you.  
I don't care what they think. I care what you think."

Ward turned, and curtains strung across the doorway  
Behind the counter bellied up and split,  
Unveiling a thick-gutted man who stuck

His uppers out, then sucked them back and scowled:  
"You need a room? Or you just want directions?"

"A room," Ward said.

"Reason I ask you that  
Is ain't nobody stops." The old man passed  
A pen and form to Ward, then took his card.  
From back where Helen waited, she could glimpse,  
Between the gaping curtains, TV light –  
First peach, then pink, red, brown, the closeup shot,  
Or so it seemed, of some exotic flower.  
"My wife, she said the sky was heavy here,  
That's why nobody'd stop. She wasn't right  
Up in her head, though. Lord, a night like this  
Would make her crazy as a shithouse rat."

"What's that?" said Helen.

Ward looked up. "What's what?"

"That screaming."

"I don't hear a thing."

"I do."

"This old boy keeps a mare across the four-lane.  
She's foaling."

"Does he know that?" Helen said.  
The old man stared. "I mean, what if she's narrow?  
What if her colt's breach?"

"You some farm-fed girl?"  
The old man said. Ward didn't speak to that;  
He kept his head down, filling out the forms  
While Helen focused on the TV screen,  
Glimpsing robed women kneeling on a stage.  
They gripped another woman who was naked  
And struggling as a black man mounted her.

Ward passed the form back, and the old man's teeth  
Clicked as he said, "My wife begged me to call  
This place The Green Rose, but there's no such thing.  
'Somewhere there is,' she'd say. We come to find  
There ain't no blue ones neither. Here's your key."

"I'll get the car," Ward said, then he was gone.

"I built us this blue rose," the old man said,  
"Some thirty-foot high out of fiberglass  
To draw the tourists in. Wind blew it down."

The old man stuck his lower plate toward Helen.  
She looked away from him and saw the screen,  
The woman balanced on a low trapeze  
While men in crotchless tights were hoisted toward her.  
Ward honked, and Helen turned, but out beyond  
The four-lane, headlights cut across the field.

"Looks like they got that mare," the old man said.