

Roses are Red

By Jennifer Roe

She wore white. The thin fabric surrendered to the breeze, whipping gently round her thin legs. She walked ahead of him. If he wanted he could reach out his fingers and feel her flowing hair tickle his skin. Instead he pinned his hand against his side. His eyes did not waver though; each time he blinked his heart would pang for those lost moments. They followed her every movement, like a moth drawn to the light. She swayed a little; keeping beat to that beautiful music only she was privy to. The whispering wind tousled the leaves on the trees that filled the park, daring anyone to utter a sound. An elderly couple rested on a bench at the opposite end of the green expanse; their heads close together. Their solitude drove a charge of anxiety and joy through his being, making his heart crash against his chest. His legs felt useless and weak against his onslaught of emotions. And still obediently he followed her, all the while keeping his distance.

She knew her way round the park; her brittle limbs carried her on a familiar route as her mind occupied another. She ambled through the weaving paths, content in her own world. For a wonderful, unending period of time their game of follow the leader continued. He would have followed her to the end of his days, but her mind had other adventures planned. Something caught her eye and suddenly her movements became focused and steady and she sauntered down a straight path, one he had followed before, many, many years perviously. Realising the destination of their journey, all joy fled from his body; a paralysing fear was all that remained in the wake of his bitter-sweet joy. He watched from a distance as she eased herself through a hidden passage, cloaked from the rest of the park by a copse of trees. His feet refused to move forward. He smothered a terrible urge to turn round and run, to flee from this secluded world and return to his own. But then, was his world any different?

His last time in that rose garden had been fleeting; their precious time together disturbed by cruel and selfish words; his words; each and every last hateful one. Back then his time was not his own. Not his time, his mind, his body. Not today. Today he had time. Today he had resolved to follow that girl, even to the ends of the earth, if only on her whim. Today his time was hers. He took a bold step towards that dreadful entrance and shuddered. He closed his eyes and let his feet carry him the rest of the way.

It had not changed, not in those long years they spent apart. He so longed to follow as she immersed herself amidst the roses. They climbed towards the clear blue sky, one higher than the other, in desperate competition. She was like those roses, stretched high above the world, swaying gentle in the wind. She had no cares for what lay below, for the thorns that pierced and tore his flesh. He tried to reach her but every time he struggled the thorns dug deeper into his broken and

bleeding skin. And yet she grew, higher and higher, further and further away. She was too far away. Instead he watched from afar. Her hands were clasped in the small of her back, brittle fingers woven together. Intently she stared at the ornate flowers, bowing their heads as she passed. Her white dress and white skin stood in stark contrast to the vivid colours dancing in the air. The pavement she walked, planted by an artist's hand, forced its way through the garden in a large ring. All the colours of nature danced around the ring. Except one. Red. Too wonderful a colour to be allowed to mingle with others, it occupied the heart of the ring. There it sat, adorned.

He had been a helpless child when he last saw her. Ten years of age, and they forced that decision upon his powerless, desperate shoulders. What choice did he have? He had to leave her, there was no other choice. He rested his weary body against the wrought-iron arch, creating an entrance for the rose garden amidst the trees. He watched as she circled those red roses. Every day of their separation had been a torture reserved only for his pitiful mind. There was nothing he could do from so far away. Looking at the woman circling the roses as a vulture circles its dying prey, he knew he lost his precious sister that day.

It was the night their mother collapsed, eight years ago. He rode up the front of the ambulance, snuggled between two men. They sped through the night, the sirens tearing through the silence of the cold winter. His mother's face was so pale. When he asked what had happened they told him it would be alright. But their shaky smiles did not reach their eyes. His father and sister were in the back of the ambulance with their mother. His mother's lifeless hand was cradled in his sister's grasp, pulled tight against her heart. No one spoke except the man treating his mother, chirping code as he checked the endless wires and tubes connected to his mother's body. His sister did not speak. His father did not speak. So he did not speak.

They were sent home. There was nothing they could do in the hospital. His father had talked to the doctor as his sister sat beside him, their hands woven together. She squeezed his fingers very tight until they hurt, but her eyes looked like they were hurting more than his fingers. He sat quietly and pretended the throbbing in his fingers did not exist. He was good at pretending things didn't exist. He pretended he didn't see the flash of rage in his father's eyes as he returned from talking with the doctor. They got into a taxi waiting outside the hospital and left his mother alone. He wondered how his mother would feel waking up all alone. He wished he could stay with her so she wouldn't be lonely.

His sister made him a sandwich when they got home. She let him eat it in his room. He expected her to leave and go to her own room but she sat on his bed with him. She only stayed in his room when their parents were fighting, but he wasn't supposed to know his parents fought. His mother told him it was a secret. He wanted to play with his cars but not in front of his sister. Instead he found a

book in his wardrobe and wiped off the dust. They sat together. He read. Quietly. His mother read quietly. His father did not read books. He read the newspaper. He was not allowed into his sister's room. He did not know if she read books. He thought that if she read books she would read them quietly, like his mother. Not like their father. They sat together. He read quietly. Only the sound of his sister's occasional breath would stir the room. He liked the smell of her hair. The floor boards outside his room creaked. Only his father made noise in their house.

His sister's breaths became loud. He didn't like the sound of those breaths. He wanted to make her quiet again but he didn't know how. Instead he pushed his fingers through hers and tried to squeeze her hand as tightly as she had held his. He felt her shake. Their father stepped through the door. His eyes were red and swollen. His mother would not read to him at night when his father's eyes were red and swollen. She would not look at him the next morning either. His father held out his hand and his sister's fingers gripped his. She shook her head and the smell of her hair floated all around. He had only seen his father angry once, when his sister slept over at a friend's house. That night his mother let him watch television until he fell asleep on the couch. His father was angry now. Very angry. He used some very bad words.

His sister tried to push their father away but he pulled her hair and threw her against her wall. He whispered something in her ear and she started crying. His father told him to get into bed. His sister didn't stop crying. Their father started screaming. He threw his sister against the wall again. Somewhere in his mind a voice told him he should be good and get into bed but his teacher told him if someone was crying they were hurting and you had to help them. He tried. He ran to the door. The neighbour once told him if something bad happened to call the police. They were at his house earlier when his mother collapsed so they knew their way. His mother had taught him the number he was to call. It was first number he ever learnt. His father let go of his sister and ran after him. He caught him by his collar and pulled him back to his room. His sister tried to stop him but he kicked her. Everyone was screaming. He hoped the neighbours would hear them. They were very loud. His throat hurt from screaming.

His father locked him in the wardrobe in his room. It was very dusty. Every time he took a breath to scream he started coughing. Tears began to roll down his face. His body was shaking. He pulled his knees close to his body and pressed his eyes against his thighs. He was scared. His mother was all alone in the hospital. He wished he had stayed with her. He heard his sister scream all the way down the landing. She begged him not to listen. Over and over again she begged him to cover his ears. She begged him. He could hear her begging as their father slammed her bedroom door. He tried but he still heard. His room was at the opposite end of the landing. His sister's room was beside their parents' bedroom. No matter how tightly he pressed his hands over his ears he could hear his sister's screams.

She didn't stop screaming all night. He couldn't remember when she stopped screaming.

He woke up in the hospital. His neighbour was beside him. He asked to see his sister. He suddenly closed his eyes and shook his head. He had been in the wardrobe for three days before they found him. His mother died the night after she was brought into hospital. Their father went into the hospital the same night. He told the staff he didn't want his children to see their mother. It was not appropriate for children. That night he committed suicide. The police broke into the house the next day.

That night his sister spent the last of her sanity protecting him.

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"Look" she said. He opened his eyes suddenly and watched as she held a rose in her hands. Suddenly she flinched and she pulled her hand from the rose. He could see a splash of blood on her white skin. He quickly rushed to her side, forgetting about his hesitation. She made to hit the rose, her hand raised high in the air but he caught her wrist.

"Don't hurt the rose" he mused. "It was only protecting itself."

Her expression was one of outrage. He smiled.

"Those sharp thorns protect the rose, so that it won't get hurt," he told her, tipping the blood-coloured rose with his finger tip. It quivered gently from his caress.

She withdrew her hand from his and gently cupped the rose in her hand.

"I'll protect it too," she whispered.

And I'll protect you.

WINNING ENTRY



Jennifer Roe

Jennifer Roe lives in Dublin, Ireland. She is currently attending university where she is in her final year of teacher training. *Roses are Red* is her first attempt to be published. Jennifer's passion is writing, deriving inspiration from music; coupled with her love of tea, they are the most important things in her life.