

Sub Rosa.



I was surprised to see her again; the split had been angry. I'd regretted it after she'd gone but she'd gone and that was that. I assumed I would never see her again and got on with my life. I should never have assumed anything.

I was selecting a bouquet for Mrs J before I caught the last Cardiff train: I had been standing for a few minutes enraptured by a selection of gilded lilies, fruiting holly and artificial ivy when I saw her. We'd been apart for so many years, now there she was in my local flower shop on Christmas Eve buying a bunch of Cardinal de Richelieu roses.

There was a familiar scent; sweet and sickly, lascivious and rotten, with a hint of maiden aunts and broken hearts. The burrowing perfume-worm began chewing its way back into my brain stem; munching straight into the hypothalamus. The subtle and metaphorical invertebrate bypassed the man and the mammal, baiting a hook for the fish happily swimming along in the flush and swirl of oceanic instinct. The Instinct was decanted, gaffed, and gutted. My will trampled down by a lumbering amphibian id. I was trapped; transfixed by the mirror-vision of my princess among the priapic pink buds.

Between the Christmas cacti and gold glittered foliage, she's leaning over the counter wearing a short red dress trimmed with white fur.

Is it ermine? Fox? Or ferret?

She's all dolled up for a party somewhere, She is looking edible; perhaps it's her icing sugar skin?

"Flown in from Egypt this morning" The Florist says as she wraps the roses. The cellophane and white sparkly paper decorated with orgasmic

angels, their mouths hanging open in an choir of 'Oohs', eyes rolling up to heaven.

"Not a normal florists stock."

I think of them growing among old tombs; taking over the yellow desert and the pink marble ruins of the pharaoh's graves. I see the fields; dry and dusty in the heat. Rag-wrapped peasant farmers creep up and down the rows of bushes scattering black dust, fertilising the soil with the ground-up remains of the dead steeped in sandalwood and frankincense. The dry mummy meal of camels and kings sucked up by the old blossoms growing into fields of blood. I can see them flowing, a lake of crimson on the black Nile mud, shaded from the sun by pyramids, sphinxes and chryselephantine statues. Roses growing among the droop-headed date palms; roses running wild over decaying temples; roses building palisades of thorn trapping the Bedouin tents in permanent shantytowns. It's blasphemy against the God of Roses; they belong blooming in the cool gardens of labyrinthine palaces where secrets are whispered and subtle, sudden deaths are conjured in the moonlight.

But then again, it may be that the de Richelieu is the legendary Blue Rose of Arabian antiquity. The flowers offered to Ishtar in her temple where the brief triumph of existence over eternal night was celebrated with sacrifices of wine, wheat and blood on golden altars. The pagan flower has been christianised; renamed after the most secretive and unchristian cardinal. Is it some Gallic irony, a reference to the rose consecrated by ancient Greeks to the god of Silence?

She has grown thinner with time. Her nails hold a fresh coat of varnish. Mimicking youth she has painted them the brash scarlet-red of a 'Royal Bassino'. She is trying to be a modern rose but the vivid common colour only emphasises the pallid membranous parchment wrapping her blue-blooded flesh. The bloodline and breeding of the old rose shows through.

Her needle nails click as she counts out bank notes substituting her finger beat for the mummified heart of the hard cash.

∞

"How have you been, its years... what are you doing now?"

She bites a painted lip. I guess she's coming for dinner. She's tugging at the single dark red thread running from my heart, she has it coiled about her fingers and I'm dancing like a marionette. I know then that I'm going to forget.

Forget what? Forget the train with its warm yellow lights and cheery passengers partying and home-bound. Forget Jonesy waiting for me in his house near the River Taff. The vision is funnelled down a dark well and with a jolly hoot of its horn the plan goes into reverse-gear enveloped in oily clouds of diesel smoke. There's a death rattle in the sidings as she shunts my future back down the track. I'm going to miss the train for Her.

She takes me arm in arm; It's dark outside except for the white-star Christmas lights strung over the streets. They provide illumination for the gobby showers of sleety snow coming out of the night. I look up and a flake catches me in the eye. Spit from the dribbly dipsomaniac God of Christmas, mocking me from his hostel in air. His children sway up the street in his

image. They stagger past us; drunk. A man in a grey suit sits on the grey kerb in front of the grey kebab shop; he groans a prayer as he expels the contents of his stomach into the street. It sounds like water gushing in the gutter. I grip her tighter, I can feel the promise of her bones beneath the soft thrill of her flesh, we turn into the Mews and I guide her towards my residence at three-A.

∞

I dump my rucksack in the hallway, unlace it and extract the bottle of Chartreuse and two of bottles of medium-cheap wine. The presents for Jonesy wrapped in the cheap gold paper lie abandoned among my fresh socks and lucky underwear. A smart shirt is all ironed and folded ready for lunch at 'The Philharmonic'. My Christmas dinner will grow cold and rotten sat on the table before an empty space in my favourite gin-palace, its golden pillars glowing like Christmas candles in the shadow of Roger Fitzhamon's castle. My place will remain vacant while all my friends forget me in their happiness. What should I say to Jonesy; how can I explain this woman? I really should be firm, have spine, backbone and character; I could still get a cab all the way to Cardiff and tell this story over laughter, roast turkey and beer. Is she showing the three inches of cleavage for me? Why has she come back after all this time?

Already I'm back to my bad old habit of standing up my friends. Standing up Jonesy for her? Had they ever met? I couldn't remember. When I tried, all I could think of was her dancing naked in the snow.

Outside the window the stone satyr in the garden is grinning on his plinth, his marble skin shines with the cold. The moisture turns to ice in the bitter air. She holds the glass of emerald liquid between delicate ivory fingers. She always had skin like icing sugar.

"So where have you been?" I ask.

Down-under she indicates as she drains the glass in a single swig.

"Australia? What was it like?"

She pours another glass.

A different place?

∞

I light a candle and turn down the lights. What do I have to cook for her? I examine the fridge. I find a rattling subsonic throb and a few limp rashers of cold cooked bacon. Anything in the icebox? Vegetables. I wasn't planning to be here; that might do for tea but not Christmas and Boxing Day. How long is she going to stay this time? I can see her from here, reflected in the chromed sides of stacked and scrubbed pans; she is seated at the unlaid dining table, looking almost emaciated in the candlelight. She is working her way through the green chartreuse far too quickly. I really ought to feed her if only to slow down her drinking.

I wasn't supposed be here. I open the cold airing cupboard and switch on the central heating, the boiler gurgles into life, blue flames roaring behind the spy glass. I arrange the de Richelieu roses. Green thorned stems crammed in a water jug. The severed heads as red as communion wine with seams and stitches running in waves around the over-inflated buds. They

sway and whisper in the vase, red and swollen: ripe pulsating lips. There are soft swellings of old roses under her Santa costume. Pale apples in the smoky shadows cast by the candlelight. Was that button undone when I met her?

At the rate she's drinking we'll need more alcohol let alone food. I need to buy her something to eat. Pizza Polka will still be serving, open until four on Christmas day the flyer says. I'll get them to deliver supper tonight but I need to buy some food for tomorrow; a packet of Paracetamol might be a good idea too.

I slip into my jacket and head out into the dark. I can just make out the glow of the shop a hundred yards down the road from the Mews turning. I dodge random hazards of thin iced-puddles and fat old drunks.

In the Corner store, the owner's gone a bit festive. He's rapping Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer at me with a pair of plastic antlers bouncing on his walnut-head. LED Fairy lights twinkle on the top shelves, winking at the tits and rictus-grins on the covers of his stock of Christmas porn. He gives me a nod as I head to the food shelves at the back. How many bottles of wine? Any puddings left? Tinned custard? Brandy?

"Ahh you forgot Tesco's." He says smiling. He's broken off his rap; he adds up the piles of snacks and Happy Shopper branded products.

"They're open until midnight if you need a turkey."

"I've got to get back: Visitors."

"A lady?"

"An old friend."

"How about some chocolates for your friend?"

A present for her? All she ever wants is roses; that dusty bottle of Cointreau will do. The price of this stuff. If only she'd called ahead: she could have let me know she was coming.

"Merry Christmas one and all" he sings.

The till ker-chings and he shouts after me.

"God bless us every one."

∞

Walking by the spiked iron railings, beyond the dark caged foliage I can hear the sounds of kids playing in the park. They are up, always up in those trees however wet or cold the weather. Their fingers must freeze to the bark. In the winter, I can't see them but I think of their monkey bodies hanging from the branches covered in icicles. Little apes chattering and screaming as I struggle past the park gates laden with my Happy-Shopping.

∞

She looks around questioning the lack of decorations.

Swirling the last of the Green Chartreuse around the glass; it churns viscous with sugar.

"I was going away; a party in Cardiff."

That look, making me feel guilty. How could I think of leaving her alone, all alone at Christmas? A twitch of her ice-white cheek, a snap of her snow-white fingers, another tug on the red thread running from my heart.

She knows I never have decorations. The shard-sharp heels of her glass slippers tread me down. In the candlelight her hair seems moulded into a platinum seashell rising a foot above her head; very neat, very formal. Her teeth are snowy bright; very even, very formal. Beyond the window, the sleet gives way to snow and a white-skull moon grins through the clouds. In the garden, the remains of the Cardinal de Richelieu Roses are tangling and straggling woven and wild; the twisted canes still bearing hips at the end of shrivelled branchlets. The fallen petals have turned to grey mould with winter. Brown skeletons of the summer leaves cover the ground like a lost legion, massacred, stripped, and forgotten.

“What were you planning on doing this Christmas?” I ask.

Of course she was planning on spending it with me.

“No, I mean before we met.”

My memory’s not good, is it? She was always supposed to spending Christmas with me.

She always loved the Cardinal de Richelieu rose, its secret layers of silk petticoats soaked in gore. Its blood red lips pursed in the wet darkness of the garden. Petals balled up in the rain, closed tight, cocooning the pulsing heart. Although they seem delicate, the bushes run like the wild dogs around the bare-ribbed woods.

∞

The door buzzer alerts me to two pizzas arriving, with garlic bread, breaded mushrooms and a couple boxes of frozen tiramisu. All wrapped up against the cold in an insulated bag. I hand the two twenty pound notes to the black-screened motorcycle deliveryman. I tell him to keep the change, after all, it’s Christmas. I carry the pile of corrugated card and polystyrene boxes back down the hall. I can see through the bathroom window the neglected lawn has been infested by clumps of moss and rye grass. It looks like grey hairs sprouting from the black mud.

We sit eating and drinking in silence; maybe it’s the roses. Once upon a time good Christians kept one suspended over the table to remind guests that silence was observed during the feast.

The back garden is overgrown with the dead canes of the rose bushes I should have pruned months ago. They are coiled around every plant and shrub, over the red earthenware pots and faience statues and all over the rust-locked potting shed. I should have lagged them in the autumn, should have pruned them. They should have been deadheaded. The coconut matting is rolled up and rotting in the shed with the dead wasps nests and unused nutrients, the boxes of phosphate, the bags of dried blood and bone meal, food for the roses. I’ll have to do something to the soil in the spring, it will be rose sick, the poison will have spread from the roots. I’ll have to replace the top layer, at the very least it’ll need plenty of blood and bone. Perhaps some horse manure. The ice on the satyr glitters green as the Chartreuse liqueur. She opens another bottle of wine and pours until my glass is spilling red puddles over the table. Another button on the Santa dress has undone itself. The bells in a distant church are ringing out for midnight mass, incense will be burning; Frankincense for Christmas. The priest’s gold robes will be glittering in the flicker of tall temple candles. The diplomatically close-lipped roses

watch from the jug, they seem smug in their shadows. Her thin fingers curl around the wineglass; still sugar skinned, bloodless and silver-blue. In the night sky it is apparent that the moon is a loose stone hurtling around the planet. It's leaving a slipstream of boiling snow clouds in its wake as it spins through the frosty air.

We are still under the silence of the rose; her hair has come loose. I was glad she still hadn't cut her hair, she would never cut it when I knew her. Cold moonlight and the pharaohs' gold are united in her hair. It's like white tinsel spreading over everything. She's paler than a snowman more silver than sleigh-bells. I never needed any decorations with her hair. Look what she has found.

Her eyes widen in mock-surprise, her eyes the colours of the Blue Rose of Antiquity flicker and spark with amusement. She is holding the box, offering it to me. It's about a foot square, wrapped in red and white, a ribbon curled and bowed and covered in dried earth, strands of root are caught in the wrapping

"I remember. It was my present...no, I wouldn't like you to unwrap it now. Leave it until the morning."

The Satyr's face smiles outside the window, Saturn springing in the silence of space. That grin of satirical lust and his green glass eye shining among the withered roses. Would you like to join the wild dance with the cold Venus and her skin like a sugar coating on her soft blue-blooded flesh? Oh to unwrap it in the shade of a pagan temple. I'm waiting for its twinkle and shimmer. I'm waiting to feel the warmth of the rising winter sun. The *sol invictus* of saturnalia. The colours of the roses leach out into the night, those old rose hues of purple and purple violet all glowing richness. Quietly we move to the dark bed. In every shadow, the red of the cardinal's robe fluttering velvet in the dying candles' light. Those blooms rich and bloody yet dripping perfume from every petal. The candle has burned low, the wax has formed a stalactite puddle ruining the surface of the table.

The green stems rove in shadows. Only in full sunlight it shrinks away. Her skin like icing sugar; her lips red as roses. The candle putters out, leaving the smell of the smoking twist of carbonised wick. In the trees of the park beyond the iron fence the feral monkey children scream. We remain in silence: *sub rosa*.

∞

The morning's white sheets press me down, heavy in secrets and the scent of roses. A veil of icy prisms breaks the grey light into rainbows. There is an impression left where she lay, I place my hand on it, find it cold. Through the filigree fern of the window glass I can see night has laid a holy surplice of lace over the world. Still the trees in the park are waiting; they look like black old bones against the pale winter sky, dark spider-food bundles hanging in the branches, the dark winter woods reduced to gaunt outlines over a white limbo. Frost is splitting the crumbled brick of the garden wall. The plants are wearing frosty ruffs of pearl. Chalcedony spiders hang in icicle webs over velvet dark shadows of the slow growing evergreen junipers. At the perimeter, all around the borders, sprout immense bunches of reflexive petals sheened with mother

of pearl. They hide the feet of the stone satyr with fecund inflorescence, its frosty leer dripping with petrified drool.

My de Richelieu roses are blooming on Christmas day. I thought they were dead. How stupid of me, she hasn't left; how could she leave? After all it's Christmas Day. The box is still there; red and white paper wrapping among the mud and roots. She's in the garden. I can see her hair flowing over everything. She's growing among the roses. Weaving and waving her tendrils of white-gold ornamented with moonstones and pearls. There are platinum ringlets among the Cardinal de Richelieu's. She's growing back through the white snow; nurtured on blood, nurtured on bones, silent in the earth: *sub rosa*.

Oliver Smith, 2010