

The Rose Bush

"In all things of nature, there is something of the marvelous" - Aristotle, supposedly.

During The Middle Ages, the ideal of chivalry was born, swaddled, and raised up by adorning young men with swords. Ladies surrounded noble women to serve them with companionship and assistance. Merchants sold perfumed oil from distant lands that grew a woman's hair down past the small of her back. Cities, ruled by dueling families, stood tall on top of steep Italian hills. It was during this time, a root sprang up and bore her first harvest.

Below one city in the Umbria region, men and women and nobles and peasants walked on the sole road out of the city. This dirt road doubled as a trade route, and she watched a cart pulled by oxen kick up dust as it rolled by. Not nearly two moments later, a band of boys dressed in silver marched in front of her. Some sat mounted on horses and carried flags as high as the blue sky above her. Every time the horses clomped their hooves on the ground, the sound of metal armor grated against her ears.

"The soldiers are getting dirt all over me."

She looked over to see her friend's white petals and yellow center covered with pale brown specks. "Do you think they admire us?" she asked.

"Why do you want to be chosen so badly?" countered the daisy.

She did not have an answer for the daisy. She knew what happened after getting plucked: you die, or at least a part of you does. Her flower friends never failed to mention to her the pain that came with getting their stems pulled at, or the final severing from a blade cutting them in half. Then what happens next? You're taken to an unknown place, and slowly decay until death takes you from the world.

"This is the first spring you'll bear any rosebuds worth taking," the daisy scoffed. "You'll learn soon enough."

The rose bush thought differently than the daisy. She dreamed that someday she would be hand picked by an important individual. She'd travel. She would serve a purpose. The prettiest parts of herself would be displayed in a vase and watered. She'd be set in front of a window to be admired for her beauty. One day, she would stun people with her essence. Once the last of her petals dried out they would replant her, and she would return back into the earth. The cycle would start all over again. A rebirth would commence.

While she waited to be chosen, the rose bush continued to stare at the deciduous trees across the way every morning, day, and night. One afternoon a few male humans came to cut down a tree that lived on the left side of her vision. It fell with a groaning, shaking crash. She wondered how the trees could be so at peace knowing not one human thanked them for their lumber that warmed their homes, or the shade the trees provided for them while they walked on the road. Despite their unacknowledged purposes, they looked so harmonious swaying in the breeze. The rose bush sighed. She pruned her leaves and soaked up the dew drops on the tips of her buds to pass the time.

The next day less people walked on the road, and she lowered her blossoming roses in defeat until three small children pretending to fight a "dragon," which was really just a shaggy dog dressed up in red rags, crossed the road towards the flowers.

They stopped when one boy noticed the geraniums, tulips, daisies, and the rose bush in front of the rickety farmhouse that supported them. He called to his friends, and they came running back. The rose bush straightened her stems, trying her best to look presentable. After they smelled all of the flowers, one of the boys, the oldest, took a handful of geraniums.

The oldest boy ruffled another boy's sandy hair, "We'll bring them back home for mother." Then they all walked back to the city, some still chasing the poor pup.

The rose bush's flowers sank. Almost as though sensing her distress, the daisy brushed up against her. "You'll have your moment," she said.

"They didn't like how my roses smelled," she moped.

"That's not true. You smell the best out of all of us," the daisy tried to comfort her.

Yet no amount of words could make the rose bush see the process differently. She wanted to be picked. As for her friends, no one could imagine why any flower would want to part with their roots or give away the most beautiful parts of themselves to people who did not appreciate them. Not even the tulip's advice, "people take and take until soon there is nothing left," swayed the rose bush from her naive blindness. "In some cases," the daisy warned, "people take too much until there is nothing more to cultivate for the next year." All of them, she told herself, misunderstood her.

Later in the week, a young man and woman stopped beside the farmhouse on a cold, sunless day. She could tell they were peasants by their worn-down slippers. They wore plain, chalky garments down to their ankles that were too thin for the weather. Nonetheless they laughed and happiness beamed on their fresh faces. The two went up to the rose bush, and she shook with happiness. The man, upon putting his hand on one of her stems,

yelled. He jumped back, shaking out his hand. The young woman covered her smile with a hand, and shook her narrow head at him. The couple picked the tulip before leaving.

"I knew it," said the rose bush sadly, "it's my thorns."

"You're lucky to have thorns," explained the daisy. "They defend you."

"They hurt that fellow. They jut out of me like sharp little knives. They make me so ugly."

"That's not true," was all her friend could say. "Hush now, and enjoy the approaching rain."

The thick, gray clouds were still a ways away. She expected the rain to come later in the evening. A couple hours had passed when a bumble bee came to rest on one of her roses. "Hello, Rose bush," he said. "How are you today?"

"I'm alright. The weather's nice. It's not too hot, not too cold."

"That's right," said the bee. "There's just enough breeze so my wings don't have to flap too hard."

"Glad to hear it. It's nice to see you again. Take as much pollen as you'd like," the rose bush replied.

"Thank you, but your petals are too dense and clustered to climb into. I was hoping the tulip was still around."

"A young couple came and took her away."

"I see. May I stay and rest here for a moment longer then? I need to be

strong enough to get back to the hive before the storm."

"As you please."

The rose bush let the bee stay until he built up his strength. When the bee flew away, she cried a little. The boys did not want her, and neither did the peasant couple. Now, not even the bee found her useful. She strained to find her worth while enduring the constant rejection.

The next morning, a most peculiar person walked by the flowers. The man, head bowed, wore a brown sack cloth with a rope tied around his thin waist. The hood covered most of his face, but she heard him muttering some gibberish she could not understand. He walked slowly on his bare feet, until he turned into a thick part of the forest beside the path, and she lost sight of him.

Later that afternoon, while the sun relaxed into the western hemisphere, more people stopped by the flowers. They picked the daisies, including her friend, and the rest of the geraniums until she was left alone, turned-over dirt on both sides of her. Though some individuals glanced at the rose bush and rubbed her petals, they did not cut any for themselves. The rose bush decided not to get her hopes up that someone would pick a flower or two from her abundant thicket. She instinctively tucked away her desires and wishes so as to not be disappointed. Even then, she could not help but give attention to those desires every once and a while. And even then, if she never thought about her innermost ambitions tucked away in the deepest crevices and back tunnels of herself, they were still there nonetheless.

Weeks after the people took away all of her friends, the air became stiflingly hot. Water had not fallen from the sky since their last storm. A few of her petals hung from the stems, and then dropped to the ground in puddles of shriveled maroon and green leaves. They were falling quickly, and her bloom would soon expire.

The sun's rays became too much for the rose bush to endure, and her branches drooped most of the day. Suddenly, she felt relief from the yellow light beating down on her. She looked up to see a woman dressed in fine, white silk blocking the sun. The woman surveyed her roses with a content curiosity while her ladies in waiting stood a few paces behind her. The woman wrapped a piece of her shawl around her hand, and mouthed something to the ladies behind her. When she moved, her clothes seemed to shimmer in the light. She barely felt a prick when the lady took one rose, then another. The woman smiled at her before turning around and walking gracefully away with her ladies.

All of her friend's warnings about the extraction process came back to her as heedless and stupid. To her, the experience was invigorating and divine. She longed to feel the bliss once more that delighted her whole self even though something had been taken from her. She paid for the blissful feeling, but the pain, she thought, was not so bad. The rose bush was finally worthy.

She glowed differently than before, and the rose bush found it in herself to lift her branches up an inch. Her velvety red roses expanded and opened like never before. Then more people came: a merchant and his apprentices. They wrapped cloth around their palms. She braced herself when their rough, thick hands met the base of her stems and welcomed their touch. They tugged and pulled at her stems. The whole affair was slow and painful.

Is this what I wanted? She asked herself.

She thought back to the woman's quick and clean removal of her roses. Why did this experience have to be so different in comparison? She would have never expected an encounter to change her life so drastically. The individuals took four roses in total, a lot for a little rose bush's first produce.

The roses that had once decorated her bush were now turned into stumps. They ached and pulsed. Before she could process what had happened, more people arrived and took away her remaining roses. One person even dug up a section of her roots. After all was said and done, it was clear the rose bush would not be strong enough to make any flowers next year.

She sat naked and battered, feeling as though her identity was stripped away from her. The rose bush shivered due to the loss of her foliage. The rose bush thought back to her friends' warnings, and now she understood what they meant. She missed her friends. She remembered when one of her thorns poked the peasant, how he had jumped back, shook out his hand, and sucked on the punctured finger. In her hurt, she became proud of that memory.

That night the moon shone dim. The stars hid behind clouds so the rose bush did not see them crying. The air, animals, and all the flora did not speak. She considered the absence of noise so loud. Finally, the crickets started to chirp a long, solemn song in the darkness. It went on and on, slowly, until they too needed rest. They ended their composition with a decrescendo, and the music faded out. The night again went on in silence. This time, she welcomed it. The rose bush did not break the silence to cry or speak. She could not manage either of those actions. Instead, she used the silence to process all that had been done to her.

Days passed that turned into weeks. During that time, it seemed the rose bush's thorns grew larger and sharper. She did not speak to anyone, not even the butterflies or bees that came to rest on her now barren branches.

When the final days of summer came around, the rose bush saw a man dressed in a dirty tunic walk by the farmhouse. She recognized him from earlier in the season. He had passed by before when all of her flower friends were together and whole. The man walked differently than before. Before, his hood was pulled over his head, and he walked in a straight line

towards a destination of some sort. Now, she could see his face. The man's face twisted in torment or anguish. He staggered and puttered around, dragging his feet around in the dirt and occasionally kicking rocks. He used the rope around his waist to whip his back. He shouted about heaviness and collapsing?

Who was he talking to? she wondered. No one else was walking on the road at that time.

He turned his head towards her. At first, she was afraid. He walked towards her. He unraveled his waistband. He then threw his tunic over his head and tossed it onto the ground. He struggled to walk and take off his undergarments. He stumbled and stopped.

With every step he took, she cowered. His unusual behavior scared her, but something changed in her. She blushed with resentment at another human. What more could he take from her? She had nothing left to give. She would let him come and cut himself on her thorns. She would let him break her already frail branches and maybe the pain would stop. She'd be gone from this earth whose inhabitants treated her so unfairly.

He stood before her now, and she could not help but observe his gentle but tormented countenance. She saw he was about to cry. He held out his hands as though he was about to embrace the bush. He hesitated. Did he understand he was about to get hurt from the fall? Was he willingly going to harm himself?

Do it, she thought. Fall into me. She did not have the soft roses she once had to cushion his fall. Instead, broken branches and sharp thorns awaited him. The man rolled his eyes up to heaven. She winced as the man fell on top of her.

She felt his weight on her for many moments longer until his rapid

breathing slowed to a normal, relaxed pace. He did not seem to be hurt. She did not hear him groan or moan from the pain. The man flipped over beside her. The astonishment on his face confused her. He looked at her, hugged her, and kissed her stems. He praised the God of nature and creation.

The rose bush scrutinized him for any cuts or bruises. The man smiled up close to her. His eyes scanned all sides of her, and at that moment she knew what had happened. Red, vibrant roses decorated her branches once again. Her branches were no longer brown, but dark green. Where were her thorns? She searched for her thorns, but she did not find any on herself.

The man got dressed. He did not rush. All the while he kept staring at the rose bush. The bright, ecstatic smile on his face did not once leave his face. He finished tying the rope around his waist. He patted her roses.

"Thank you, friend," he said. He knelt down one last time and kissed a large rose in the center of the bush. He walked on, humming as he went back into the city.

She stared at the man until he disappeared into the distance. A few moments passed before she could bring herself to recount the miracle that had just taken place. She still carried the wounds that she had endured by other people's hands. Yet, she contemplated, this person's hand helped to heal her. He did not recoil from the ugly parts of herself. He did not take anything from her. He knew the fall would maim him, and still he fell on top of her.

Perhaps she did not want to be chosen so much as loved. She gazed at the trees blowing in the wind. They were older than she could have possibly imagined. The trees looked so tall to her, sturdy, and strong, despite the invention of the ax or stinging cold winters. The sweetness of suffering satiated her soul, and the rose bush now understood the old, wise trees. She allowed the wind to pick up her branches and leaves. She moved with the wind, and she imagined that she swayed as peacefully as the trees across the road.