

Dreams in the Briar House

Her dad liked Peter more than she did. On the way to the park, watching her in the rearview mirror as she fiddled with her church stockings, he told her she should give him a chance, he was such a sweet boy, he said, slipping into the cartoonish southern accent he got sometimes when he thought it made him seem nicer. He came to her school last year to talk about the children's book he had published, an ornately illustrated version of Sleeping Beauty. It was told in poetry that didn't rhyme, which he said was called free verse. He told them that anyone could write a poem if they wanted. He said anything could be poetry. At the University, Rose knew, he picked apart poems like a cat licking bones clean. but there, in front of her fifth grade class, he made poems seem like such a nice fun thing, made the world seem so sweet. It was very irresponsible of him.

"I like him fine," she said, laying the edge of her skirt over her knee. "I just don't like him like him."

He laughed, a jolly belly-laugh that didn't quite reach the level of sincerity she knew he wanted. Somehow, that felt worse than if he was laughing at her. Rose pressed her foot against the back of the seat, searching until her toes found a hint of soft human in it. He didn't do anything until she could feel the knots of his spine.

"Rose," he said, quiet, and not southern at all. "That hurts."

She put her foot down. There was still an impression of it in the back of the seat, rising slowly

back into shape on its own.

"He might not even be there. Who would come wait at a park on Sunday for some stranger?"

"You're not a stranger," her dad said. He was back to his accent already. "He really likes you, you know. He's sweet on you."

She really wished he didn't. At school they made fun of him, because he wore a stupid bowl cut that his Grandma's hairdresser did. It made him look like he was eight instead of twelve, soft, girly face framed by dirt-blond hair and wire-rimmed glasses. He looked away from people when he talked to him, wringing his hands, pinching the skin between his thumb and forefinger. Rose had only ever started talking to him because he came up to her in the park and said they had Social Studies together, which. She let him talk about the homework, which was something about Columbus, figuring he would go away after a while if all she did was nod. But then Dad saw him, and said he looked like a sweet boy when she got into the car, and she knew that was it.

Last Sunday she had promised him to come back here after church. He said his Grandma lived around here and that was who he lived with right now. So he walked to the park a lot. The park was old, the playground equipment filthy and damaged in places, filled with sharp gravel instead of the soft stuff at the new park. But the swings were long, and they took her higher than she had ever been.

He was there. He recognized her dad's car and waved from the suspension bridge on the jungle gym, leaning against the railing and poking his head out. He had a worn down notebook next to him, held together with duct tape. He had cornered her at school Monday and tried to show her a drawing he did of her. She wanted to push him down right there in the hall. Just the thought of being drawn made her face tingle with humiliation. Her image shaped in uncanny lines, wrong, but with just enough rightness to make her want to feel her face to make sure it hadn't changed. In the photos in the living room she was someone else, a black-eyed fairy that thought about things far away, things too old and strange for Rose to worry about.

"Have fun," Dad said as she lifted herself out of the car. "Tell Peter he can come over if he wants. We always welcome company."

She slammed the car door just soft enough for him not to notice. Peter was already getting off the bridge, sliding down until his toes touched the gravel, letting the rest of himself follow. He clutched the notebook to his chest like it was his heart. She made a beeline for the swings. He was jogging a little to keep up with her, opening and closing his mouth, trying to shape what he was going to say. She watched it move around almost-words and drop them, like erasing a line on paper.

"How are you?" was what he settled on. Rose gave him a little half-smile, lighting him up into something very genuine and painful.

"Church was really boring." She pulled her skirt off her legs so she could sit on the swing. He

stared at her for a moment, digging into his palm with bitten-down nails.

"Um. Well, you look nice in your dress. I like the cats on it."

She hated her church dress. No one else her age had to dress up, they wore jeans. She felt like a little doll, pushed in front of old ladies who cooed at her and told her dad what a wonderful job he was doing as a single father.

"One of my dad's students made it for me. She likes sewing, I guess."

He was quiet again, staring at her like she was the doll, like she was perfect in a way she did not want to be. Rose doubted that he heard a word she said. She decided she wouldn't say any more. She didn't want to talk to him anyway; he was weird and no one else liked him, except for her dad. He hadn't heard him talk though. All he had was him silent through the car window, an uncanny portrait, just like hers.

"You wanna see my drawing?" He was already flipping through his notebook to find it.

Of course she didn't. No one wanted to see Peter's stupid drawing.

"Sure."

He held it up. Drawing Rose was all soft edges, made of lines ghosting over each other, all light

and barely there, like he was afraid of it. Her mouth was an unrecognizable pout she had never seen herself make. Her eyes were too bright. But her hair, her hair was pretty, floating around her head like it was something alive, like it would wrap around her and make clothes that were nicer than what she had. She didn't know how he could get that perfect and the rest of it so, so wrong.

"Um. How do you like it?"

"It's pretty," she said, not trying very hard to lie at all. "Hey. Swing with me."

For a moment all the tension in his body flowed out, and she caught herself thinking that he didn't look that bad when he wasn't all stiff and squeaky. Then it was over, and he cringed for no reason when he sat in the swing next to her, toes scraping the gravel like he wanted to take off, but couldn't. He was biting his lip so hard she thought it might start bleeding.

"Can we talk instead?" he offered.

"About what?"

"I dunno." Peter kicked at the ground. "Anything. What's your favorite subject at school?"

"I don't have one."

"Mine's English," he said. He turned to look at her, almost making eye contact like a normal

person. "Wait, your dad wrote a book didn't he?"

No. You've got the wrong person, sorry. Real Rose has a normal dad, who means it when he smiles and talks like he's from an old movie, quick and certain.

"Yeah. He wrote a fairytale."

Her father was watching them from the car, his huge fingers dug into the soil of his book like garden stakes. He made eye contact, and she had to use every ounce of strength she had to twist her face into a smile.

"You wanna meet him? He's right over there."

"Yeah! Um, if that's okay."

"If you want," she said, fists bunched in her dress. "You can come over. I have one of the pictures from it in my room."

Dad had let her pick whichever one she liked. She chose the moat of thorns, breaking the ground to rise and cover the castle in a black tangle that seemed to have no end. Briar Rose must have felt so safe, she thought, sleeping behind that wall of hurting, unreachable to all except for the one who would for sure wake her up. The artist, when she signed it for her, put a little rose on the tip of a thorn just for her.

"Really?" He acted like he was asking, but Peter was already scrambling to gather up his notebook. "Your dad won't care?"

"He likes having people over. It gets lonely with just the two of us."

Sometimes it felt like it was just her, small and alone in that empty house, coming home to neatly-written notes and instructions for making their dinner. Once she had just made herself a jelly sandwich, just to see, and he had looked at her so scarily that she never did it again.

When they got in the car, Dad was waiting for them, turned around in the seat so he could shake his hand. Peter took it nervously, smiling with the frightened eyes of a cornered rabbit. Like her, he knew just enough to push down the instinct to bolt, but not enough to know why it was there. He took her father's offered drink, dumbly obedient as he swallowed it down. He made a face.

"It tastes weird."

"It's just orange juice," Rose said. Just hurry up. Hurry up. "You think my dad has germs or something?"

He drained it all in one gulp. She listened to Dad talk to him about his book until he fell asleep, staring at the sky turning white-gray. Far off to the left, she thought she could see a silent flash of lightning that she wished would strike her.

"You ready to go, darlin'?" He was holding out her drink. "We're here."

"You said I wouldn't have to." She took it anyway, felt how warm and sweaty it was from his hand. "You promised."

"I think you heard wrong."

She hadn't. She remembered it clearly, this morning when they were getting ready for church. Rose watched him pour medicine in only one cup. One cup, and she had asked, but he said that was the only cup he would get ready. It wasn't like he had never lied before. But. But.

"Please."

Gently, with only his fingertips (he was so strong, that was all he had to do) he pushed the cup toward her, and she knew that was it. Shaking, hands slick with sweat, she took her cup and drained it in one long gulp. Peter was right. It did taste funny.

Rose never slept well, after medicine. With just enough energy left to sluggishly pull on her nightgown, the world was black before she hit the blankets. She drifted in and out of that blackness, like coming up for air, but each time the medicine dragged her back down by the hair.

Once she wondered what would happen if she didn't wake up. Would it hurt? Would she go to heaven?

She didn't want to go back to sleep. She didn't want to sleep, ever.

There was a wet spot when she woke up again. She had to force herself awake, afraid it was her period. Rolling over, she felt the presence of a warm body next to hers, soft and smelling like outside. And now, she realized, feeling the spot with her hand, pee.

She threw the covers off and stood on the bed, digging her heel into his back, but he didn't wake up. She had to rest her foot against his side, and feel his breath there, to even know he was still alive. Rose kicked him again, for good measure, and hoped he would wake up with a giant bruise.

She was trying really hard not to cry when she went to get Dad. She failed, and he pat her head when he pushed her into the bathroom with a bundle of clean clothes and a hairbrush. Before she got into the shower, she heard him shut and lock her bedroom door. When she got out, he was putting new sheets on her bed. Peter was gone.

"Where is he?"

"I decided to let him stay in my room for the night," her dad said, smiling, why was he smiling?

"I swear, that little fella could sleep through a hurricane."

"That -- " She swallowed. Her chest felt tight. "You don't need to do that, he can stay in here. I was just surprised, that's all."

His hands came to clasp her shoulders, big enough to cover them entirely.

"You're so sweet, Rose. I don't know how I got lucky enough to have such a good little girl."

You didn't, she thought, but she just smiled instead. He didn't really want her to respond when he talked, most of the time. Good Little Girl was just another set of words that meant Doll, like Angel or Princess. She wasn't any of those things. She didn't know what she was, but she wasn't that.

"Goodnight, sweetie." Another thing she wasn't. She had always hated it, it made her sound like something good to eat. Like the kids the candy witch in Hansel and Gretel had turned into gingerbread men.

"Goodnight, Daddy."

She didn't go back to bed. The medicine wasn't as strong for her as it used to be, and there was only so much he could give her before she started to throw up. Rose knew because they had tried. Grabbing the duvet off the bed, she wrapped herself up and scooted to the T.V. to turn it on, volume low, almost a whisper. There was a documentary on PBS about witch hunts. She

watched woodcarvings and paintings of burning women dance across the screen, their agony and horror as lovingly rendered as the fires that ate them up.

That was what she was, wasn't it? Not an Angel, or a Sweetie, or even a Good Little Girl. She was a wicked Witch, leading good, nice boys, whose only crime was being annoying, to something awful, something worse than being eaten. She was the old woman with a pretty house, holding open the oven door for him to climb in. Tangled up in her blanket, Rose burrowed inside, safe and hidden in the makeshift cave it made. She wanted to die. She wanted to be burned up in her pretty house, with all her pretty things, all her dresses and ribbons and all the pictures that made her a little doll.

Rose began to cry. She didn't want to die.

Mom had wanted to die. When she was only a little girl, she put it in a note that said life was too painful to live in. That she wanted to stop, she was too tired, after all. Then she had put that note in a little envelope, neatly folded, as if it mattered, and she took one and a half handfuls of sleeping pills. Rose knew because the note specified, the note she was not supposed to read but found first, struggling over the big words and the large, terrible thoughts that she was then still too little to understand. People at the funeral said at least she died peacefully, but Rose knew better. Her mother had drowned in that one and a half handfuls, her agonized face silent and unknowable.

She could not remember a time after then that she was not afraid of sleeping. It was not just the

medicine Dad gave her when she was, as he said, "underfoot" or "difficult". Nor was it the spot of drool on Mom's dead and sleeping face, sliding down her face, never to drip down on to the pillow. It wasn't even all the awful dreams she had; dreams of dolls and furnaces and sweets with too much icing, smothering and filling her until she breathed only smoke and sugar. What scared Rose more than anything was the absence of all these things. On nights when everything was quiet, she struggled to stay awake, pinching her forearms until they were covered with ugly little cat scratch marks. She would always fail, and when she woke up, her body choked in sheets, she would cry quietly in relief that she had managed to return from the blackness once again.

The TV had switched to a show about paintings. The Mona Lisa stared over time, through the screen, into Rose, into everyone who saw her. Men with wire glasses and bright eyes speculated on the meaning of her smile, the slight dimpling of her mouth that looked like a million different feelings to a million different people. To Rose, sliding to the floor in her blanket cocoon, she looked like she wasn't really smiling at all. She reminded her of the tight, pained looks she had in all her own pictures, wound up until the slightest touch sent echoes of her through everything she saw. To her, Mona Lisa looked like she would rather no one see her. How mean of Da Vinci, to make her so pretty that there was no way she could be ignored.

Out of courtesy for Mona Lisa, she turned the TV off. A little bit of gray light was beginning to show itself outside, dim and near black, but still enough to make her room more than vague shadows and outlines. She was sure to only let her face stick out as she crawled back up on the bed, grabbing her pillow to pull it with her into her little shell. It felt soothing and cool against her cheek, and she could feel her tension unwinding itself, her spine going slack, her limbs

sinking into the bed. But she didn't close her eyes until she was sure no light was under her blanket. Not until she couldn't even see her fingers resting in front of her.

Something in the house slammed against a door, soft and barely thudding; the sound of a human body against wood. There was a terrible shout right after that, then the door slammed, and she was crawling out of bed, untangling herself from the duvet, her chest so tight and heavy it slowed her down as she opened the door. The hall light was on. Her dad was standing in front of the bathroom door, half-dressed in his work clothes, all his careful self-control unwound and undone as he fixed it with a face that was more of a twisted, ruined painting than something human. He saw her, and the weight in her chest became a solid lump of rock. He tried to smile, and she felt the need to vomit.

Rose shut and locked her bedroom door before he could say anything to her. He still knocked, gentle, calm, not at all like Peter's head hitting the guest bathroom's door. She couldn't breathe, now. Maybe she would die.

"You okay, sweetie?"

She forced air into her throat, just enough to answer him in a voice that sounded like it was far away.

"I'm fine."

"Sorry I woke you up," he said, nonchalant. "Poor Peter was a little startled when he woke up, so I put him in the bathroom to let him calm down a bit."

Startled, he said. Startled. It was so horrible she choked on a laugh.

"Why don't you go talk to him in a little bit? I bet you'll make him feel a whole lot better. I've got to get to work right now, but I'll be back around one."

"Okay."

"Love you, sweetie. Have a good day."

"Love you, Daddy."

She couldn't breathe until he was gone. His feet carefully thudded down their fourteen steps, across the kitchen floor, and finally, finally, out the front door with a sound that echoed straight into her chest, waking it up. She decided to sit there for a few moments more, her small lungs greedily filling themselves with all the air they had been too heavy to take before. Her chest moved with them, heart thumping in her ears as she curled up in front of the door.

She had slept so much, but she was still so tired.

Putting her ear against the floor, Rose could hear Peter moving around in the bathroom next door. He was pacing back and forth with energy that made her jealous, pausing every few steps to kick the door. The sound of it, the sound of him, startled her, even repeating like clockwork. She wanted to get up and tell him to stop. She wanted to lay here forever and listen to him walk. She couldn't hear her heartbeat anymore.

"Rose!"

He began to punctuate every kick with her name. She made it into a song in her head, rose-knock-rose-knock-rose-knock! Like that, she could almost fall asleep to it.

"Rose, please!"

She stood up. She brushed her hair until every single tangle and knot was torn out. She changed into a pair of leggings with poppies on them and pulled on a big sweater she had found in her dad's classroom once. She didn't have time to take a shower, so she sprayed body mist all over until she smelled like Autumn Breeze. The whole time, she was very careful to never look in a mirror. If she caught an eyeful of her reflection, she was sure, absolutely sure, that she would never want to leave her room again.

No one had questioned why Dad had wanted to put the lock on the other side of the bathroom door. Not the locksmith who did it, not Mama, not any guests. Once he had joked, right in front

of her, that it was for locking up misbehaving children. The French Literature professor and his wife laughed, but Rose had to fake a stomachache to escape the table, and later, had to make herself throw up to make sure his joke didn't come true.

The door hit her in the face when it opened. For a moment, she went blind and dizzy, the stars behind her eyelids flashing a panicked red. Peter was gasping frantic apologies, gingerly touching the hurting spot the door made on her forehead. Still unable to see, Rose grabbed at his wrist, twisting it in her tiny hands until her sight came back. She had only a brief look at his teary face before he threw himself at her, knocking them both off balance and slamming her head into the stair railing. It was a little hard to know what was going on after that. They both made strange, angry noises, trying to dig fists, knees, and elbows into whatever soft parts their bodies could find. It was the first fight Rose had ever been in, and she found herself enjoying it very much.

Peter got worn out first, rolling off of her with a tight little sob, his body curling over itself, still as a dead bird. She suddenly felt very bad for him. This probably wasn't his first fight at all.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. His muscles twitched, as if that hurt him.

"Why didn't you let me out?"

She didn't answer him. She sat down next to the stairwell and pulled her knees to her chest. He sat up, ugly and red with exertion and leftover tears.

"I was getting dressed. I was in my nightgown."

He coiled up, his hands and his mouth shaking with unreleased feeling. Rose was scared for a moment. He breathed out, and was still.

"I'm sorry," she said, surprised to find that she meant it. Peter took off his glasses and wiped them on his shirt with delicate precision. He ground his palms into his eyes, tensing and letting go in one smooth motion. He stared at the bannister above her head.

"Your house is older than I thought, Rose."

"Dad had a lot of the rooms redone. He said it looked really bad before. Termites and stuff."

Peter stretched his limbs in all four directions, laying back. He sucked in a big breath, small chest rising until she could see his ribs, then let it out as a sigh. He blinked at the ceiling a few times, and somehow she knew that meant he was thinking.

"So it's mostly wood?" he said, not asked, though there was a bit of a tone of hope in there.

"Yeah." Rose began to feel a bit giddy. "It was built a long time ago so a lot of the paint's old too."

"Isn't old paint like a fire hazard or something?"

"Dad said it was really oily, so I guess so."

They fell silent, both contemplating the exact same thing. When they got up, he knew to follow her down the stairs, through the kitchen, past the laundry room and into the garage. On top of an old wooden shelf nailed in to the wall, there was a big red container, the outline of flames just barely visible in raised plastic. The shelf was just high enough to go over her head, and her arms were just long enough to let her fingertips brush the container. Standing on her toes, she tried to grab it, but all she could do was scratch the side.

"I could help you," Peter said, reaching for her hand. She snatched it away.

"You're not that much taller than me."

"I'll lift you up."

She hesitated, but quickly acquiesced, letting him put his arms around her middle and pull her almost four inches off the ground to grab the container. Even after it was in her hands, he never asked what it was for. Just followed her, dutifully quiet, as she opened it up and began to pour gas into the living room carpet. It smelled nasty, and weirdly stale, different from what was at the pumps at convenience stores.

"Should I do the upstairs too?" Rose shook the can. She wasn't sure there would be enough.

"It'll fall if the downstairs is burned enough," he said. "Wasting gas is bad for the planet."

She nodded in agreement, because it seemed like the good thing to do. Good people cared about the planet, she thought.

There was enough after all, at least for downstairs. Rose grabbed the matches from the kitchen, before retreating into the doorway with Peter to admire her work. Without thinking, she grabbed his hand, holding fast to it like a lifeline as she struck a match on the doorframe and tossed it into the oil. It came to life instantly, winding its way along trails of gasoline like a thin, red snake.

"We need to go," Peter said, pulling at her with the hand she was still thoughtlessly gripping. She let herself sway on her feet for a moment, her face heating red as the flames rose. He pulled harder, until she stumbled back on the steps. He didn't apologize, or speak, even when she nearly tripped, just pulled her up and shut the door behind them. Neatly, as if they were just going on a day trip.

She didn't look back again until they were halfway down the road that would take them to the park. It was in the front yard now, rosebushes crumpling into black, curling up and dying, spared from a process that would have taken years otherwise if it wasn't for this, for her. She closed her eyes, and smiled.

She felt so awake.