

### A Rosebed for Becca

Most people would probably make fun of a teenage boy who called a remote spot in the forest his favorite place. But Becca wasn't most people. At birth, her mind had opened as wide as her mother's birth canal and had never closed, despite all the people working to close it. She didn't tweak her face as the other kids did when the only lesbian couple in our school held hands while walking down the hallway. She didn't laugh as any other popular girl would when our school's biggest nerd dripped sweat as if he'd just run a marathon when he asked her to prom. I had to hand it to him for seizing an opportunity—that was the same day everyone whispered about Becca's boyfriend of two years dumping her for a promiscuous sophomore. She declined Mr. Nerd's invitation, but only after she had thanked him for asking her.

I took her to my favorite place the day cheerleading practice had been canceled due to a nasty flu. We were walking down the forest path when she stopped and took an audible breath through her nose. "Do you smell that? Roses? I think I smell roses. You don't see any, do you?"

I'd been everywhere in this forest, and we were nowhere near the only roses hiding in it. I looked around before answering, "No. And I don't smell any, either. Hallucinate much?" I made eye contact, smiled with my lips closed and as if on cue, laughter erupted from her. Every time I made fun of her, if I smiled afterwards, she laughed. A bubbly giggle that popped from her lips like carbon dioxide escaping a fresh liter of soda.

After she quieted, she said, "Stupid Rape Forest, playing tricks on my nose." She never took the shortcut through the forest alone. The first time we had taken it together, back in middle school, she said that if she were a rapist she would hide here. It did seem like a perfect place to troll for victims, but I'd never heard of anything bad happening here. Not even an attempted rape. My father was a police detective. Just to make sure, I had him check his database.

"You heard my father. Nobody's ever been hurt here."

"Doesn't mean nobody ever will."

"Then call it Potential Rape Forest." She would watch "Law & Order: SVU" episodes over and over again. A small side yard separated her house from mine, her bedroom from mine. In springtime, the distinctive "Law & Order" music drifted from her open window down to mine: DUH! DUH! "I got it. How about Alleged Rape Forest?"

A smile spread across her face. "*Alleged* Rape Forest. I like it. A.D.A. Barba would approve."

I veered her off the path, prying her book bag from her when she wondered out loud how much longer she could carry it. Her backpack overflowed with books, so much so that the zipper gaped open at the top like a clown's oversized, painted smile. After school, her bag always looked like this, but usually a fellow cheerleader drove her home after practice.

We were about twenty yards away when she spotted it. "Oh my God, Patrick. I can't believe it."

A tree or two had fallen long before my time, leaving stumps, decay and a substantial break in the foliage. The sun shone down to the forest floor like a theatre spotlight, highlighting the ground like a stage. And the featured actor: a wild rosebush boasting over three dozen perfect blooms.

"Did you do this? It looks like the one your dad bought you last weekend." A closed lip half-smile climbed up one side of her face and her eyes narrowed like a detective waiting for confirmation of what she thought she knew.

"I didn't." I put our bags down and arched my back to stretch it.

"But these are my favorite. You know they are. These yellow ones with the red tips. Like God kissed them."

I stood next to her and watched as she bent down to a waiting bloom, closed her eyes and took a long, deep inhalation through her nose.

"Maybe now you can stop calling it Rape Forest."

She stood. "Have you smelled them? They're amazing."

"I have. They're nice."

I focused on the rosebush, ignoring Becca for a moment, so there wasn't any warning. Her lips pressed against my cheek. I jumped.

"Thank you for bringing me here."

In the time it took for her to say these six words, blood had already rushed to my groin.

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It took three chimes of the doorbell before Becca's mom answered. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. Her feet were bare underneath a thin, food-stained robe that should've seen the inside of a dumpster long ago. Her hair was oily. Her puffy eyelids seemed too heavy to open all the way, as if to stop from crying she had swallowed sleeping pills in the daytime. Did that mean she was awake at night? If so, shouldn't I have heard sounds of her crying drift from Becca's window? The last two nights had been silent. These two silent nights had coincided with the forest search ending, as if everyone in town—including Mrs. Wilson—had given up on Becca.

Mrs. Wilson didn't greet me. Instead, she looked at me as if I were a part of a dream she wasn't sure she wanted to be having.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs. Wilson. I found Becca's cross in the woods."

"You *what*?" Her eyes sprang open, giving her the too-wide look of someone deranged. "Let me see it." She grabbed my hands and pulled them close to her face. She let go of them when she saw that they were empty.

"I left it in the forest, where I found it. It's evidence. I have to call my father. I should've called him when I found it, but I wanted to let you know first." A cross-breeze shoved the scent of her house against my nose like a kidnapper's chloroformed rag. Overfilled ashtrays. Rancid undertones of days' old trash. Mrs. Wilson was no longer bothering to smoke outside, and since the divorce, Becca had been in charge of the garbage.

"Yes. Of course!" She reached into her bathrobe pockets. "Oh my God. Where's my phone?" She turned and sprinted down her hallway.

I leaned my head through her wide, open door and raised my voice. "I have mine, Mrs. Wilson."

She was back at the door before my father answered his cell phone. Mrs. Wilson used to run five miles every morning, but after a week without exercise, her lungs had weakened. She leaned her ear toward mine, her panting breath sour enough to loosen the valve at the top of my stomach and project a recently consumed energy bar up my throat. I swallowed before it could reach my tongue, avoiding the ghost of snacks past.

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Despite being Becca's next door neighbor, and her mother's sometimes lover, my father was the detective in charge of her disappearance. Even if his boss knew about my father's intimate relationship with Mrs. Wilson, he still would've had to put my father on the case since our town's only other detective was dying of lung cancer.

To avoid contaminating a possible crime scene, my father asked me to point from afar to Becca's cross, but when his Barney Fife-like uniformed officers couldn't locate it, he asked me to approach the scene. From far away I could see it, but I continued walking until my father said, "That's close enough, Patrick. Can you see it?"

I nodded. It lay on the ground next to the damaged rosebush, the sun glinting off of the necklace's too yellow surface. I jumped when Mrs. Wilson took a sharp intake of breath next to me. I hadn't noticed that she had followed me. I turned to her. Her hand hovered in front of her eyes. The gold reflection of Becca's cross bore a perfect hole into it. She took a step sideways to look at the necklace unhindered.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "She was here."

I watched as silent, oversized tears popped from her eyes.

"I see it," my father said. He was on the other side of me. He circled behind me to put his arm around Mrs. Wilson, and guide her away from the scene.

I didn't notice it earlier, a single undamaged rose close to the center of the bush, like a near dead body being kept alive by an unusually strong heart.

"Patrick? Can you come here, please?" My father asked.

A few quick strides and I caught up with him. He had dropped his arm from Mrs. Wilson and stood far enough away from her to have a private conversation with me.

He spoke in a soft, low voice, "What were you doing way out here?"

From my back pocket, I pulled out my map, a copy of the one my father had been using to coordinate the search for Becca. "I never stopped looking for her."

His eyes looked shiny. He turned away and coughed, but really, he was running his forearm across his eyes. He put his hand on my shoulder. "Thank you for not giving up. Would you mind walking Mrs. Wilson home?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Helen? Patrick's going to escort you home."

"Thank you, Patrick," Mrs. Wilson said as I approached her. The wet trails on her cheeks turned her skin red. Such sensitive skin. Like Becca's. Hers had done the same thing whenever she had cried, which she hadn't done often. I hadn't even seen her cry when Jake had broken up with her last month in a text during second period.

"Your father's proud of you, you know. I mean, of course he is. Any parent would be. You're such a good student. But this? What you did for me and for Becca...this is something special. I'll never forget this. Everything's different now, you know? I feel...hopeful. Your father. He's going to find her." She stopped walking and threw her arms around me. She grabbed the back of my head and pulled it down to her shoulder, shoving my nose into her pungent hair.

I patted her back for a few seconds, giving her the prompt to release me, but she squeezed for at least a minute, which was fifty-nine seconds too long.

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After the sliding glass door opened and closed, I heard my father's heavy footsteps crossing the yard. He stood next to me, joining me as I looked down at the row of rose bushes. "I know those people down at the garden center think I'm crazy, buying expensive rose bushes for a teenager, but if they saw them now, they'd keep their looks to themselves." He put his hand on my shoulder. It felt as uncomfortable as Becca's overstuffed backpack, and if it had been, I would've dropped it on the ground.

"Yeah." In my flashlight beam, I spotted the tiniest thread of a weed, not much thicker than a strand of hair, in the rich dirt. "Weed," I said as I squatted down to pull it. After, I laid my empty hand, fingers spread, on the freshly turned ground, just like visitors do with prisoners, their hands separated by thick glass. When I stood back up, his hand was back at his side.

"I wonder how many people in the world weed by flashlight."

I glanced at him. "I can't be the only one."

"Yeah, there must be someone else out there who does this." As he spoke, his words slowed, as if he were falling asleep, or distracted by a daydream.

I focused my flashlight on my newest bush. Yellow roses with red-kissed tips. Already, it seemed obvious how special this particular bush was. The petals glowed in a way none of the others did, like the skin of a newly pregnant woman. It even looked taller, which was impossible after only one week in the ground. If my entire garden were a human being, this bush was the heart, the lifeblood of the garden pulsing in and out of it, engorging it.

My father cleared his throat. "The search party starts at eight tomorrow morning, but I have to be there around six to organize. You want to drive over with me or meet me there?"

"I'll meet you there."

He headed back to the house. "I'll see you there at eight."

"Yeah, okay."

We exchanged goodnights before he slid the glass door closed.

I stuck my hand in my front pants pocket and traced the filigree of Becca's gold, heart-shaped locket, the necklace that she had worn every day since her father had given it to her for her fourteenth birthday. It held a single picture, one of Mrs. Wilson. The other side was empty, where Jake's picture probably used to reside.

As I rubbed her golden heart, I closed my eyes. I felt everything as if it were happening again. How little strength it took for me to pin Becca to the ground. How the slightest squeeze of her throat broke her hyoid bone, suffocating her. How beautiful her underwear was—enough to almost tempt me into keeping them. How much force it took to penetrate her, more than I would have expected. How her cooling skin felt as welcoming as a cold shower after a long, hot day, inviting me to leave a part of me inside of her. A gift from me to her. How no one noticed me digging a hole in my garden at a depth greater than a rosebush requires. Becca would feed a bush of her favorite colored roses. In my garden. Forever. Keeping my hand in my pocket, I barely had to touch myself to achieve a glorious release.

No, this locket wasn't going anywhere. No one was going to "find it" during the search. Not tomorrow. Or ever.

As I turned to walk back into the house, I saw the light on in Becca's room, the first time in two days. In the springtime, Becca never closed her window, and her mother had left it open.



Tonight, I would be serenaded by Mrs. Wilson's wordless soliloquy. A tearful ode to a dead daughter.