

The Roses Didn't Hurt Anyone

She couldn't get it out of her head, the deafening vacuum at first, then the ringing, slowly building, echoing between the ears, everything else muffled behind it. And then the dark dread of knowing something is changing, the ache in your body telling you there's nothing you can do. Something ending, taken away, forever. Even an old woman can't get used to that.

#

Lori Santana had heard all about it, of course, already after just a couple of months in her new house. She couldn't believe no one told her anything about it before she bought the house.

I wouldn't have bought it or thought about it seriously. Then again, naaaah. This house fits Joe and I and little Joey, just right. This is our home now--Birch Street.

Even so, she had walked little Joey in his stroller up to the abandoned house a couple of mornings already to investigate. It didn't look anything like what Mrs. Muñoz, or Suki next door had described. There wasn't any grand garden, or the fabled roses. The place was overrun with weeds of all kinds, mostly dried out, new ones shooting from inside the desiccation, reaching for the sun. There was an old, dried skeleton of a bush-tree in the middle of the yard, its thick branches stretched wide, close to the ground. You couldn't walk to it from the thickness of the unwanted growth.

This lunchtime hour was her prized possession, it was the time for her walk. Joey was fed and asleep and Suki had the monitor in case he awoke, she could just step in to look after him. The Reeboks were double-knotted for a good hard walk up Arizona Street. She still couldn't help wondering if the scent of those roses they talked about could really be smelled all the way to her house three blocks down. She focused on her gait these first few steps and getting a good warm up on the first mile of the workout.

As she crossed busy Montana Street Lori noticed the old lady she'd seen over there, across from the house with the

weeds, knitting as before, sitting on the bench under the little porch of her house. She couldn't help herself and decided to slow down to speak with the *viejita*. But she'd have to look innocent enough so the old lady wouldn't think she was just nosing around, they probably had enough of those already. Lori slowed down and finally stopped right in front of the abandoned house. She made like she was seeing the dried out garden for the first time. When she turned back around the little old lady was still focused on the yarn and needle in her hands. She crossed the street slowly, looking back at the abandoned backyard a couple of times, innocent like, of course.

On the other side Ani was busy working out the new stitch she'd seen at the artisan shop the week before, in between reminders of needing to go to the big store to get roach poison now that summer was here. She had to be a lot more deliberate about planning those trips. Everything was different now. Two by two, yarn back...

"Good morning."

Ani was surprised to see someone in front of her and picked up her eyes and her eyebrows to look at the greeter.

"*Buenos días*," she replied. Young girl, familiar somehow. Neat. One of those exercisers, looked eager to talk.

"Good morning. We're neighbors now. We just moved in a couple of blocks that way," Lori said pointing down the street.

"Ahhh. Did you buy the Davis house, the yellow one?"

"Yes, that one." Smiles came to both of them, something in common.

"They're friends of mine. Good, good. Many years of happiness in that house. You'll be very happy there," she gave her blessing and got back to the knitting. "Welcome to the neighborhood."

"Thank you."

"We're pretty quiet here. Kind of boring." Ani said, paying more attention to the stitching than the conversation. Two by two, slip to the left needle, knit two together... But the girl was still there. She gave a quick smile but it only made it to her hands in front of her. *Must be interested in the knitting.*

"My mom used to knit," Lori said, trying to engage the old lady into more. No luck. "Yeah, she used to get just like this," slowing down her words. "No one could talk to her when she was sitting and..."

The last words registered and Ani put her hands down, looked up and smiled. "Your *mami* still knitting?"

"Oh no. She can't see well now a days. But..., " now or never, "someone was telling me about a beautiful garden on this side of the street. Flowers and fruit trees..."

There it is. What the young girl really wanted to talk about. Ani went back to her yarn.

"Actually, I want to start a garden of my own and I was looking for inspiration."

"Hmm," Ani said politely, lifting her eye brows momentarily but still on the needles.

"They told me about beautiful colors, fragrances, just like fine perfume..."

Ani kept knitting. *Another one here to give their own damnation. When will they stop?*

Neither one followed up, Ani hoping the young girl would take the hint, Lori looking at the intricate finger work, waiting for a response. A month's moment passed.

Then Lori backed away slowly. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I didn't mean to interrupt."

As much as she wanted the young girl to move on, Ani's generous spirit wouldn't let her get away with such a mean response. "What is your name?"

"I'm sorry," Lori answered with a renewed optimism. "Look at me, asking you all these questions and I haven't even introduced myself. My name is Lori Santana." She offered her hand, old fashioned respect.

"And I am Aniceta Robles. Ani."

"I'm glad to meet you *Señora* Robles." Not a first name yet. Not the right way. "I've seen you a couple of mornings out here when I walked my little Joey this way in his stroller."

Ani looks at her closer. "Aah yes, yes. I recognize you now." *She was the one poking her head into Rosa's backyard last week.*

"So you're looking for inspiration?" Ani asked, more a statement than a question. She looked into Lori's eyes, searching for something but just didn't find it. Slowly, carefully, "you already heard the stories," trying not to be confrontational.

"I'm..., I'm sorry *Señora Robles.*" The words were coming slowly, Ani was looking right at her. "I'm not interested in... Really, I'm just curious about the garden. They say it was beautiful."

Not amused, Ani remained composed, lowered her eyes to the knitting to let the young girl off the hook. "I know what they must say. They don't know the truth."

"Really, I don't..." Lori stammered.

The young girl had revealed herself and Ani questioned whether she should tell the story. Mostly, those living nearby were the curious ones. And really, besides the police they were the ones who should know the real story, not the half truths. She had kept it to herself long enough. *Luto* had passed already. Slowly, she put thoughts and words together.

"Yes. Rosa's garden was something," staring across the street. "That little wood fence there was loaded down with

flowers like you've never seen. There was a big fig tree back there and grape vines covered the back wall. The figs were so sweet!" Ani's eyes darted left and right, seeing everything all over again.

"It must have been a sight," Lori offered.

"So many flowers," Ani continued, a smile dawning. "Some were tiny. Some looked like huge popcorn balls in white, and in pink. Some flowers had purple down the middle like someone had taken a brush and painted a stripe there. Others were like little feathers floating over the plant." She enjoyed telling about the garden, like all good gardeners do.

"But the roses. Oh my," Ani said with a knowing smile. "The Queen Elizabeths, the Scentimentals, the Icebergs. I didn't even know they had different names. You could smell them for blocks." She paused, waiting for the scent maybe.

"So what happened?" Lori asked.

Ani's eyes returned to the present. The smile faded.

"You already heard the story," trying not to be impolite but hurt by the question.

Lori was stuck once again. Trying to be sensitive, "Mrs. Robles, we just bought our first house here, and then we found out about this." Carefully. "Wouldn't you be concerned?" She waited for an answer. "I only want to know what we're living

with. I don't want to know what someone two, three, or four blocks away thinks happened. That's all."

Ani struggles with the young girl's logic but she knows she has a point.

Slowly, "they were like my own," Ani declared.

"They?"

"My two girls, Rosa and Perlita. Rosa, my pride. Her restaurant was full of people all week long. Her employees respected her. She had the prettiest garden in the neighborhood."

"The lady that lived there?" Ani nods unconsciously.

"Perlita was barely an adult. Her giggling drove the boys wild. That young girl was in love with everything around her—slow walks in summer evenings, taking care of her grandmother, snow cones from Don Chelo, attending the university. But especially, she liked tall, shy, boys."

Ani smiled with pride. "My girls, they were blessed with abundance," Ani said, her eyes punctuating her words. "One sparkled with the smiles and perfume of girl youth. The other with the comfort of success that comes from years of hard work."

Lori looked at Ani, appreciating the pride in her words. Then Ani's smile slowly fades again. This time, with more care, Lori asked, "Did something happen, Mrs. Robles?"

Ani knew the answer but she quickly checked it to see if it still fit. "Temptation," Ani revealed. "Temptation always finds its way around abundance."

Lori waited for more.

"At first she gave him a rose from the garden so he wouldn't arrive without a gift. Then she actually told the young girl to enjoy herself with him. 'Have fun while you're young!'" Ani said almost singing the words. "Now who would advise that to someone in the frenzy of youth? Ay, ay, ay," she scolds.

Ani then tried to stand up without thinking about it, couldn't make it all the way up, and gently fell back on the bench.

"Here, let me help you." Lori got closer.

"Thank you. My back, I need to stand and stretch." She took Lori's arm and slowly stood up.

"Jacob was tall, a handsome boy, formal. He delivered vegetables to the restaurant and to Rosa's house. In fact, that's where he first saw Perlita, talking with Rosa in the garden. She noticed him, too."

"Love at first sight?"

Ani nodded. "Soon he was a familiar face here on Birch Street. The boy visited Perla around the time her grandmother took her afternoon nap. Once Cuca was asleep nothing could awaken her. Not his stumbling around in Perlita's bedroom, not

their loud excitement, and not their clumsy finishes either."

Ani smiled. "Rosa and I used to laugh, remembering our own early attempts at grown up pleasures."

Ani sat down again, rubbing her thighs. "But the innocence faded away quickly." She noticed Lori standing in front of her. "Here *mija*, sit down here with me." She gathered her yarn and needles towards her, making room for Lori on the bench.

"Thank you."

"Rosa was a working woman, shy, a bit awkward. Honorable, like her mother. Her big arms and wide hips told of years spent in the kitchen of her restaurant. No time for much else. In her fifty-some years, there had only been a couple of men, and neither of them were any special."

"So she'd never been in love?" asked Lori.

"She was always working. But Perlita and Jacob must have awakened something in her. I think it started one day when she was watering her flowers. She was over there, near the alley, across from Perla's bedroom. It was funny at first, she was acting different. She walked and then she stopped. Took another step and then just stood there with her ear in the air for minutes," mimicking Rosa's movements. "It went on for a bit, and then she took that hose and turned it all on herself. She bent over and doused her thick head of hair and her shoulders. She stood up and flooded her big chest like she was on fire. And she

had this look on her face," Ani said with a pained face. "Then she ran in her house.

"That didn't look right to me," shaking her finger. "So I went to check on her." The ringing began unnoticed. "Took me a while to get there with these old legs, but my ears put it together when I got there.

"You see, Perlita's window faced the garden. She and Jacob were going at it pretty loud, they were enjoying it so much," said Ani, troubled. "This was exactly what Rosa was missing in her life. It must have torn her apart to hear it so loud and so near. I don't know," questioning herself. "I walked over to the house to check on Rosa. But through the kitchen door screen I could see her sitting at her table, crying, clutching her womanhood, pressing at it with both hands, trying to keep it from the itch. Poor Rosa. I turned around and walked away quietly," a pained look on Ani's face. "And then, it sounded like she was reaching her ultimate pleasure. Perlita and Jacob were reaching theirs too. That was not an old woman's place to be. I kept on walking."

Lori noticed the confusion in Ani's face. "You cared for her...Rosa."

"I loved both those girls," Ani said, the ringing in her ears growing. "Rosa's mother moved here the same year that my Frank and I bought this house. Rosa was just a little girl,

playing on this street. Perla's grandmother, Cuca, and I know each other a long time, since we were young girls in the *Segundo Barrio*. Only she doesn't remember much anymore. Perla moved in to take care of her about five years ago."

"You've known them a long time."

"A long time. On her one day off, I would make dinner for Rosa, here in my house. *Pobrecita*, I couldn't let her cook on her day away from the restaurant. And Cuca would come over for coffee later. We would play *Canicas* just the three of us," Ani said with a smile, the ringing slowly waning.

"*Canicas*?"

"Ay, you call it, what? Chinese Checkers," she answered herself. "In recent years, Perla would bring Cuca over. Perlita was so good with Cuca. She was a good player, too." She smiled.

"You were like family to each other. I see why you looked over them," said Lori.

"We looked after each other. Rosa took me shopping in her car every month when my check came in. If I needed anything else Perlita came over. She was so sweet, *mija* Perlita."

"So was Rosa hurt, after that incident in the kitchen?"

Returning to that, Ani thinks, "I tell you, it must have awakened her, her desires."

"In her fifties?" Lori asked innocently.

"Of course, in her fifties!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...", shaking her head, realizing. "What did she do? Did she go looking for someone?" asked Lori, curiosity getting the best of her.

"No. He was right there in front of her."

Lori waited for Ani again, it was getting harder each time.

"Perlita was at school, and Rosa had Jacob over to work in the garden," Ani said, paying close attention to how she unreeled the story. Even if she'd told the account many times to the police, she had to make sure it was the most truthful account, to protect Rosa. Even in her failings.

"I guess they didn't notice when I came out here and sat down. They were working and talking and laughing. She wore her mama's old blue church dress. To work in the garden?" Ani couldn't help herself. "It went down below her knees but everywhere else, the buttons barely held. She was all friendly and talky," Ani mocked. "She bent over in his direction and gave him a good look at the sisters," holding her bosoms. "Jacob's mouth watered. He tried not to look, tried to keep working but no matter where he raked she put her *nalgas* right there in front of him," shifting her bottom from side to side. "Talking and talking. I could see Jacob was hurting. Breasts of a young boy's dreams. And the hips that keep men home at night. But they belonged to his boss," Ani said. "His job! He had to think of his job. Then Rosa went in the kitchen to get something and

Jacob turned the hose on himself to cool down. But he knew that wouldn't be enough. He jumped the fence and left. *Pobrecito.*"

Ani shook her head with concern.

"The next day I told her, 'I see what you're doing,'" pointing her finger. "'That boy can't help himself.' She tried to make it nothing. 'Ay Ani, Jacob is just helping me with the garden.'" Ani's head cocked back incredulously.

"That was it." Lori exclaimed. "You caught her. She knew you were watching her."

"Tsk!" Ani said, shaking her head again. "I just wanted her to stop and think clearly."

Puzzled, Lori challenged Ani, "so what was wrong with her? Was she that selfish?" And then she caught herself. "I'm sorry, *Señora Robles*, I know you loved her as your own, but she had everything. Her own restaurant, money, respect. Now she had to have Perlita's boyfriend, too?"

The questions burned in Ani's ears. No one had asked her this before about her beloved Rosa. And even though the young girl was questioning Rosa's honor, she had a point. But Ani had no answer. *Only the truth and humility could explain the unexplainable.*

"She had it all, yes. But there was still a fire burning inside her that had never been tamed." Ani kept thinking out loud. "Maybe she confused Jacob and Perlita's easy show of love,

with her own situation. Maybe this time love, physical love was too near to ignore. Maybe she thought she could just flirt with the excitement, get close to it, feel it, and then let it die out, then she would be done with it. Maybe she thought it wouldn't matter, if Jacob was willing, and Perlita didn't know?" Even the thoughts said aloud hurt Ani.

"What did she do, knowing you were on to her?"

"The next week they were back there again. Working, in the middle of the day. Hot, sweaty. Same dress. I remember that day I was knitting inside, in the air conditioning. But they just kept going, didn't bother them. Rosa kept talking, and trying to keep her buttons buttoned. Poor Jacob tried not to look. They were cutting long branches of roses, and taking them inside, and coming back outside for more. I lost track of them. They had been out there a couple of hours already.

"Then I noticed Perlita walk by. She was early back from school. And half way down the block she slows down and turns around. I got a feeling right here in my chest that it was not going to be good. I got up to go out there, but these old legs," she grabbed her thighs and shook her head. "When I was in the middle of the street she was walking up to Rosa's kitchen enraged, *con mucho coraje!*"

"I could hear them," Ani said agitated. "Rosa was loud. Jacob was loud. I was walking as fast as I could. '*Mija,*

Perlita, come to me,'" Ani motioned with her hands. "Rosa must have yelled his name out loud. Perla opened the screen door and even I could see Jacob half naked standing above Rosa, lying on the table, legs in the air."

"Perlita screamed, slammed the door and ran. She ran past me and past her house. Jacob came through the door next buttoning up his trousers. He almost knocked me over as he ran after her. He called her name over and over. She just kept running."

The deafening vacuum returned, and slowly, the ringing.

"But it was done. It was done and no one could take it back. No one could do anything," Ani said, her words coming slower as she spoke. "One person got what she desperately needed, what she thought she couldn't do without for one more second. Another was deeply betrayed. Betrayed like only a first love can be betrayed. And the one in the middle, he let himself get taken, and lost both prizes he thought were his."

Ani and Lori stared across the street and felt the enormity of the incident, the life changing impact of that decision to just let go, just let things happen. They felt it as if it had just happened. As if it could happen at any time again.

In the silence, Lori felt the pain this caused Ani a year before, and ever since. She looked at Ani's eyes and it was all there, playing it over and over thinking of the details that may

have brought about a different result. It was there in the furrowing of paper-thin wrinkles on her forehead and around her mouth still worrying about those involved and a future that had long been violated.

"I can't imagine what it did to all of you," Lori said with care.

Ani couldn't help but return. "Perlita took her grandmother away the next week, I still don't know where. At the restaurant, the employees found out and the *chismes* and gossip got to the customers." The memories tighten Ani's face and voice further. "Rosa couldn't even come out to the dining room. She said they would stare at her. We cried together one night," Ani said, not able to control the tears. "My Rosita was a private person. But this was so public."

She pulls a handkerchief from her hip pocket and rubs her eyes.

"The gossip must have killed her," Lori said with concern, but the unmeasured words stabbed at Ani. The ringing was loud again deep inside her head.

"Rosa had been watering at night so no one would see her. She came out late one afternoon to trim everything. The garden was overgrown from weeks of neglect. After a while there were mounds of prunings all over the ground," recalled Ani. "She took a ladder and leaned it against the tree and climbed up to pluck

the last figs of the season. There was so much trash on the ground. Rosa reached too far in the setting afternoon, the ladder trembled, and she came down hard. *Ay, dios,*" Ani recalled with pain in her eyes. "She was all cut up in her hands, and arms, and her face was bloody from the thorns, too. By the time I got there, she was raging mad, hacking at the roses and cutting everything in half," Ani said, the ringing agitating her. "She was shaking with rage. She looked down and noticed the blood on her trembling hands, and the bushes in pieces. And then she saw me there too.

"The roses were not at fault, Rosa. They didn't hurt anybody," explained Ani. "Her face dropped and a load of tears fell on her. She cried and cried, bloodied, standing there on the mounds of cuttings. 'Come here, *mi Rosita,*'" Ani offered outstretched arms. "But she dropped to her knees and cried a terrible cry. My heart was in pieces. I couldn't help her." Ani cried deeply. Lori moved closer and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"You tried to help her," Lori said, slowly thinking, "but she couldn't accept your hand. She betrayed even you."

It was true. Lori helped Ani make sense of an unexplainable point that had brought many tears, many times before.

"I can't imagine how much Rosa was hurting by then."

Ani sighed. "That night, I was saying my prayers, and then I heard it." Ani twitched and shrugged her shoulders high, and the vacuum started all over again, her voice strained. "The noise slapped me in the shoulders, in the back of my head." She turned her head slightly. "When I started breathing again I realized what it was and where it came from, and I walked out there as fast as I could," Ani said short of breath just trying to get all the words out. "So many things were coming to my mind. My heart was thundering in my throat. There was a darkness in my head and I just wanted to get there as fast as I could to wrap my arms around her," Ani said trying to fight the sobbing. "A young man stopped me out there and asked if I really wanted to see what was on the other side," crying, trying to finish. "But I could see her arm, and the gun. And I knew...." She let out a long uncontrolled yowl. This time she let herself stand in the muddy mess of Rosa's indiscretion, and in the only punishment she could have given herself. It was just like Rosa to be so hard on herself, to take responsibility.

Ani cried like she had not cried for Rosa before. She cried for Perlita and she cried for Jacob. She cried for Cuca and she cried for all those nights of *Canicas* and coffee, and Birch Street in the afternoon, and little girls playing on the sidewalk.

Suddenly Lori felt out of place. She looked at Ani as she tried to compose herself and put the needles and yarn back in her hands.

"There's no roses anymore, no giggling. We're pretty quiet here. Pretty boring."

- END -