

Roses

Once upon a time, there lived a princess. She wasn't beautiful or sharp-witted or ambitious, like all of her sisters. Shadow Princess, they called her--and in a way they were right. This princess would rather be out alone in her garden with rain pouring out of the heavens and dripping onto her nose than in the noisy, crowded ballrooms filled with flattering and conniving wall flowers that her sisters loved. Everything that grew in her tiny garden on the palace grounds gave her happiness because she had helped something live. That feeling gave her a sense of freedom in her prison.

The princess's favorite flower was the rose. She had found an old, scraggly rosebush right next to her garden. Slowly and carefully, the princess had nurtured the dying rosebush back to its former glory. She watched enviously as it grew and grew, untamed and wild. Each day as the rosebush grew more beautiful, the princess felt the walls of her prison close in around her until she could barely breath. The princess wondered what it would be like to be a peasant when she watched the commoner children laugh and play together outside of the palace gates. Friends were a fantasy that belonged to the dream of freedom she could never achieve. Every autumn the roses burst into bloom and then faded, taking the princess' illusion of hope and liberty away a little more each year, until the garden was forbidden and the princess resigned to her fate.

A tear drops onto the paper. I wipe it off, smudging the ink of my story in the process. The fairy tale is supposed to have a happy ending. I bite the end of my pen and think. I can't concentrate. My mind is dwelling on thoughts of my fate instead of my heroine's fate. Our stories are intertwined. Somehow, I have always felt like her--we are both trapped and imprisoned even though we have done nothing wrong.

Secretly, I have always loved roses and gardening. Writing about someone very much

like me but at times very different from me gave me a feeling of freedom when I was a child. The ending was always bright and cheerful. A Prince Charming would come and sweep me off my feet, or I would save England from some horrible force of evil and afterwards the people of England would crowd the streets, all cheering and shouting my name as I rode by. I would give them a regal nod or wave to acknowledge the praise, and then gallop off in a cloud of dust. The horse was always magnificent.

My mind flashes back to rosebushes as the autumn breeze blows softly on my face, heavily laden with the perfume of wild roses and the crisp scent of oak leaves. I sigh, remembering what is to happen. I will die; there won't be anyone to rescue me, although many will pity me. None of my hopes and dreams will ever be fulfilled.

I look down at the battered, scarred writing desk that is chained to the floor and the thin, lumpy mattress that has been my bed for the past two weeks and smile a little. Strangely, the Tower of London, the place I once feared more than anything else in the world, is not very uncomfortable. The jailor, who I had always envisioned as burly and menacing, is actually a short, stout man who has a wife and three daughters and looks better suited for a tavern keeper than a jailor. His wife makes my food, which is delicious, even if it is common. And his youngest daughter made a bouquet of roses for me. It sits on the desk, still breathtakingly beautiful even though only a few petals remain on the stems. The letters I was permitted to write sit beside the flowers. My unfinished story looks at me balefully. And suddenly, I know how it should end.

One day, while the princess was staring out the window of her prison, a man walked in. He wasn't dressed in fine clothes; the only thing that stood out about him was the ring on his hand. It was gold, inlaid with dark, sparkling sapphires that caught the light and sent rainbows

dancing across the room. Unwillingly she dragged her eyes from the ring and looked at the man. He bowed deeply and began to talk.

"Your highness," he began, "I am not a rich man." The princess sighed inwardly, sensing the direction this was going. "However," he continued, "on the way home from the mill one day, I found this." He gently tugged the ring from his finger and handed it to her. Once it was close to her, she could see that detailed outlines of roses and vines had been carved into the gold.

"Why bring this to me, and not my father, the king?" The princess asked suspiciously.

"Look inside, highness. Your name has been carved into it." She turned over the ring and, to her surprise, it was.

"Thank you," she said formally. "My father will see that you are repaid for your services." The man bowed again and walked out. As soon as he left the room, the sapphires became a dull, brownish color that looked repulsive. The roses seemed to wilt and droop, and the gold was no longer bright and gleaming like it had been on the man's finger. The princess ran out of her rooms, shouting for the man. The guard standing duty outside of her door looked at her strangely when she asked which way the man went.

"Your highness, you have been the only one in your room for the past three days," he said. The princess frowned and thanked him, walking slowly back into her rooms. The man stood in a corner, smiling.

"What do you want?" the princess asked the man fearfully. He walked over to where she had dropped the ring and picked it up. Immediately rainbows appeared on the walls and the gold shone brightly.

"Which is more important to you," he asked, "Your freedom or the life of that child

playing on the street?" The princess moved over to the window in time to watch the little girl laugh, lifting her face and looking into the sky. Wisps of brown curls defied the braid they had been pulled severely back into and danced around her upturned, freckled face. The princess looked away and thought of roses.

"The child," she said finally. The man looked at her thoughtfully for a moment before speaking.

"If I were to offer you eternal freedom, at the cost of your life, which would you choose?"

The princess watched the little girl dancing to music only she could hear and smiled.

"Freedom," she said. "Definitely freedom."

The girl that had been dancing on the streets disappeared. The princess looked at the man, who held out his hand to her. She hesitated a moment, then slipped the shining ring onto her finger and took his outstretched hand. Her last memory of captivity was the scent of roses wafting through the open window and carrying her up to a cloud of happiness.

As the axe comes down, time seems to slow to a crawl. I look around at all of the people who have betrayed me, lied to me and hated me, and I smile. Behind all of the jeering, cruel faces, I can see a rose trellis. Petals float gently off onto the ground. The axe continues its slow descent and I close my eyes. The last thing I see on this earth is a rose petal scudding across the ground, picked up by the fragrant autumn breeze and blown into my face.