

## Rose: To Rise

a labyrinth,  
as if at its center,  
god would be there—  
but at the center, only rose,  
where rose came from,  
where rose grows— (an excerpt from Jean Valentine’s poem *The Rose*)

When I hear the ambulance sirens coming closer and closer—is that called the doppler effect?—I find myself praying that they are coming for someone I don’t know. I pray that the sirens will fade in some other direction. But when the sirens continue to get louder I start praying that they are coming for someone old, and not young. I pray that whoever it is, it isn’t someone I care for. But as the sirens stop next door I realize that only one of my prayers was answered. It is the Browns; they are old.

I find myself praying again. This time I ask that it be Joe and not Ruth. Joe is older, less capable. He’s been suffering from poor health for years. His Alzheimer’s keeps him from remembering much. And he spends most of his time watching luchadores wrestling on the television. Ruth is so much more. She isn’t a shell. She is vibrant. If she isn’t inside taking care of Joe, she is outside mending her garden. Her pride and joy are her roses. They line her back fence, flowering a lovely pink rose. She told me that they are hedge roses and she’s had them for longer than I’ve been alive. Even as I pray that the sirens came for Joe, I have a feeling they didn’t.

*Lazarus, Lazarus, why dost thou rise?*

I kissed the first dead body that I ever saw. An old man. A stranger. His family stood nearby mourning their loss. I—hating that I was there—bent down and kissed his forehead. The formaldehyde made my lips tingle. I stood and left the room.

“Dad,” I said, “I think it would’ve been worse if I hadn’t seen it coming. I mean, we all saw it coming. I think it would’ve been worse if it was sudden, but it wasn’t. I think it let me prepare.” My dad was silent. “At first it was a shock, even though I knew it would happen. But after the initial shock I feel like I can celebrate all the things he did when he was alive.” Still silent. “Is it different for you? Is it different because he was your dad? Or were you prepared as much as I was?”

I imagine that the best way to die would be to have an aneurism. My grandpa’s brother died that way—an aneurism in the night. You wouldn’t feel it at all. I guess though, it could be tough if you woke up next to someone who died that way.

To call a rose a rose would not be wrong, but it also isn’t right. You see, rose is actually the grouping, Rosa the genus and Rosaceae the family name. There are over 100 varieties of plants in the rose family. It is typically categorized into three general areas: wild roses, old garden roses, and new garden roses. Most of the time—when someone thinks of a rose—they are thinking of one of the garden variety. The Chinese were the first to domesticate those kinds of roses for the garden.

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*I flinch when you touch me.*

I was watching television one night when the phone rang. Joe had fallen. Ruth couldn't get him up. I ran over to lend a hand. Ruth thanked me for coming and apologized for only wearing her nightgown. She had been trying to help Joe into bed when he fell. He was stuck on his knees, trying in vain to rise. Ruth introduced me to Joe—he had forgotten me again. I bent down, unceremoniously, grabbed him under the arms and lifted. His body was stiff, I felt like one of his luchadores. Where was my mask?

When my grandfather was sick I didn't help much. My cousin's fiancé spent time nearly every day taking care of him. I spent most of my time trying not to think about it. My grandpa was an eccentric man. He did things that other people didn't. He'd show up places he shouldn't be. He'd make paper cranes and give them to anyone he could. He liked getting day-old bakery items from local grocery stores to take to people. He always had bread in his car. He helped a lot of people who needed it. But he didn't always seem to know who needed it. I'll never forget hearing a group of boys at my high school joking about the old man they had seen in the parking lot handing out birds and donuts. I was too embarrassed to say anything to them. I just sat in the back of the room trying not to hear.

*The white rose wooed the Nightingale, but pierced its heart, turning the flower red.*

Something started to change near the end when I'd visit my grandparents. I'd sit nearby my grandpa pretending I could hear his heartbeat. He didn't say much; and when he did his voice was a whisper. You had to lean in close to decipher the words. But he didn't need words to speak. His hands were always moving. Always folding the paper birds. Something was changing, but it wasn't him.

Among—or related to—the many varieties of roses are plants such as: the wild red raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*), Wood's Rose (*Rosa Woodsii*), Thimbleberry (*Rubus parviflorus*), Bitterbrush (*Purshia tridentate*), Apache Plume (*Fallugia paradoxa*), and Black Hawthorn (*Crataegus douglasii*). All of these plants are most commonly found growing in the wild.

The sirens stopped. Time passed. I thought of going to see if Ruth was okay. I was afraid. I stood near the fence—near those pink hedge roses, the pride of the garden—and watched. All was quiet.

*Said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead.*

1,000 years. The oldest known living rose bush grows on the wall of Hildesheim Cathedral in Germany. It is commonly known as the wild dog rose.

*Let us also go, that we may die with him.*

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would happen. But after the initial shock I feel like I can celebrate all the things he did when he was alive.” Still silent. “Is it different for you? Is it different because he was your dad? Or were you prepared as much as I was?”

Silence.

“Dad, it may have been different for you, but because I knew he was dying, I feel like I was able to make my peace with it.”

Silence.

*It wasn't really my grandpa, it was just a shell, a wax effigy that should have been, and could have been, standing between John Wayne and Martin Luther King, Jr.*

I was okay. I'd made my peace. I sat nearby at the end, watching his fingers trace the shapes of the birds. I had started to understand what made him tick. I was fine.

The casket lay open. The body. The shell. Sobs. The most heart-wrenching sobs. During the bishop's prayer. During the last passing moments. Sobs. Spirit gone. Sobs. I'd never heard such violent sobbing. I turned and saw my twelve-year-old brother collapsing from the loss. His namesake was gone. It hurt then. It hurt so much. This wasn't a strange body. This wasn't a strange ritual. Sobs.

*My purpose: to rise when fallen. The crumbling of self when faced with loss. To grow wild in our grief.*

Ruth was okay. She had been dehydrated and fainted. She was going to the hospital just so they could run some tests, but she was okay.

The roses in the back, along the fence, had become too much for Ruth. She couldn't take care of them anymore. She couldn't take care of Joe either. They moved to a care center. It was a place where all their needs would be looked after. But not the roses. Nobody came for the roses. Some of the flowers withered. Some died. Some became wild in their grief.

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