

# Under a Spell...



Ever since he rescued her from Certain  
Death,  
the girl named Rose had been in love  
with the boy called Fish.

But Fish felt sure that  
she should look elsewhere  
for a knight in shining armor.

Then a curse that spanned two decades  
finally struck home.

And Fish found he might indeed be the  
only one to rescue Rose...

Waking Rose  
a fairy tale retold

*by Regina Doman*

Books by Regina Doman

*The Fairy Tale Novels*

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*For children:*

Angel in the Waters

*Edited by Regina Doman:*

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*Waking*  
a fairy  
tale *Rose*  
retold  
by regina doman

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Summary: Nineteen-year-old Rose Brier is in love with Fish Denniston: but Fish, struggling with abuse issues in his past, holds her at arms' length until an old danger and a tragic accident threatens Rose's life. A modern retelling of the story of "Sleeping Beauty," and the third novel in the Fairy Tale Novel series.

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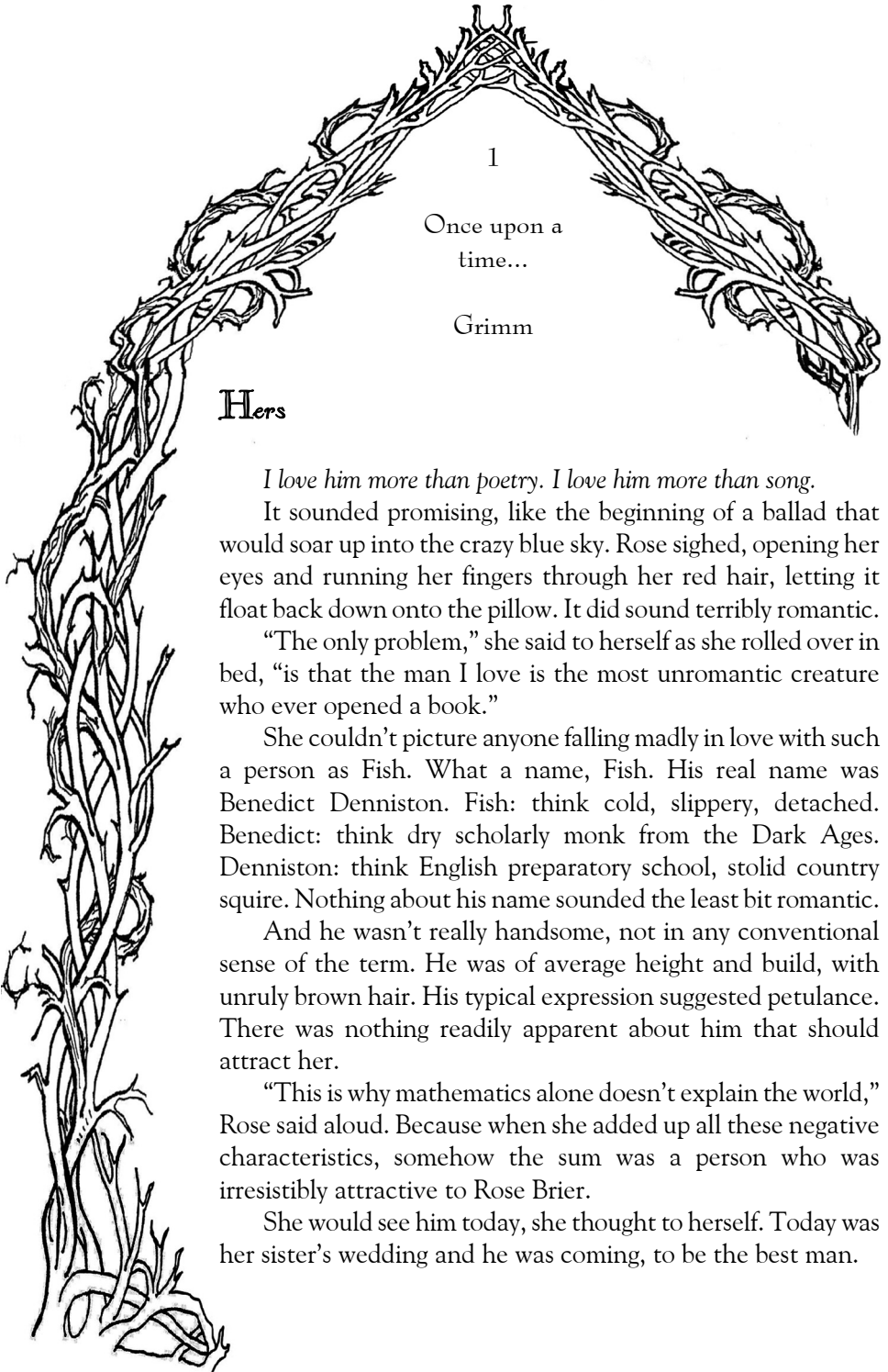
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This book is dedicated to all the fans  
of Bear, Blanche, Fish and especially of Rose,  
whose enthusiasm has encouraged me so much,  
and without whose wishes and prayers,  
I never would have finished this book.

I hope it was worth waiting for.

Enjoy.



1

Once upon a  
time...

Grimm

### Hers

*I love him more than poetry. I love him more than song.*

It sounded promising, like the beginning of a ballad that would soar up into the crazy blue sky. Rose sighed, opening her eyes and running her fingers through her red hair, letting it float back down onto the pillow. It did sound terribly romantic.

“The only problem,” she said to herself as she rolled over in bed, “is that the man I love is the most unromantic creature who ever opened a book.”

She couldn’t picture anyone falling madly in love with such a person as Fish. What a name, Fish. His real name was Benedict Denniston. Fish: think cold, slippery, detached. Benedict: think dry scholarly monk from the Dark Ages. Denniston: think English preparatory school, stolid country squire. Nothing about his name sounded the least bit romantic.

And he wasn’t really handsome, not in any conventional sense of the term. He was of average height and build, with unruly brown hair. His typical expression suggested petulance. There was nothing readily apparent about him that should attract her.

“This is why mathematics alone doesn’t explain the world,” Rose said aloud. Because when she added up all these negative characteristics, somehow the sum was a person who was irresistibly attractive to Rose Brier.

She would see him today, she thought to herself. Today was her sister’s wedding and he was coming, to be the best man.

The mere thought was enough to impel her out of bed with a bounce and over to the closet, humming a passionate love song.

But she heaved a sigh as she opened the rickety closet door and surveyed the clothes inside. The problem was, she wasn't his love. At least, not yet.

"What is wrong with me?" she moaned, pulling a shirt off of a hanger. "There are billions of men in the world, at least millions who are near my age. Maybe hundreds who are compatible with me. Maybe at least a dozen who would want to date me. There's got to be at least five on the continent whom I could probably marry. So why in the world am I so hung up about this one guy? And he doesn't even like you, Rose Brier."

The lecture had as little effect on her as it usually did. She stared at the ceiling of her bedroom. One of the rafters had a cobweb on it.

Well, at least she and Mom and Blanche were back in the country in Warwick, at the old farmhouse that used to be their home, before Dad died of cancer years ago. And Blanche was getting married. And she, Rose, would be the maid of honor.

The wedding! There was so much to do today! She was out of the room like a shot.

## HIS

He woke up in the unfamiliar bed, blinking in the bright sunlight. The relative silence around him reminded him that he was in the country, in the home of the Brier's friends, the Wykas. Yawning, he got out of bed and found the bathroom to start getting ready.

Shaving for Fish was a meticulous process. As he carefully moved the razor over the slightly raised scar on his cheek, he thought again of his dad's insistence that he have plastic surgery done to erase the effects of his various run-ins with criminals. But Bear always said, "Scars are cool." Fish admitted that substantial parts of his history were now written on his flesh—one cut on his cheek running down to his chin was from a fight in prison. That one had actually healed the worst—it hadn't been properly treated at the time. Because of it, he noticed, his smile was slightly crooked. There were one or two faint scars from a few other fights he had encountered on the streets. One from a man who had been more heavy-handed than effective. Another from a slap on the side of the face with a pistol.

And one mark that ran down from between his eyebrows to under his right eye—barely noticeable, but he could make it out. That lovely jag had been courtesy of a Mr. Freet, from a blow with the butt end of a whip. Fish felt it

lightly with his fingertips, amazed at how something that had hurt so much at the time was now hardly noticeable. He wondered idly if plastic surgery would have erased that one. But most of the scars from that unpleasant episode were not visible.

He sighed, gave himself one more quick glance, then splashed water on his face quickly and combed gel into his light brown hair, which tended to get out of hand without some help. Then he set about getting dressed.

Once presentable, he walked down the steps to the kitchen. "Good morning, Mrs. Wyka," he said courteously.

"Good morning to you, Fish," the woman beamed. "Do you like omelets? I just made your brother one."

"Sounds great," Fish said amiably. He had to smile. Most of the time he and his brother introduced themselves to strangers by their Christian names—Benedict and Arthur. But to the Brier family, they had always been Fish and Bear, right from the start, so naturally that's how the Briers had introduced them to all their friends, including the Wykas.

*They probably think our parents were hippies*, Fish speculated. Few knew or recalled that "Fish" and "Bear" were handles from when the brothers had been in juvenile prison. Blanche Brier—now Bear's fiancé—had always liked the name Bear, and even when she found out Bear's real name, she and her mother, Jean, and sister, Rose, had continued to use it. It certainly fit Bear, who was tall and burly, with thick dark hair that was inclined to be shaggy.

Fish actually preferred to be known by his real name, Benedict, or Ben, but the Briers had never asked him what he preferred, and so to them, he remained Fish. He had acquired that name because, according to his former inmates, he was so good at getting out of tight places, which was true, and partly because of his aloof, detached demeanor. It was correct that Fish was a fairly calm, analytical person. But he didn't know exactly why others seemed to think he had no feelings. He supposed he must be better at hiding his responses than most people, and wondered if that were truly an asset, outside of dealing with policemen and criminals.

He was eating his omelet with the careful table manners his mother had drilled into him when Steven came in, stretching and yawning.

"Morning, Steve," Fish said.

"Hey, Ben, good morning," Steve clasped his former high school buddy's hand. "So where's the groom?"

"Probably out for a morning walk," Fish said.

"Hope he's back before we have to leave for the church," the tall black guy smiled.

“Oh, I’m sure he will be,” Fish took the last bite. “You know Bear.”

“Yeah, I guessed he was pretty much gone for Blanche ever since he snagged my tux to take her to the prom. And ruined it in a fistfight,” Steven laughed. “So how do I get an omelet?”

Fish indicated the other room with a finger. “Mrs. Wyka makes them. Why don’t you go say good morning to her? I bet she’ll make you one as tasty as this.”

“Hey, I’ll be Prince Charming to anyone for an omelet. It’s sure nice of these people to put us strangers up for the wedding.”

“The Briers have some good friends around here,” Fish agreed. “Bear’s trying to buy a house in this town so he and Blanche can live near her mom.”

“I can see why,” Steven nodded. He stepped into the other room and smiled broadly. “Good morning, Mrs. Wyka!”

Fish chuckled to himself as he overheard the friendly conversation that ensued in the next room. Setting his plate on the counter by the sink, he went back upstairs to change into his wedding clothes. Once dressed, he dialed the Brier’s number on his cell.

The phone rang several times before someone answered, and the line opened onto chaos.

“Hello?” shouted the female voice over a background of chattering and calls for assistance.

“Hello, this is Ben Denniston,” Fish said. “Is Jean available?”

“Fish!” the voice exclaimed and Fish realized it was Rose. “You sounded so suave I didn’t recognize you.”

“Good morning,” he said blandly. “It’s the voice I use for speaking to ladies of more mature years.”

“You mean Mom? I’ll get her. Mom!” Rose sang out without moving the phone from her lips, and Fish winced.

“I think she’s talking with a delivery man,” Rose informed him.

“Can she use any help?”

“Oh definitely. All sorts of friends-and-relations are over here helping, but they’re all women. There are a few things I know she needs a guy to do. Could you and Steven come over and take things to the hall?”

“Of course,” Fish said good-humoredly. “Tell your mom we’ll be right over.”

As he and Steven were walking out the door, they spotted Bear coming over a far hillside. He waved at them and bounded down the hill to meet them.

“Great morning!” he shouted as he came closer.

“So is the bridegroom ready then?” Fish asked, noting his brother’s exuberance.

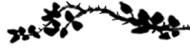
“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Bear’s grin was contagious. “I’d better get to the church.”

"You want us to come with you?" Steven asked, checking his watch.

"Nah—Blanche and I agreed to make sure we both had some alone time today before everything gets in motion. Want to make sure we're prepared."

"Father Raymond would approve," Fish said.

Bear nodded. "Probably gave us the idea himself from heaven."



When Fish arrived at the Brier's house, he and Steven met a flurry of girls, women, and babies, all dressed in various kinds of wedding finery, and all bustling about with distinct and sometimes contradictory purposes. Most of the wedding children—and there were quite a few flower girls and pages—were dressed or half-dressed and were running around outside on the lawn of the old farmhouse, or jumping off the porch steps, or swinging from the branches of the apple tree. Their mothers and older sisters were chasing them, reprimanding them, and trying to keep them somewhat polished. Fish noticed that most of the children and quite a few of the adults were of Asian descent. He recalled that the Briers were good friends with a large family whose mother was Vietnamese and supposed these were some relations of those.

He and Steven edged their way into the house and found Rose in jeans and an apron tying wildflowers into nosegays for the children to carry. Steven paused to greet his mother, who was poring over a list of guests. Jean Brier in her best cream dress, was talking on the phone to a relative who appeared to be hard of hearing. There was no sign of the bride.

"Where's Blanche?" Fish asked Rose over the tumult after waving hello to Mrs. Foster.

"Upstairs in her room."

"Getting ready?"

"She was ready," Rose informed him, "at seven this morning. But she told me she wasn't doing anything today except getting dressed and marrying Bear. She said to me, 'That's it. If there's any crisis about the flowers or the catering or the place settings, I don't want to know about it, so don't tell me. It will all work out.'"

"She's probably right," Fish observed, watching the minor hysterics of one twelve-year-old and her younger brother on the porch. The boy had gotten a streak of mud down the front of his page-boy outfit.

Rose finished tying the ribbons with a flourish and indicated the table, stacked with table settings, flower arrangements, and covered dishes. "Mother wants everything on the table brought over to the hall before we go to church. Can you princes spirit them over there and still make it to the church on time?"

“On my flying carpet,” Steven assured her, hefting up a large box of napkins and vases of flowers.

“Wonderful. I have to get dressed,” Rose sighed, pushing back a strand of her tangled hair.

“Oh? You’re not wearing that flannel shirt?” Fish sounded disappointed.

Rose made a face at him. “You look very handsome this morning, Fish.”

He bowed again. “No doubt I’ll be able to return the compliment later.”

“Yes, later. I’m just Cinderella now. At least the bride is stunning.”

As Steven and Fish packed the boxes in the car, Steve surprised Fish by asking him, “So what’s going on between you and Rose?”

Fish was slightly annoyed. “Nothing.”

“Really? That’s a surprise. I thought for sure she liked you.”

“You asked if there was anything *between* us. I thought you meant reciprocal affection,” Fish answered dryly, starting the engine.

“Eh. So she likes you but you don’t like her? She’s a cute kid.”

“Exactly,” said Fish, inching the car down the driveway in reverse, watching the rear window carefully. Having so many children running around made him cautious.

“So what’s keeping you from dating her?”

Fish glanced at Steven, amused. “Why don’t you date her yourself if you’re so interested?”

“Oh, I don’t want to intrude on the family,” Steven said lightly. “After all, your brother is marrying her sister. It seems too perfect a scenario. I just can’t figure out what’s stopping you from pursuing her.”

Fish wasn’t inclined to go into the matter, even with an old high school friend. “You said it yourself,” Fish said. “She’s a cute kid.”

## **H**ers

It was a beautiful day. Rose, whose many duties as maid of honor had included praying for good weather on May 25, gave thanks to God that she could check one more thing off her list, as she looked out the bedroom window. The sky was a pale robin’s egg blue, with only a few tufts of cloud in the sky.

The wedding children and bridesmaids were piling into family cars and driving over to the church. Only she and Mom and Blanche had yet to leave.

Blanche was uncertain, as usual, about how she came off as a bride, but Rose had taken one look at her in the white linen-and-silk gown and pronounced that she had turned into a princess for real. Blanche had flushed pink and checked the mirror again.

Her gown was beautiful—simple yet sumptuous, as a proper wedding gown should be, Rose thought. It was pure white, with a textured sheen to the material—a simple bodice, a curved neckline that showed off Blanche’s lithe neck, simple elbow-length sleeves, a full skirt embroidered in a few places with the delicate shapes of flowers and leaves. No heavy beaded lace, no exaggerated flounces, no plunging necklines, no drippy pearls. Just a lovely, simple dress that didn’t compete with the bride’s natural grace.

Blanche’s black hair was pulled up into a soft chignon, not one black strand out of place. It glistened softly in the morning light, and her fair skin had a radiant glow. Silver filigree earrings and a silver cross were her only jewelry. Her veil cascaded down her back in translucent white folds.

“You are perfect,” Rose declared. “There’s nothing you can do to make yourself look prettier—most of it you’re not responsible for anyhow.”

Blanche smiled self-consciously. “Do you think I should wear any lipstick?”

“No. But it probably wouldn’t hurt if you feel you want some on. Do you need anything else?”

“I’m good,” Blanche picked through an open cosmetic case. “Go ahead downstairs. I’ll come soon.”

“As you wish.” Rose tucked her silk pouch of a purse and her bridesmaid’s bouquet of wildflowers into a basket, and stole out to the porch for a few quiet moments to just sit and feel utterly beautiful.

Partly it was because of her dress. It was long, sweeping, and palest pink, lightly trimmed with silk roses and trailing ribbons. Sitting on the steps of the battered wooden porch, feeling the spring breeze play over her long red hair, she closed her eyes and felt as though she were part of a large, gorgeous painting.

As she sat, she wondered if Bear was already at the church. Probably. He was a little anxious about whether or not he would be a good husband and father. Rose felt he shouldn’t be worried. He and Blanche had been dating for two years, and it was obvious to everyone that they were perfect for each other. Still Bear was concerned: his parents hadn’t had a good marriage. “But at least he knows his handicaps and can deal with them,” Rose assured herself. Her gut instinct was that Bear would be a terrific husband and father. She knew Blanche thought so too—obviously.

Probably Fish was at the church too. There was the usual faint flutter in her stomach regarding that personage. He had looked so—regal this morning in his tuxedo. She wondered to herself why she was still so fascinated with Bear’s younger brother after all this time.

How long had she known him now? Almost three years. Her family had come to know Bear first, back when the brothers were poor and living on the

streets and the Foster's living room couch. She had only met Fish, through various circumstances, a few months afterwards. "Then I rescued him," she thought to herself, still with a touch of awe. He had been kidnapped, and she had stumbled into the criminal's lair, and found him. One would think that rescuing someone from Certain Death would cause some romantic feelings—he had rescued her, too, before that unusual episode was over—but apparently, the only thing it had done was make Fish perennially concerned for her safety and not the least bit interested in anything beyond it.

She sighed heavily. While Blanche and Bear had soon discovered their mutual attraction, she and Fish had always remained careful friends, Rose's daydreams notwithstanding.

He seemed much older than she was, even though he was only twenty-one, and she was nineteen. He was extremely intelligent, and most of the time they had known each other, he had been at school, engrossed in catching up on his delayed education. He was also wealthy, but since his experience of prison and poverty had shaped his living habits, it was only rarely that Rose remembered that he actually had quite a lot of money.

Their conversations alternated between intellectual discussion and his tormenting her with his superior mind. Despite this, she'd had a fabulous crush on him. For a long time after she met him, she had written down almost everything he said to her in her diary. Every occasional letter he sent her she still filed carefully in a fabric-covered wish box under her bed. She had even printed out his emails. Usually she sent him six-page letters and he wrote her back a meager page, but at least he wrote. Once, he had been in a mood, and had drawn a fish at the bottom of his letter instead of signing his name.

She had cut out the fish and taped it on her bulletin board over her desk. Once she had toyed with the idea of putting it in her locket, but that seemed a bit ridiculous, even to Rose.

Trying hard not to anticipate seeing him today—and what would he think of how she looked in her bridesmaid's dress?—she rose to her feet, dusting off the barest fragments of dust from that lovely skirt.

"Blanche?" she called. "It really, really is time to go."

## HIS

The Brier's parish was a simple country church that had gone through far too many renovations to make it more modern, with painful results. The abstract art banners around the altar were appalling, even though their colors were no doubt liturgically correct. Fish speculated what the church had looked

like a hundred years ago when it was first built, and wondered why the artistic choices of those ancestors hadn't been respected, or at least investigated.

He tried to ignore the surroundings as he sat in the pew next to his older brother, waiting, along with the congregation of friends and family—mostly Brier friends and family—for the celebration to begin. He had glanced over his shoulder at that brightly dressed throng once or twice. There were senior citizens from Blanche's New York parish and waitresses from the banquet hall where Blanche had worked. The home schooling crowd of Warwick, New Jersey, was also present in numbers. It was true in this case, Fish thought wryly, that the congregation was more artistically appealing than the church building.

Eventually there were soft chords of organ music, announcing that the bridal party was arriving. Fish looked at Bear, but his older brother had already risen and was moving to the front of the church where he would meet his bride. Fish and the other groomsmen followed him.

Fish was amazed at how many people were in the wedding party. The procession of priests and altar servers at the beginning was lengthy—Blanche was friends with an order of friars and they had all come to the wedding. He counted at least seven men in religious garb in addition to other priests, mostly fairly old or fairly young. There were four altar servers of various sizes, all Vietnamese. And then the bridal party began with a flock of little girls and boys in white, carrying flowers and candles. The older ones walked with a slow practiced pace, while the little ones bounced along behind them, trying hard to resist the urge to push and shove the slow ones in front.

Then came bridesmaids, all young girls dressed in pink gowns. The last of them must have been Rose, but Fish didn't recognize her at first. She had undergone a complete transformation from the wild-haired girl of this morning. Her hair was up in the front and fell in a cascade of curls down the back. She moved so slowly and regally that she seemed like a different person, serene and composed. Then she caught Fish's eye with an eager grin. He raised an eyebrow at her.

It was her sister, following in a cloud of silk veiling, who exuded an air of true tranquility and poise. Blanche, he admitted to himself, was gorgeous, and on this day she shone with a real radiance. Her black hair and fair skin contrasted with each other in harmonious balance, and there was barely a trace of timidity about her as she came down the aisle, unescorted and alone.

Mr. Brier had died several years ago, and Fish and Bear's father, whom Blanche had become close to in a short period of time, had just died. Her mother Jean had considered walking up with her, but in the wake of Mr. Denniston's recent death, Blanche decided to honor the memories of these two

fathers by walking with them in spirit. It was significant, and painful, that as a bride she walked alone.

But now Bear was coming forward to take her arm—a bit early, but it seemed fitting—and led her up to the altar, where a gray-bearded Franciscan priest with a gruff face stood blinking and smiling despite himself. Bear lifted Blanche's veil and embraced her. Rose burst into tears, and some in the congregation applauded.

Fish looked at the embracing couple, and noted, on some level, how detached he felt from the whole scene. He knew that logically, he should be joining in the sentimental swell of emotion, or even feeling the sadness of missing those who were not physically present, like his parents, and Father Raymond—instead, he felt nothing. Shouldn't he be feeling *something* at his brother's wedding? Why did he sense only a dull blunted emptiness?

*You know why. Because this will never be you.*

Quietly he picked up a missal and pushed the thoughts away.

*...there lived a king  
and queen who were  
made glad by the birth  
of a daughter...*

Grimm

**H**ers

“Oh! You look so much like your father, dear!” Sister Maria gasped, clasping Rose’s hand when she came to her in the receiving line.

“Do I?” Rose asked, bending over to speak to the little nun, her godmother and second cousin who had traveled from Pennsylvania for the wedding.

“It seems like only yesterday that we were celebrating your christening,” Sister Maria said fondly. “It was in a Knights of Columbus Hall, just like this one.” A sudden shadow came over her face. “Well, well, it doesn’t do to brood on the past,” she patted Rose’s hand faintly. “You don’t know what it means to me to see you looking so well.”

“Thank you,” Rose said, giving her a kiss, and tearing up inadvertently. She guessed that remembering her father’s absence was hard for all of the relatives, especially on a day like today. “I’m so glad you could come.”

“Your mother told me that we’ll be seeing you this fall,” Sister Maria said, changing the subject.

“Yes, of course you will! I can’t wait to visit you!” Rose squeezed her elderly cousin’s hand as she ushered the nun into the hall.

She couldn't help glancing proudly around the room. The Knights of Columbus building of Warwick had been the site of many First Communion parties, plays, anniversaries, and graduations for the homeschool community throughout the years. It had a pronounced masculine air of beer and bingo. To Rose, it resembled a mead hall, with its heavy wood beams and high ceiling. With the combined genius of herself, her family and their friends, they had attempted the challenge of balancing the atmosphere by introducing a festive feminine element into this hoary male hall.

It was Rose who had suggested using a host of artificial Christmas trees decorated with white lights to create a forest-like feeling. That had worked better than their usual frothy solutions of crepe paper and pastel tablecloths. They had covered the ancient metal folding chairs of the wedding party with beige canvas and found tablecloths whose floral pattern had a lot of dark green foliage. The centerpieces for the tables were potted violets swathed in Spanish moss, contributing to the woodland atmosphere.

Friends had brought in plants and even small decorated trees to group in the corners, and there were ivy leaves strewn on the dozens of tables. Rose thought it was the perfect setting for a play—a masque, a drama of allegorical proportions, where archetypes and portents would appear disguised as humble peasants or ethereal fairies. She gave a faint shiver of anticipation. It was going to be a wonderful celebration.

## HIS

Fish had endured lavish New York weddings ever since his childhood, and was well used to sumptuous receptions on the Long Island Sound with ice sculptures and caviar tables. He had expected Bear to do something completely different. The reception that the Briers had put together at the rather rustic Knights of Columbus Hall next to an old golf course fit the bill.

The wedding banquet was picnic food, and the atmosphere was largely dictated by the crowds of children who raced around and jumped off the stage. But Blanche and Bear were the true attraction, and as Blanche walked around on Bear's arm, talking with elderly guests and kissing sticky-fingered children, Fish thought she had chosen to celebrate this day in the best manner possible.

There were cupcakes and hot dogs for the children, appetizers and wedding cake for the adults, and a lot of dancing. Fish didn't care for it as much as his older brother did, but due to his upbringing, he was well-schooled in a variety of ballroom dances. Of course, he had to dance with Rose for the second song, when the wedding party joined the bridal couple on the floor.

As he had taken her arm to lead her out of church after the wedding ceremony, he had told her that she looked very nice, because she did. Rose had put her hand over his in a way that made him aware of emanations of joy radiating from her. That joy made him uneasy. Was being close to him really making her so happy? Or was it just that she was at her sister's wedding? Or both?

As they danced, she closed her eyes, and half-smiled, as though she were drinking it all in. He watched her enjoy herself, and felt more worried than flattered. She was making him feel self-conscious, and he was apprehensive that those around them might get the wrong impression. He remembered that when Blanche and Bear had gotten engaged, Rose had begun to look at him with an expectant air that exasperated Fish. So he had made himself scarce, and she seemed to take the hint. But apparently, she had forgotten again. Fish began to be slightly annoyed with her.

## Hers

Rose pondered once again the strange roller coaster of the heart of a girl as she ate her dinner during the reception. She had been in the heights of joy during the Mass, seeing the world of real things, as she called it, and the physical world in an unexpected convergence in the wedding ceremony. Bear and Blanche were almost more than themselves—they were Love and Beloved made manifest, something bigger, something beyond the world, and everyone present in the church could see it. It was as though the wedding Mass had been a metaphysical magnifying glass, where even the words were *real* words, communicating what was really going on, instead of a babble of syllables.

She had been in a rapture of contemplation, weeping openly and unselfconsciously. She was the sister of the bride. She could do that.

And after this transcendent experience, she had switched planes abruptly when she took Fish's arm to leave the church. She had been so far above the earth that she hadn't even noticed him, relatively speaking. "You look very nice," he observed as he held out his arm.

And there she was, back on earth and bounding towards the sky again. A more familiar kind of rapture. And Fish in typical fashion was now starting to ignore her. He must have sensed her pleasure, and pulled back hastily. She was trying hard not to let it bother her.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye as she nibbled on the little quiches and puff pastries, leftover appetizers she was eating instead of dinner.

Fish was sitting on the edge of the stage, allowing himself to be teased by some of the flower girls, the younger Kovachs.

Why did she like him? It was so irrational. She counted on her fingers the things she particularly liked about him again, trying to analyze that curious feeling. The way he moved—he walked smoothly, like a lean jaguar. And his thin frame hid his muscles, which were strong. She had once been foolish enough to arm-wrestle him, which had been barely a contest. She had known she would lose as soon as she touched his hand. And the fact that he was just an inch above her height—as though they were a matched set. His profile was striking, sharper than Bear's. And his eyes, light brown, almost bronze. Unusually good eyes, but she had never had the opportunity to study them closely, of course. Fish seemed to know whenever someone was looking at him, and shied away. He probably knew she was watching him now.

She wondered if he would ask her to dance again, and tried to convince herself that it wouldn't matter if he wouldn't.

"You okay, Rose?" The bride had returned to the head table to sit down for a rare break, smoothing her skirts as she slid into her seat. Blanche had been out talking to the guests for most of the dinner.

"Yes, everything's wonderful," Rose said, speaking the general truth. But her eyes lingered on Fish.

Her sister knew everything. "Is he avoiding you again?"

"Yes," Rose sighed. "I wish, I wish, I wish I could pretend I don't care the smallest whit for him. Then he wouldn't be so edgy around me. But I can't seem to help myself."

Blanche shook her head, with a small smile. "You do seem to make your own trouble, Rose."

"I bet he's not going to dance with me again," Rose said. "I just feel it. I've driven him away. He's going to complain about silly girls and wish aloud for a rational intelligent female to converse with."

They were both silent. Rose knew that Fish had been friends with a girl at NYU who seemed to match that description, a foreign girl who had been a top scholar. She and Blanche didn't know if he was pursuing her or not.

"Well, you're going to college this fall with Kateri Kovach," Blanche said, indicating Rose's best friend from her younger years. "Maybe you'll be able to get over him."

"We must be optimistic," Rose said, trying a smile. A new song had started. "Come on, we can't be grim at your own wedding! Remember this song from our sleepovers when we were kids? Let's go dance to it."

She seized Blanche's hand and tumbled out onto the dance floor to the beat of a sighing singer.

*But mama said  
you can't hurry love  
no, you just have to wait  
She said love don't come easy  
It's a game of give and take*

Rose threw back her head, put a hand on her heart, and sang woefully as Blanche laughed at her.

*How long must I wait,  
how much more can I take  
until loneliness will cause my heart,  
heart to break?*

The other Kovach girls, comrades from younger years, danced over to join them and the girls broke out into the crazy fifties-style dancing they had developed during nights of sleepovers on the living room floor. Tracy Kovach, now married and six months pregnant, grooved out onto the floor to dance with her younger sisters and their friends. Kateri Kovach, in her long bridesmaid's gown, linked arms with her younger sister Monica and flipped the younger girl over her back to the shouts and shrieks of the other girls.

*No, I can't bear  
to live my life alone  
I'm so impatient for a love  
to call my own  
And when I feel that I, I can't go on  
these precious words  
keep me hanging on,  
I remember Mama said*

Not wanting to miss a cue, Bear leaped over and swept his bride into his arms as Blanche laughed and blushed, her full skirt billowing around her like a cloud. Blanche, Rose remembered, had always been the one who didn't want to dance at the sleepover parties. But here she was, dancing at her own wedding with her handsome prince.

Rose thought the two of them would go into one of Bear's famous ballroom dance routines that he had wowed the sisters with before. But instead he put out

a hand to Rose, smiling. *He remembers, Rose thought, when it was just the three of us, him and Blanche and me. When we were all waiting.*

Grinning, Rose took his hand and her sister's hand and the three of them danced together in the center of the party.

*You can't hurry love  
No, you just have to wait  
She said love don't come easy  
It's a game of give and take*

The song was so wonderful that Rose's spirits flew once more. As the song ended and everyone clapped, Rose was so blissful that she deliberately didn't look over at Fish to see what his reaction was.

## HIS

Bear and Blanche hadn't left the reception openly. They slipped away, as planned. Blanche's natural shyness had re-asserted itself, and after their last dance together, Bear had kissed her, taken her hand, and escorted her out of the hall, without any fanfare. Fish wasn't sure how many people even noticed. He saw the couple walk down the hall and slip out the door. Bear had told Steven to park their car on the other side of the woods behind the hall, and the last Fish saw of them was the two walking, hand in hand, Blanche holding the train of her gown in one arm, heading through the tall grass of the back lot towards the trees beyond, as the sun glowed red off to their right.

Fish leaned against the door, watching them until they disappeared into the woods. The bear had found his bride. Blanche had found her prince.

He stood in deep silence, looking at the burning light of the sunset on the swaying grass of the field.

He came out of his reverie to find Rose had glided up beside him and was leaning against the other doorjamb. He wondered how long she had been there.

"So they're gone," she said at last, with a sigh.

"Yes," Fish said.

"On their journey together, just the two of them at last," Rose said softly.

*"Some forgotten isle in far-off seas—  
like a god going through the woods there stands  
a mountain for a moment in the dusk  
whole brotherhoods of cedars on its brow*

*and you are ever by me as I gaze,  
are in my arms as now, as now, as now!  
Some forgotten isle in the far-off seas!"*

"Robert Browning," he said, without looking at her.

"But of course."

The silence remained, but he was aware of it now. He glanced at her then, and saw she was looking at him. She gave him a smile, a mysterious smile, and swept away back to the party.

Troubled, he remained at the door until the music ended.

## **H**ers

Rose was not afraid of snakes, bugs, slime, mice, heights, depths, loud noises, and had even braved dark places where danger might be lurking on occasion.

But she was deathly afraid of what she wanted to tell Fish, even though she was laughing and joking with the other girls as they cleaned up the reception hall. The relatives were going back to her mom's house, and Kateri had invited her to come to a post-bridal party for the young adults at the Kovach farmhouse, but Rose said maybe she would come by later.

"What's up?" Kateri looked at her, her black eyes snapping warily. "Rose, don't."

"Don't what?" Rose feigned indifference.

"Don't go and break your heart over that Fish guy again. He's not worth it," her friend said in her no-nonsense manner.

"I just want to talk with him," Rose objected.

Kateri rolled her eyes. "All right. Then come over to the farm after you talk, and you and I can go out to the barn and you can have another good cry over the whole thing, okay?"

"Okay," Rose said, trying to strangle the butterflies in her stomach.

## **H**is

The guests had gone in spurts and trickles. Steven and his mother said goodbye early on, since they were driving back to the city that night. Feeling a sense of duty, Fish remained behind to assist the family in cleaning up the hall.

He helped take down the Christmas lights from the ceiling and roll up and throw away huge bundles of floral paper tablecloths. He swept the stage of

cupcake crumbs, napkin bits, and broken spoons, and found a child's shoe behind a curtain. He carried boxes out to the cargo doors of station wagons and suburbans, and waited around until people ran out of jobs for him to do. Rose, still in her bridesmaid's dress, was also working hard, until at last the old hall was successfully restored to its usual virile drabness.

"Can you give me a ride home?" Rose had queried while putting away the coffee maker, and he had said yes. Now with all the various helpers scattered to their different rides home, Fish found Rose standing before him, purse and bouquet in hand.

"All set?" he asked her, taking out his car keys.

"Yes—and no," Rose said, looking longingly over the darkened hillside. "Would you feel up for a walk?"

He studied her, and wondered if it would be wise to say yes.

"Okay," he sighed, and put away his car keys. "Where do you want to walk?"

"Let's go towards the golf course over on the other side of the hall," she suggested. "It's fun to walk on the paths there at night."

Out on the golf course, the moon was rising. Fish listened to the sound of occasional traffic on the country roads, and reflected on how quiet it was out here. Rose kept pace with him, sometimes walking a bit more quickly than he did.

"I wonder how it feels to be a princess who's just gotten married," Rose said at last.

"I'm not sure," he said, unhelpfully, smiling. "I've never been a princess."

"Happiness is such a difficult thing to describe," said Rose, ignoring his last remark. "Maybe that's why fairy tales just end with the old cliché of living happily ever after. It's so much easier to visualize tragedy than happiness."

"True. Or it could be that happiness is just more rare."

Rose pondered and wound a ringlet of hair around her finger as she walked. "There's one kind of happiness that comes from going to a wedding, and, I suspect, a whole other kind that comes from being married."

"The second kind is probably more real," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Love is an ideal thing. Marriage is a real thing." He added, "That's Goethe, by the way."

She considered this. "Do you want to get married?"

"Are you proposing?" he inquired mildly.

"No, silly, of course not," she said quickly, flushing.

"Of course not. No, I don't know that I will ever get married."

"Why not?"

He paused. "I'd like to finish my doctorate. I'd rather concentrate on school and get as much done as possible without any distractions."

"A distraction!" Rose scoffed at him. "You sound so—mercenary."

"Just being practical," he said easily. "You'll find out when you start college—it's not easy to be a full-time student and maintain a relationship."

"Speaking of college, I guess we'll be near each other next semester," Rose said, changing the subject. "Did you know I'm going to Mercy College?"

"I didn't. And where is that?"

"About an hour and a half from the University of Pittsburgh, where you are. It's a small Catholic school. My best friend Kateri goes there. The students there are really serious about their faith."

"How nice. What will you be studying?"

"English," she said. "Just like you."

"How nice."

There was silence as they walked. At last Rose said, "So what do you want to do after you get your degree?"

"Write. Do research. Teach, if I have to," Fish looked out at the night sky. "Live a quiet life."

"Doesn't sound very exciting," Rose said, apparently disappointed.

"No, but it sounds very appealing to me. I've had more than enough adventures."

"I thought you liked having an adventurous life."

He chuckled. "Liked? Well, 'tolerated' would be a better word for it. Yes, it's been exciting at times, but not usually enjoyable. Mostly it's made me older. And it's made me feel different, like an outsider."

"I think you've always felt like an outsider, and you always will, even if you just do nothing but live an average American life," Rose said, seeming put out. "It's just your personality."

"Then my personality's been exacerbated by my experience," he agreed amiably.

"Although I've always considered myself an outsider too," she said at last.

"I'm sure most people do," he granted. "It's part of the human condition."

"Fish, stop it. You're always trying to distance yourself from me."

"Was I? I was just agreeing that you and I are like most people in the human race."

"No, I don't think we are, at all," she said stubbornly.

"Rose, come, come," he said, and stopped and looked at her. "I think we've had this conversation before, haven't we? I sense that you're trying to categorize yourself with me, in a particular, unique way, aren't you?"

“Well, what if I am?” Rose said, lifting her chin. “It’s how I honestly feel.”  
“Fine. Feel that way. But I think you’re wasting your time.”

There was silence. He exhaled and wished, for the upteenth time, that Rose wouldn’t put herself through this ordeal time and time again. After a moment, he said, “Let’s go back.”

Fish turned around, and she followed him, a bit unwillingly. He waited a moment, and then, having gathered his thoughts, tried to ease her out of the situation. “Rose, I understand how you feel, but let’s face it—you’ve lived a pretty isolated life up until now. Most of the guys you’ve met, aside from my brother and me, have been jerks.” He amended his statement after a pause. “Well, aside from my brother, anyway. But that’s not a true picture of reality. You’re going to college next semester where you’ll probably meet a lot of other people who are like you. You’ll meet lots of other guys who share your interests and your particular brand of exuberance. You’ll make friends. Given this situation, I think it’s foolish of you to keep pinning your hopes on someone who’s just going to keep disappointing you.”

“You sound just like an uncle!” she burst out at last. “For Pete’s sake, Fish, you’re hardly much older than I am!”

He smiled. “But in terms of life experience, Rose, I feel decades older than you are.”

“You *always* say that. Well, I don’t think you are. I see a lot of similarities between us, and you just keep on coming up with all sorts of reasons why those things don’t—or can’t exist! I think *you’re* fooling yourself.” She halted, folded her arms and glared at him.

He swung around to face her. Now he was irritated. “So what do you want me to do? Sweep you into my arms and kiss you?”

Her expression changed. “Would you?” she asked, in a new and different voice.

He covered his face and groaned in exasperation. Finally he said, “Look, Rose. If you ever think that I’d kiss you, tell yourself you’re dreaming, because you are.”

Fish turned and walked off a few steps, but stopped out of courtesy. She began trailing after him.

“But Fish, what about you?” she said again, in a voice that was barely a whisper.

“What about me?” he tried to sound good-humored.

“You’re lonely, and solitary, and an outsider. I don’t want you to be. I want you to be happy.”

“Oh, I’m happy enough,” Fish said shortly. “Don’t think that just because you rescued me you’re under an obligation to marry me to make me happy.”

"I didn't say that," Rose said defensively.

"Don't even think it," he said.

She was silent for so long that he looked at her, a bit wary.

"Don't worry about me," he repeated. "God's going to take care of me. And He'll take care of you, too. A pretty girl like you isn't going to have any trouble finding a boyfriend. You'll be in love before you know it."

She turned on him, eyes flashing, and he realized he had said the wrong thing. "Don't trivialize me!" she burst out, then sat down on the grass, hands over her face, and started to cry.

*Good Lord*, he thought, hating this entire situation. He waited for a moment, then squatted down beside her. "Rose, I'm sorry. I was too flippant with you," he said at last.

"I just want you to take me seriously," she said at last, her voice muffled by her hands.

"I do. Or at least, I try to," he said. "I'm just not very good at relating to girls." He exhaled. "See, this is why I keep telling you to stay away from me."

"I know," she sighed, trying to compose herself. "My mom keeps telling me to stay away from you too."

"Well, there you are," he stood up, feeling vaguely uncomfortable about this knowledge. "She's a wise woman. Listen to her." He put out a hand to help her up. "Come on. I'll drive you home."

She stood up, wiping her eyes, and they went on.

But as they passed over a particularly striking rise of ground, with a view of the velvet-grassed hills all silvered by the moonlight, she halted. He waited for her a few steps away, and heard her murmuring to herself, chanting poetry.

*"I hold it true, what e'er befall,  
I hold it when I sorrow most,  
'Tis better to have loved and lost,  
than never to have loved at all."*

She probably assumed that he couldn't hear her, but Tennyson's lines were so familiar to him that he did. After a moment, she came up beside him and gave him a faint smile. He had already decided to pretend that he hadn't heard, and started mildly to talk about college majors. Poetry in the moonlight was a dangerous thing.

**H***ers*

“Could you do me another favor, Fish?” she asked as she got into the car.

“What is that?” the most aggravating man in the world inquired, starting the car as though none of the past conversation had occurred.

“Could you drive me home so I can change, then drive me to the Kovach’s? There’s a party going on there. You can come if you like. You can meet the other Kovachs.”

“I’d be happy to chauffeur you there, but I’m not sure if I’m up for a party,” he said, stifling a yawn as they drove from the parking lot. “I’ve got to get an early start tomorrow.”

“Do you have to get back for summer classes?” she asked.

“As always.”

Rose stared dismally out the window. As wretched as it was, she preferred being with him to being without him. Now that the wedding was over, it would be at least three months until she saw him again. Oh, stupid, stupid person that she was, to set her heart on such a man.

“Fish?” she asked hesitantly.

“Hm?”

“Can we still be friends?”

“Certainly.”

“You’ll come visit me at college?”

“Of course.”

“You won’t be embarrassed?”

He glanced over at her momentarily as he drove. “Rose, I’m never embarrassed to be around you. Frustrated and exasperated, yes, but not embarrassed. You’re a charming girl.”

“Oh shut up, or I’ll hit you,” she said fiercely, rubbing a grass stain on her pink skirt. “No wonder people keep beating you up, Mr. Fish. You bring it on yourself.”

“That’s probably true,” he said, with his characteristic crooked smile.

When they reached her home, she ran inside, avoiding the relatives talking in the kitchen, and mounted the stairs to her bedroom. Shutting the door, she dragged the wish box out from beneath her bed, took off the lid, and looked inside.

She gazed at the letters from Fish, the various mementos from him. A book of poetry he had given her as a birthday present, by T. S. Eliot, whom she normally detested as the man responsible for the ugliness of modern poetry.

Up until that moment, she had intended to pitch the whole box into the trashcan, or at very least the letters. But now, in the light of his promise to continue being her friend, she couldn't. Momentarily she toyed with solemnly bringing the letters down and handing them back to him, like some kind of modern Ophelia. "Their perfume lost, I give them back."

But Fish would only laugh at her. She couldn't bear that thought. And she had certainly put him through enough dramatics tonight.

What was the use of keeping these things? Wasn't she merely harboring a vain desire that would never be? Wasn't it unhealthy, or delusional, or even sinful to hold onto them?

But he had saved her life. And she had saved his life. At the very least, they would always be friends.

Fingering the letters, she pictured him married, maybe to a handsome Indian woman, with several interracial children, coming for a token visit at Blanche and Bear's house while she was there. He would greet her cordially, and they would exchange pleasantries. His wife would be charming. Rose would like her. They would all talk together. And maybe Rose would have a husband of her own by then, someone tall and devastatingly handsome, who could easily beat Fish at arm wrestling. By the time of their conversation, she would have forgotten all about her disturbing passion. Maybe she and Fish would even laugh about it as her trivial adolescent phase.

All of this smarted in her imagination. Then she pictured herself as an old maid, sitting in a parlor, clutching this box to her chest and rambling on about the one true love of her life. For some reason, she preferred the latter picture to the more civilized and realistic first scenario.

"I shall have twenty cats and talk to them all," she said, picking up the volume of poetry. "My cats and I shall have *fish* every day for dinner." Her imagination taking flight, she finished, dropping the book in the box, "And I shall memorize every line in this book and paint it in calligraphy on my living room walls."

Giggling at her ridiculousness, she replaced the lid of the box and shoved it back under the bed. There were a few precious moments left of her otherwise meaningless life to spend with Fish, just the two of them together. He was out there waiting in the car, probably wondering what the devil was taking her so long.

With a sigh that was disappointment and resignation all at once, she stood, deciding not to change out of her bridesmaids dress after all. The celebration

was still on, and she should go and celebrate. She could go to the Kovachs, and tell Kateri all about it, and cry and laugh over it. And Fish, if he guessed anything, would probably think she was silly. As usual.

*...and they prepared a  
great feast in honor of  
their daughter's  
christening, to which  
they invited the wise  
women...*

*Grimm*

## HIS

Soon after the wedding, Fish started classes at the University of Pittsburgh. He had been taking summer classes ever since he had gotten the chance to go back to school. It wasn't so much that he enjoyed the classes as that he was anxious to squeeze as much learning into as short a time span as possible. He preferred going to school in the summer—there were fewer students, less going on around campus, less distractions. And nights in his apartment were quieter. It was probably the closest that a modern university came to approaching a monastic school. Engrossed in his work, he barely noticed the summer slipping by.

In August, he made a trip back East before fall classes started. He stopped in to see Bear and Blanche and admire their new (old) farmhouse, which they were busy renovating. Rose had already gone off to her first semester at Mercy College, so Blanche informed him.

"Why did she pick Mercy College?" Fish asked as they sat in the mostly stripped-to-the-studs living room on canvas-covered chairs, drinking tea. He was vaguely suspicious that Rose had picked the college merely because of the proximity to his school, but doubted that even Rose would be that silly. "I've never heard of it."

“That’s where my parents went to college. They met and married there,” Blanche said.

“Seriously? I didn’t know that.”

“Yes. My mom was a nursing student, and my dad was majoring in English. He was two years ahead of her. They married during my mom’s sophomore year, and then he got a job working for the local paper and they lived with his parents while she finished her degree. My mom had me her junior year and dropped down to part-time. She finished school right around the time she had Rose, and then they moved to New Jersey.”

“I see,” Fish said. “So Mercy College is sort of the family tradition.”

“Actually, my dad always discouraged me from going there,” Blanche said reflectively, pushing back her dark hair with one hand. “I guess he didn’t think much of the place. But my mom loved it. And our friends the Kovachs have sent almost all their kids there. It’s a very Catholic school, and has become more so since my parents went there. I hear that most of the students there are pretty intense about putting their faith into action.”

“Hmph,” Fish said. As a teenage convert, he had never been around many devout Catholics his own age. After his experience at secular universities, he couldn’t imagine what an intensely Catholic school would be like. He suspected a fishbowl removed from real life.

Blanche added, “That reminds me. Rose has some furniture here that we couldn’t fit into the car when she moved. If it fits in your car, would you consider bringing it up with you? I guess you’ll pass by Mercy College on your way back to Pittsburgh. It’s right off of the turnpike.”

“Sure,” Fish shrugged, “What do you have?”

“Just an old armchair and a small bookcase.”

“Well, we can see if they fit,” Fish said.

Surprisingly, the furniture did fit into Fish’s compact car, so he brought the chair and bookshelf back with him, and stopped off in the small municipality of Meyerstown to drop them off at Mercy College.

Mercy College was a small, squat college tucked away in a rather depressed former steel mill town. It had been built in the 1950s by a most unimaginative set of architects, who apparently considered brick warehouses really neat buildings. The most colorful part of the school was the student body, who were quite an assortment. Fish was rather surprised—and pleased—to see a generous sprinkling of different skin tones and dress styles among the students walking the sidewalks of the campus. He had thought such a backwater place would have more middle-class homogeneity, but he was wrong.

Blanche had called Rose to tell her he would be passing through, so Rose met him outside of her dorm, a drab brick rectangle of a building that was

reminiscent of a small high school. She was dressed all in black, with an aqua blue scarf around her neck. With her red hair flaming in the autumn light, it was easy to pick her out among the crowds of other college students. He could see college hadn't changed her dress style.

And she seemed to be completely at ease. "This is the chair I got from my mom's mother. It used to be in her living room when I was growing up, and she said I could have it when I got older. I love it. Isn't it such a nice shade of blue?"

Fish agreed that it was, as he struggled to get it out of the car. He offered to bring the chair inside for her, and she picked up the small bookcase and ushered him in, telling him that the college had strict rules about their single-sex dorms, but that, since it was open dorm hours, he could actually come and see her room.

*A far cry from U of Pitt with their co-ed dorms*, he thought to himself, balancing the chair on his shoulders as he walked down the narrow hallway. Even without her guidance, Fish could have recognized Rose's room immediately as it was stamped with her particular brand of taste. There were scarves draped around the window to serve as curtains, a tall shelf of books and knickknacks, colorful quilts on the bunk beds, and a china tea set on a small table in the center of the room.

Fish eased the chair around the tea table into the waiting vacant corner, and Rose set down the bookshelf. "These will really make the room feel like home," she said. "Thank you so much! Would you care for some tea?"

"Sure," Fish said, sitting down in the chair he had just carried in and suppressing a smile. He knew by now that Briers had to offer tea to anyone who walked in the door.

Rose checked to make sure that the door to her room was propped open, explaining that residence hall rules required it. "Sorry I can't get water to boil on this hot plate," she said regretfully. "But it's very warm." She poured the water into a rose-painted teapot and added two tea bags. "Do you still take sugar in it?"

"But of course."

Making a mild face at him, she rummaged in a crate stowed in her closet and pulled out a bag of sugar, and took a clean teaspoon out of a jar of pencils on the bookshelf. "One tablespoon or two?"

"Two, thank you," he said.

"You still insist on drowning the fine flavor of tea leaves in processed sugar, alas," she said regretfully, as she added it for him and handed him the cup.

"My one remaining vice," he said, and changed the subject. "Blanche tells me your parents went here."

Rose dropped her affected manner as she settled cross-legged on the bed with her own cup. “Yes, Dad’s family is actually from here. Some of his cousins still live in the area. The family farm my parents lived on isn’t far from here.”

“Interesting,” Fish said. Driving through, he had mostly seen run-down farms and small stores. He wondered what Rose and Blanche’s lives would have been like if their family had stayed here. *They never would have met my brother and me, for starters*, he reflected.

“My grandmother had Alzheimer’s disease and so dad was living with her and taking care of her until she died.”

“And when your mom graduated, they moved away?”

“Yes. My mom’s mom lived in Warwick, and my Dad got a job up there as a reference librarian.”

“And so history was made,” Fish said, stretching. “So what are you doing this semester outside of classes?”

“I tried out for the play,” Rose said, and her eyes lit up. “They’re doing Shakespeare, instead of one of those horrid modern plays. *King Lear*. AND they’re going to do it in period dress.”

“Amazing,” he said. “That’s rare. Last semester they did a Shakespeare at the University. *The Tempest*. It was set on a space ship traveling to Mars.”

Rose made a noise of distaste. “Why is it that every time people do Shakespeare they have to dress the actors in black suits or plastic helmets or Mafia outfits? It’s so tiresome. But our director said he wants to set the play during the time it actually was supposed to have happened. Everyone’s going to be in Celtic costume. Before the auditions, I asked him what the costumes would be like—I just had to know. After all, a Celtic princess carries herself very differently than a corporate CEO, doesn’t she?”

“Most likely,” Fish agreed. “How do you think you did?”

“I’m not sure, but it was fun. Some of the other students were very good. There was this other girl there—she’d been in professional theatre before. She was tall and thin and had this sort of highborn air. I thought she would make a wonderful Cordelia—that’s the third princess, the good one who gets killed in the end—but I guess it’s up to the director. I suppose I was more lighthearted with my portrayal—guess that’s to be expected, isn’t it? It being me?”

Fish gave her a wry smile. “You’re not quite the tragic type.”

“Thank God. Yes. Donna—the tall girl—certainly was. She was so serious, and very competitive. She wouldn’t even look at me after I auditioned. It was a little surprising.”

“Don’t let it bother you. People like that are small-minded.” Fish drained his cup—the tea had been at perfectly drinkable temperature. “Unfortunately, I’ve got to go soon. I’ve got work at eight tonight.”

"Where do you work?" Rose asked.

"I'm a teaching assistant. I work for Dr. Anshlung—she's an Austrian, but she teaches English literature. She's pretty incredible. I assistant teach her undergrad students, I do her secretarial work, and stand in for her if she needs to miss a class. Pretty basic stuff, but it's good experience." He looked at his watch. "Thanks for the tea, Rose. Sorry I couldn't stay longer."

She rose with him. "I'm glad you could bring the furniture down for me," she said genuinely.

"No problem," he resisted the temptation to ask how she was doing. He didn't even want to reference their conversation the night of Blanche's wedding. The sooner she put that behind her, the better. "Let me know if you make the play. I'd like to see some decent Shakespeare."

"All right," she said, as they walked down the hall. "I will."

He got into his car, waved goodbye to her, and drove away, feeling a bit relieved. So Rose was settling in to her new school and finding ways to occupy herself. That was good. It was high time she moved on.

## **H**ers

"To play or not to play, that is the question," Rose murmured to herself as she hurried from her dormitory one afternoon a few days later. "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to act in the school production, or to take arms against a sea of papers, and by composing, write them?"

She waved gaily at a few of her new friends passing on the way to class, and reflected again how different it was to be at Mercy College. Attending community college at home in New York had been a lot like attending high school, the only difference being that the classes were harder and she could leave right after class to go home, if she wanted to. Living on the fringes of school social life, she hadn't bothered to get to know the community college students.

But here at Mercy College, things were very different. She found herself thrust into a community situation unlike anything else she had experienced.

Mercy had a reputation for attracting Catholic students who were engaged in their faith, at least on some level, and this gave an unusual quality to the student body. People were friendly and eager to make friends, and Rose's natural sociability reasserted itself. After a week, she found herself with over thirty friends in various groups, and never lacking for things to do. There were dances, hikes, hanging out in the student lounge, the chapel, the little café on the edge of campus—and oh yes, there were classes to go to.

And those classes were far more fascinating than anything at her community college. Theology, history, philosophy, bioethics...Kateri had recommended that Rose sign up for the bioethics class with Dr. Cooper to fulfill her science core class. But by the middle of the first class, Rose was having serious doubts. Sure, Dr. Cooper was really interesting, but he wanted each student to do a major research paper on the issue of their choice that was far longer and more involved than anything else Rose had ever written, and it would be one-half of their grade for the class. How could she juggle this class and the semester play?

As she worried over this, she couldn't help noticing one student who sat in the first row, taking notes with unusual intensity. He was tall, broad-shouldered, with curly brown hair, brown eyes, and from his profile, Rose quickly decided she would like to get a better look at him sometime. She wondered what his name was, and if it was worth staying in this class just so she could find out...

Now facing the quandary of whether to drop bioethics or the play, she hurried to her room after class and called home. "What do you think I should do?" she asked her mom.

"Well, are you sure you have a part in the play?" her mom asked.

"No, but I was called back for a second audition—and I sort of have a good feeling about it," Rose sighed. "But do you seriously think I can do that—write a major research paper and have a lead role in the play? I would love to do the play, but it seems so—extraneous."

"But *King Lear* is a significant literary work, and your major is literature, isn't it?" Mom pointed out. "If the play were something like *Arsenic and Old Lace*, I'd encourage you to drop it in favor of your schoolwork. But acting the part of Cordelia will give you an experience of Shakespeare that otherwise you would never have."

"I guess you're right," Rose considered. "But this paper is a monster. Really long, and he wants at least three source interviews."

Mom laughed. "Writing has always been your strong suit, Rose," she said. "I know from homeschooling you. You can handle this paper. You have a gift for writing, just like your father had. He wrote for the Meyerstown News when we were up there."

"Did he?" Rose asked, remembering her red-haired father, whom she had loved so much. "He didn't happen to write on any bioethical issues, did he? Maybe I could use his writings as source material."

"Well, he covered the Right to Life March every year—I know that," her mom said. "That's how he got labeled as an ultraconservative. The editor of the paper just wasn't interested in the abortion issue. He used to say it was too passé."

"I bet that got Dad mad."

"It sure did. I was glad when he left the paper and went to work in the library. It was so much less stress."

"Well, I really don't want to do abortion as my topic, though," Rose said. "It's almost too obvious. Besides, I'm sure some people are already doing it."

"And you, being Rose, could never do something that other people were doing," Mother laughed. "Well, let me think. Actually, there was another issue he was involved with, but he never got a chance to publish anything on it."

"What was that?"

"It was a pretty strange and sad case. A nurse approached him and said that there was some kind of serious abuse going on at the hospital where she worked. She wanted your father to write an article on it using her as an anonymous source. Your dad interviewed her extensively and gathered a lot of information, but he couldn't substantiate a lot of what she said. And his editor didn't want to touch the story. I don't know all the details, but I know your father was extremely upset over it. That's one of the reasons why he quit, actually. I wish I knew some of the details. Anyway, abuse of hospital patients would probably fall under your topic—you know, cases where patients are neglected, denied proper treatment, and so on."

"Yes, but it's rather unpleasant," Rose agreed, shivering involuntarily. "What happened to the nurse?"

"I'm not sure. She may still be in the area. If she is, she would probably talk to you about it. It's been years since that happened, though."

Rose found herself getting interested. "You know, I'd actually like to find out more about the story. Do you have any of Dad's notes from the interviews or would he have left them in his newspaper's office?"

Mom ruminated. "Daniel always kept everything he wrote. You know, the notes from the interviews are probably all still in storage in Grandma Brier's old barn, near the house where we used to live. We weren't able to bring most of that stuff with us when we moved to Warwick, and I suppose your father forgot about it over time. Someone in the family still uses the farmland, but I don't think the house has been lived in since Grandma died and we left it. It was in pretty bad shape. You could probably go and poke around in the barn. Your dad kept everything in big file boxes in the hayloft."

"How could I get there?"

"I'll give you your cousin Jerry's number and he could tell you. I'm sure they won't mind if you go out there to look for the notes. They'd probably be glad to move some of that stuff out of there. Plus, it would be good for you to visit them. Let me get the number." She found it, read it out to Rose, who scribbled it in her notebook.

“All right!” Rose said. “Thanks, Mom. This really helps me out.”

“I’m glad. Now, if you do get the part in the play, make sure you keep up your studies.”

“I think I’ll be able to,” Rose said. “Love you, Mom.”

## HIS

Fish woke up in a sweat, and started. Had he been screaming? He quickly glanced around the room, but the house was quiet. His apartment was fairly secluded. Most likely, no one had heard him.

Grateful, he put his head back down on the pillow and prayed to go back to sleep. But the re-living of the ordeal had been too real.

*I’m just nervous about my classes, he told himself. Extra stress. The beginning of the semester. That’s what brought it all back.*

He was teaching his first class for Dr. Anschlag tomorrow. Even though he had prepared thoroughly, he must still be on edge.

There was nothing to do but get out of bed. He pushed back the covers and got up. Rubbing his neck, which had been tense during the nightmare, he went out to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of milk. It was common, he had heard, for people in his situation to have vivid flashbacks of the torture experience. He wondered if it would be like this all his life, waking up in the night, standing dully in the kitchen, drinking milk, emotionally exhausted.

*Freet is still having his revenge on me, he thought grimly, and smiled. The one consolation he had was that he guessed the flashbacks would be much worse if he had actually given in.*

After taking another glass of milk, Fish picked up his backpack from the living room and hunted around in it for his rosary. That might put him back to sleep, and keep him from the usual after-effects of remembering. *I’ll go rock climbing this weekend, he told himself. Maybe he could get one of his classmates to go with him. I need to start exercising more often, to keep this kind of tension from building up. That’s what I’ll do. Can’t be a graduate assistant if I have to deal with this kind of trauma every night.*

Fortified with these resolutions, he returned to his bedroom and tried once more to sleep.

The nightmare had its effect in a headache that surfaced when Fish woke up later that day. Or perhaps the headache had caused the nightmare. Annoyed, he took three aspirin and went to teach his first class.

It went surprisingly well, and he was pleased. After class, he studied in the library, then took his work with him to Dr. Anshlung's office. She had a sheaf of handwritten notes that she wanted transcribed. A short blond woman with a Germanic accent, she was apologetic about her poor handwriting, but Fish didn't find it difficult to decipher. The next few hours were spent in busy solitude with the computer, until he heard her coming in at the door.

"Ben?"

"Yes, Dr. Anshlung?"

"I heard from some students that your first lecture went off very well. I was just invited to go out to dinner with Jane—Dr. Storck. Why don't you join us? A bit of a celebration. It would give you a chance to meet some more of our faculty."

"Thank you. I would like to."

He ran his fingers through his hair and glanced down at his cotton shirt and dark pants. He hoped it was decent enough for dining out with faculty. But then again, he wasn't sure where they were going.

Dr. Anshlung drove him to the restaurant, which turned out to be a fairly nice French establishment. There they met up with Dr. Jane Storck of the English faculty. She chatted with him pleasantly about NYU where he had done his undergraduate work.

"Now, Marie, I have to warn you that Dr. Prosser is supposed to join our party tonight." Dr. Storck glanced at Fish. "I just hope she doesn't give any offense to your assistant."

"Oh!" Dr. Anshlung seemed surprised. "Was this a woman's only night? I didn't know."

"Well, Dr. Prosser can get very adamant about not wanting to deal with men on her off time. Very strident feminist. As director of the hospital, you know, she oversees a lot of male doctors..."

Dr. Anshlung glanced at Fish, and raised her Austrian nose just slightly. "Well, I also consider myself a feminist, but I happen to enjoy the company of men. I would hope Dr. Prosser would be a bit more broad-minded."

"One would hope," Dr. Storck seemed dubious. "I just wanted to give you a heads-up."

Two other professors arrived, Drs. Lora Carpenter and Frances Bosworth, Biochemistry and Engineering, respectively. They greeted the other women affably and Fish pleasantly. Then two more women followed.

One was an imposing woman with a broad chest and curly brown hair cropped short, with a boisterous manner. The other was thin and wiry with

rumpled blond hair, clearly subservient to her boss. They both wore lab coats under their overcoats.

"Hullo girls!" the big woman said loudly as she came in. "The sisterhood all here?"

"Seems like it," said Dr. Carpenter cheerfully. "But you can't be a purist tonight, Pross—we've got an enemy spy with us." She indicated Fish.

"I invited him to come along with me," said Dr. Anshlung loyally, putting a hand on his shoulder. "This is Benedict Denniston, my new graduate assistant."

"Benedict?" Dr. Prosser towered over Fish. "At least he's not named Benedict Arnold, hey?" She seemed gregarious enough, but Fish didn't like her. "Let's get some food—I'm starving."

Fish followed the party to the table, feeling a bit of an outsider, but curious to see what this dinner party would be like.

Dr. Prosser seemed to be the dominant person at the party, and led the conversation inexorably. She didn't exactly ignore Fish, but she didn't seem to go out of her way to include him. Fish wondered if she were deliberately treating him the way she fancied some men treated women—talking over them and around them, never to them.

By contrast, Dr. Anshlung seemed determined to include him in the conversation—which he would just as soon listen to as join—and persistently asked for his input. Dr. Prosser sometimes interrupted his comments, but Fish put up with it.

"So have you seen much of the area since you've moved here?" Dr. Anshlung asked Fish when the rest of the company was involved discussing the latest politics.

"Not really. I've only out to drop off some furniture at Mercy College since I've gotten here," Fish said.

"Is that the college near Meyerstown?" Dr. Anshlung asked.

"Mercy College? Isn't your facility located near Mercy College?" Dr. Storck turned to Dr. Prosser's companion, a Dr. Schaffer, who was sitting on her right. Fish had learned that she was a surgeon at the hospital.

Dr. Schaffer rolled her eyes. "Unfortunately, yes," she said distastefully.

Dr. Prosser had overheard the last remark. "What's unfortunate?"

"Mercy College."

"Ohmygawd!" exclaimed Dr. Prosser. "If I had weapons of mass destruction, that's where I'd use 'em!"

Dr. Anshlung cast a quick sidelong glance at Fish and grimaced.

"Why do you say that?" Dr. Storck asked. Then she seemed to conjecture.

"Is that where your protestors are from?"

Dr. Prosser swore. "That's right. Every single Saturday morning, with their placards and rosaries and hymns!"

"I had no idea," Dr. Anschung said. "Whatever are they protesting?"

"It's the old religion versus science thing again," sniffed Dr. Prosser. "Who knows? The religious right versus science progress. Bigots versus the people."

"Let me guess," said Dr. Carpenter. "A mixed crowd of impressionable freshmen, crew cuts and Bibles in hand, with old ladies in mantillas praying the rosary, right? Led by some emaciated priest or senile church lady with a sexual repression?"

The others laughed, but Dr. Prosser shook her head and exchanged wry glances with Dr. Schaffer. "Actually, the ringleader is this half-breed chick in denim with long black braids, a megaphone and an attitude. She's quite a character."

Dr. Schaffer sighed. "At least we have interesting protestors."

"Interesting? Like a study in criminal pathology. A female Unabomber waiting to happen." Dr. Prosser said.

"What do you mean, she's a half-breed?" inquired Dr. Bosworth, who didn't seem comfortable with the term. "Is she a Native American?"

"Looks like one, with tan skin and colored-string-bound-braids," said Dr. Schaffer.

"No," said Dr. Prosser to her, a bit triumphantly. "I forgot to tell you, I just got the report. She's actually Polish and Vietnamese!"

"Really?" Dr. Bosworth seemed visibly relieved. "How unusual."

"The amount of bad publicity she's given our hospital is damaging," Dr. Prosser said. "So I thought it prudent to have her investigated. She's already been arrested, twice, for trespassing, and she's made threats about our work and against our personnel. It's in our interest to watch her."

"The second time she was arrested, it was because I caught her in our dumpster going through the trash," Dr. Schaffer informed the rest of the table.

The other women shuddered. "Disgusting."

"Literally looking for garbage to unearth about us," Dr. Prosser said. "Fortunately, we don't have anything incriminating in our dumpsters. She just got a little more smelly for her trouble."

"Why do people do these things?" Dr. Carpenter wondered. "These are college students, you say? What in the world do they teach them at that school?"

"Religious hysteria," Dr. Prosser said firmly. "They encourage them. We've considered preparing a lawsuit against the school, we really have. I mean, I'm all for academic freedom," she gazed around the table, including Fish in her gaze.

"But this kind of intolerance is too much! Suppose they actually managed to damage our facility? Plant a bomb? Are we going to wait for that to happen?"

There was a reflective silence at the table while Dr. Prosser took another bite of her salad.

"So what is it that you do at your hospital that they find objectionable?" Fish asked calmly, since no one else had asked.

Dr. Prosser looked up at him, chewing on a bread roll. Her blue eyes were cool. "Full reproductive services for women," she said at last. "You're not familiar with our facility?"

"I'm new to the area," Fish said apologetically.

"He's from New York City," Dr. Anshlung informed them all. "He did his undergraduate at NYU."

"I see," Dr. Prosser took another bite. "Well, we only do what every other free public hospital does in this country. We provide the full range of health care for women. But to some of these weirdoes, that means we're homicidal money-hungry baby-killers."

"Surely not!" Fish said. Dr. Prosser looked at him suspiciously, so he tried to look guileless.

"I suppose it all comes down to what you consider human. Clumps of cells? Tissues? These people would have us give our fingernail cuttings a decent burial if they could make laws about it."

"Maybe that's why her hair is so long," Dr. Schaffer said in a low voice to Dr. Prosser, who laughed loudly.

"When's that food coming?" Dr. Prosser asked. She looked around the table, and returned to her practice of ignoring Fish. After a moment, Dr. Carpenter hesitantly offered an opinion on the latest governmental election. For the rest of the meal, Dr. Prosser pretended he wasn't there, which was fine with him.

On the ride home, Dr. Anshlung seemed embarrassed. "Quite a faux pas of me, asking you about Mercy College. I certainly hadn't expected such a firestorm."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I had no idea. I just mentioned the college because my sister-in-law's sister goes there."

"I see," Dr. Anshlung said. "Well, it certainly doesn't sound like the sort of place that's going to look very good on a resume," she added dubiously.

"I actually have only been there once, and it seemed fairly normal. Just another private school," Fish assured her. "Nobody chanting rosaries or beating themselves with chains."

"All the same, it does give religious schools a bad name when they allow their students to become involved with those kinds of protest activities," Dr. Anshlung said.

“Well, our university has its share of weird protests too, doesn’t it?” Fish asked. “Those environmentalists spray-painting the walls around the goldfish pond?”

“I suppose we do,” she said, sighing. “It all comes under academic freedom, doesn’t it?”

*...and each of the  
wise women stepped  
forward to bestow on  
the princess a gift...*

Grimm

## Hers

Rose swiftly decided that her favorite class this semester was going to be theology. “Theological Foundations” was taught by a middle-aged professor with a compelling Boston accent, who liked to quote poetry to illustrate a theological point. Rose was spellbound by his performances, even when she didn’t understand them.

“The ineffable paradox of the Divine Love,” Professor Dawson was saying, “communicates the totality of His Being.”

During the third class, Rose couldn’t help noticing the student in front of her, one row over. At first, seeing only out of the corner of her eye, she thought it was a girl, because of the long, black, glossy hair. Then when he turned his head, she saw a scrub beard and realized, with a slight shock, that the student was a boy. He was short, broad-shouldered and muscular, with mirrored sunglasses, dressed all in black, including a rather modish black trench coat. When he caught her stare he turned and smiled. Despite the black, his smile was friendly.

“Are you confused yet?” he said as class ended.

Rose nodded. “A bit. But it’s a wonderful confusion.”

“Oh, so you appreciate profs like him? That’s a good sign.”

“Good sign of what?” Rose was curious.

“Oh, probably nothing significant. You must like poetry.”

“I do,” Rose admitted. “But mostly older poems. Still, Professor Dawson makes me *want* to read T. S. Eliot.”

"He will do that," the boy stretched. "I'm Alex O'Donnell by the way. You must be a freshman."

Rose laughed. "Technically I'm a sophomore," she informed him. "I'm a transfer from community college."

"Good for you. You did the smart thing. Much cheaper than Mercy College. What's your major?"

"English literature. And yours?"

"Double major in poly-sci and history," he said. "This is my junior year. Where you from?"

"New Jersey."

"Ah, Joisey. I'm from Virginia. You going to the cafeteria?"

"Actually, yes." Rose liked this. It was so easy to get to know guys here, without any pressure of it turning into a date too quickly. She was pretty sure that Alex was not the type of guy she would be interested in, but knew he would be interesting to talk to.

"So what do you think of Mercy College?" Alex asked as they walked outside. "Heaven on earth or purgatory?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, haven't you picked up that not all the kids who go here want to be here? Parents love this school because of its sterling safe reputation. So your parents didn't make you go here?"

"No. My mom went here, and this family whom I'm friends with had their older kids go here and they loved it. I wanted to come."

"Good for you. I guessed 'Heaven on earth' was your option as soon as you didn't understand the question."

"And you?"

"Ah, purgatory—maybe. But an interesting experience all the same. When I first came here, I was afraid it was going to be an inbred hothouse of Christianity, but there's enough diversity among the students here that it's actually kind of fun. Hey, Burrito!"

This last remark was addressed to another student in dark glasses walking ahead of them, who turned and flashed a grin at them. Rose did a double take when she saw him. It was the guy from bioethics class. Tall, brown-haired, good-looking—he looked like someone who might have been a stud in high school, not the sort that would hang out with a punk like Alex.

The next moment Alex had dropped his books and launched into the air towards the other student with a high-pitched yell and a karate kick. The other student responded by dropping into a crouch and blocking the kick with his upraised forearms as he spun to one side. Alex landed with agility on the grass

and hurtled towards the tall student again, who stepped and caught his foot around Alex's ankle and threw the black-haired boy backwards. As the boy went over he kicked again at the tall student, who tumbled backwards, landed on his feet, and did a complete flip forwards the next moment.

"Burrito takes out the Bull!" he shouted as he sprang over Alex and landed five feet away.

Alex had shied away from the flip. "Okay, that's good, you're on your guard. I was just testing you. So what's up with you?"

"Nothing much. Just 300 medical terms to memorize by Friday," the tall student said, picking up his scattered books. "Hey, who's this?"

"Aw, some transfer student. But she looks intelligent."

Burrito shot what was intended to be a surreptitious glance at Alex. "Heaven or purgatory?"

"Earth," Rose interjected. "I'm Rose Brier."

"Good!" the tall boy exclaimed, pulling off his dark glasses which somehow had stayed in place during his fight with Alex. "That's where I live too!" He shook hands vigorously. "I'm Paul Fester. Hey, aren't you in Cooper's bioethics class?"

"I am," she said. With his glasses off, she could see that his eyes were happy, almost too happy to be really attractive by the standards Rose had learned in high school. He was not what her girl classmates would have called "cool." But she liked him instantly.

The conversation fell into the predictable routine of college small talk about academics and hometowns until they reached the cafeteria. As they approached the building with its stone pillars flanking the entrance, Rose noticed another figure in a black trench coat and dark glasses standing on top of one of the pillars, looking down on the crowd below. When they were within shouting distance, Paul hailed him and Alex gave a small salute. The student dropped down to the ground easily and strode over to meet them. He had thick, dark brown hair cut in 50's style with sideburns, and his appearance was a touch more flamboyant, a purple shirt and black pants. Rose felt as though she were caught in the middle of a Mafia huddle, with these men in black all around her. It was interesting.

"So you're learning to look down on the world, Leroy? Is that a good thing?" Alex said, by way of introduction.

"I just wanted to find out if I could climb those things. You can see a long way from up there," the pillar-stander said.

"You could be the campus stylite. You know, like Saint Simon, who lived up on a pillar for years. Hey, it could work. Right outside the caf. We could throw food up to you." Paul said.

"I don't know if G. K. Chesterton would approve, however," Rose said.

Three pairs of male eyes in sunglasses looked at her. She continued on, not intimidated.

"There's this one detective story he wrote about a priest who always prayed at the pinnacle of the cathedral, and grew so proud that he played God and committed murder. It was a good point, I always thought."

There was a silence. Then Paul looked at Alex.

"She knows Chesterton."

"She lives," said Alex.

Ten minutes later they were all sitting at one of the round cafeteria tables, having successfully crossed the bridge from small talk to what Rose termed "real talk." Philosophy, Theology, and Political Ideology had joined the conversation, and Chesterton was wrestling with Lord Acton in magnificent contest.

While Paul and Leroy took sides over which economic system was more compatible with the Catholic faith, Alex and Rose speculated about what Thomas Aquinas would have to say about the latest summer movie.

"So what are you doing for your bioethics class paper?" Paul asked her during a lull in the conversation, as they went to refill their plates.

"I'm actually thinking of something on the treatment of patients in hospitals—maybe the treatment of comatose patients," Rose said. "My sister was in a coma once after an accident, so I'm sort of interested in the issue. Also, my dad apparently had done some research on the topic when he was a news reporter." She told him what she knew about her dad's interviews with the nurse.

"Wow, that's awesome," Paul said appreciatively. "I had thought about doing medical cannibalism in Asian countries, but this sounds interesting too."

"Medical what?" Rose repeated, flabbergasted.

Paul helped himself to some strawberry Jell-O and said, "In China, there have been cases of doctors recommending that their patients eat dishes made from the remains of aborted babies for certain ailments. Some Western reporters didn't believe them, so they posed as patients and went to the doctors, and were given jars of the remains for cooking with."

"Oh," said Rose, losing her appetite.

Leroy winced, overhearing them. "Paul, stop being so medical! Not everyone has as strong a stomach as you do."

"Oh," Paul said, catching himself. "I guess it's not good lunch conversation. Anyhow, I was going to take an unusual angle on the subject. You see, I'm interested in Eastern medicine. I was going to argue that cannibalism contradicts the inherent principles of healing in Asian medicine."

“My,” Rose said.

“I’m pre-med, but I can’t decide if I’d rather do the traditional kind of Western medicine, or do something more alternative, like acupuncture. When I was recovering from a basketball injury in high school, I started going to this one acupuncturist, and it got me interested. The Army—I’m in the National Guard, by the way—will pay for med school, but they probably won’t pay for say, acupuncture training.”

“What’s acupuncture again?” Rose asked, as they sat back down at the table.

“Also not a proper topic for meal conversation,” Leroy said. “Ask him some other time, and he’ll tell you all about it.”

“What, Leroy? Are you grossed out by the thought of having sixteen-inch pins stuck all over your body?” Alex asked, munching potato chips.

“It’s not what I want to think about right now,” Leroy said.

“But really, it’s fascinating,” Paul insisted, but Rose could see that there was a mischievous glint in his brown eyes. “They’re actually needles, and they’re not inserted into the skin terribly far. Most people barely feel them...”

“Speaking of pins and needles, I like sewing,” Rose said, raising her voice a bit. “Quite a lot.”

The company groaned. “You just reminded us that you’re a girl,” Alex said. “Stop right there or we’ll run away screaming ‘Cooties.’ Back to something sensible. If you want to talk Asian, let’s talk about Godzilla. We never did see that movie you got, Paul. When are you going to bring it out?”

## HIS

There had been a call from his lawyer that afternoon, with news Fish didn’t enjoy hearing.

“I realize that you’re in school just now,” his lawyer had said. “Is it too difficult for you to make the trip?”

“No, I’ll come,” he said, rubbing his temples, where he could feel a headache already beginning.

After hanging up, he got up and tried to return to the paper he had been writing. But what his mind wouldn’t think about, his body traitorously wouldn’t forget. Soon he had to get up and go searching for aspirin.

“Hell,” he said to the wall in the bathroom. It was a fairly apt description, not a curse.

After he had paced around the house restlessly, he gave up, grabbed his rock climbing backpack, a few other things, and took off for the woods.

He knotted his rope to a strong branch at the top of a cliff and slid down to the bottom, thirty feet below. This cliff face was particularly challenging, and he had never made it up before. Since he was working alone, he had an extra safety rope.

Painstakingly, he worked with his toes and fingers to find holds in the rock, and began inching his way upwards. He fell only once, near the bottom, and the ropes caught him. He swore more than he needed to, and started again.

*...You're not worth much, boy. Wouldn't get more than five dollars in Times Square in the old days...*

The fragment of past conversation flew out at him as a pebble he had dislodged hit him in the face. He frowned and tried to clamp his memory down by taking a more difficult way. But he found he only got more frustrated.

When he got halfway up, he realized he was at an impasse—the part where the rock jutted out above his head. He couldn't get any further without risking another fall. Relentlessly, he tried to work around it, ignoring the obvious, and soon found himself swinging in midair at the end of his ropes. He turned to catch himself with his hands before he smashed into the cliff face and steadied himself. No, this was not his day. It was getting dark, too. He gave up.

*No good, boy. Still no good.*

He couldn't go home yet. Packing up his gear, he trekked further into the forest, pressing on through the dark woods. At last, weary and getting chilly in the autumn night, he stopped and turned back home. He had to live with it, somehow. He had to go on.

## Hers

Rose tried on three different outfits without making up her mind, and finally resorted to raiding Kateri's closet before she found the perfect sweater. Pulling it on, she gathered up her books and looked around at her tiny dorm room before leaving. It was a mess, a real mess. She groaned. Kateri was a bit of a neat freak, and Rose knew she would have to clean it up as soon as she could. A happy roommate meant a happy living situation.

*Besides, I like a neat room, too,* she thought, closing the door on the shambles behind her and going down the hall.

As she rounded the corner of the hallway, she almost ran into Donna. "Oh, I'm sorry," she stuttered, seeing who it was.

Donna was tall, with straight blond hair, a narrow face with a perfect Grecian nose. But there was something about her eyes that made her face unpleasant. Now she fixed her cold blue eyes on Rose with a strange expression,

and kept her eyes on her as she stepped disdainfully away and swept down the hall. Rose shuddered as she hurried down the hall.

It had been like this ever since play practice had started. It was common knowledge among the cast that Donna, a seasoned actress who was playing the part of Goneril, had wanted the role of Cordelia badly and resented losing the part to a greenhorn like Rose. Rose had a feeling Donna was playing some kind of payback game, and disliked it intensely.

*She freaks me out, and she probably knows it,* Rose thought to herself. Donna had given her that stare during play practice. On stage, it worked, but off stage, Rose wasn't sure how much was acting and how much was real life.

A damper on her spirits, she hurried out into the lounge and out the door to class.

She tried hard to enjoy the day, with its blue skies and brisk wind. So different here than in New York. There were no buildings and comparatively little smog. Green trees instead of gray concrete. She enjoyed that.

She was passing the smallest male dormitory, a long low building running along three sides of a square courtyard, with the name *Sacra Cor*, Latin transliteration for "Sacred Heart," on the sign in front. That was where Paul, Alex, and Leroy lived, she had found out. It was the smallest of the men's dorms—the other two dorms, "Lumen Christi" and "Mater Dei," were the size of the women's dorms.

As she passed the courtyard, she heard a shout, "Sacra Cor!" in a huge, magnified tone. Paul charged through a doorway, a silver sword flashing in his hand. He bolted up a nearby slope and stood with his back to her, facing the door he had exited, brandishing the weapon. Rose had never seen such a sword, which was at least three feet long and looked heavy. It well matched Paul's physique, and despite herself, she took a second look.

Then she saw Leroy rush out of the dorm, flourishing another sword. They faced each other, weapons out, and for a moment, Rose wondered if they were going to fight. But then Paul jabbed his sword into the ground, turned a flip—she had learned by now that it was as easy for him to do as breathing—and stood up in an attack stance. Leroy thrust his weapon into the grass as well and advanced. Then abruptly both guys threw themselves at each other in a full-fledged wrestling match, landing on the ground. Rose couldn't help laughing, and waited to see the outcome.

Alex emerged from his room, a curved wooden sword in his hand, ambled over to her, stuck the point of the sword in the ground in front of him, and watched the two meditatively. As usual, he was in black—this time, wearing a t-shirt that proclaimed "Abortion is Mean."

“Not bad,” he reflected. “Another semester of training, maybe, and Leroy’ll be ready.”

“For what?” she pursued.

“Knighthood. Paul’s ready. You can tell. His training has paid off.”

“Do you train them?” she asked solemnly.

“Yes,” he answered in the same tone. “Martial arts, swordplay, wrestling—all necessary skills for any man in today’s world.”

“Really,” she said.

“And for women too, though most of them around here aren’t as interested.” He pulled the sword from the grass and handed it to her. “Try this.”

She took it curiously, and looked at it. It was a curved sword, light and strong. “What’s this?”

“A Japanese boken. I use it for training. Those guys have Western swords. Sometimes the Japanese sword is easier for women. Let me show you.”

He took the sword back and swept it around in a graceful movement, ending with a lunge. “Try it.”

She set down her books, and, taking the sword, tried to imitate his movements, which were more difficult than she had expected. Alex gave her a few pointers, and she found herself intrigued. “I like this,” she said.

“Do you? Not scared off? Good, well, I’ll have to show you more sometime.” He glanced over at the wrestling match, which was drawing to a close with Leroy sitting on Paul. “Oh, very good, Leroy. Great technique.”

“I let him win!” bellowed Paul, and Leroy punched him again.

“I’ve got to run to class,” Rose said regretfully. “See you around.”

“Ciao,” Alex said, waving goodbye. He grabbed his sword and strode over to the other two.

*What an unusual group*, Rose said to herself. But she liked them, despite their black trench coats and dangerous air. She was beginning to find out that behind that aura of bad behavior was a genuine goodness. She had also run into students at Mercy who appeared clean-cut on the outside, but who were bending rules whenever they thought no one was looking.

As she passed the chapel, she saw two blue-gowned figures. One nun in full habit was pushing another in a wheelchair. A third nun, with the same light blue veil and dark blue robe, emerged from its depths. Rose started with excitement when she recognized the familiar face. “Sister Maria!” she cried. “I didn’t know you went to Mass here!”

Her elderly cousin accepted Rose’s enthusiastic hug and patted her hand, laughing. “Sometimes we do go to noon Mass, when Father can’t make it to our convent. We thought we might run into you. The Holy Spirit was nudging.”

“How are you, godmother?” Rose asked affectionately.

“I’m doing very well, and so are Sister Carmen and Therese.” Sister Maria’s aging face creased into a smile and her unusually young blue eyes sparkled. “And how are you, godchild?”

“I’m doing quite well,” Rose said, warmth coming into her face as she looked at the two other nuns, who smiled at her. Sister Carmen was very old, and Sister Therese was clearly the youngest. Rose had been receiving Mass Cards from Sister Maria and her fellow nuns all her life, but rarely saw them. “It’s so good to run into you like this, so casually. It’s almost luxury.”

“A true gift,” Sister Carmen said in a gravelly voice.

“And is there anything that you would like us to pray for?” Sister Maria said solemnly.

“You talk as though it’s your job,” Rose laughed.

“So it is,” Sister Maria nodded. “As contemplative nuns, you could say it is our job, though we’ve had to become more active lately, as there are only three left in our convent! We do pray for you every day.”

“Really? Well, that explains a lot!” Rose exclaimed. “Perhaps that’s why my life has turned out so well, with you three watching my back.”

Sister Maria looked thoughtful. “Well, you are our godchild. We’ll never cease to do that,” she said. “I know you’re on your way to class, so I won’t keep you. But we should like to have you come and visit us. Perhaps for dinner.”

“Yes, I’d love that!” Rose said with genuine feeling. “I’ll see you later then!”

She gathered up her books and hurried up to class, feeling as though she had been given extraordinary gifts.

*How many people can boast of having three godmothers? Well, technically only Sister Maria is my godmother, but the other two consider me their adopted godchild. She pictured them as three powerful entities, robed and crowned, lifting up hands to heaven to shield and protect her.*

*And in reality, that’s what they are, Rose told herself, glancing behind her at the three frail figures making their way down the hill to the parking lot. They’re not simply ordinary. No one really is.*

## HIS

Fish was sitting in his class with Dr. Anshlung, “Keats and the Romantic Movement.” He had grown to be more and more grateful for his professor and employer, who seemed to value literature for what it was. The other professors in the department seemed more intent on tearing literary works down than leading others to appreciate them. Now she was giving them their assignment for the

midterm exam, which would be a paper. “You need to pick a long poem by Keats and give a complete analysis of it according to the methods we have studied,” she said, looking over the class.

Fish paged through his course book, *The Complete Poetry and Writings of John Keats*. He had always been taken with the melancholy poem, “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” but of course, that was too short and simple. However, according to the footnotes in his text, the poem was mentioned by name in another Keats poem, “The Eve of St. Agnes,” which was considerably longer. He had read it a long time ago—in jail, actually. It hung hauntingly in his memory, but not, fortunately, among his more painful remembrances. Actually, considering most of his time in juvenile detention, it had been rather positive.

After class he ran down to the library and found several books with commentaries on the poem. Signing them out before anyone else in the class could do so, he thrust them in his backpack and hurried home. He would look over them this weekend.

*Keeping busy...keeping busy...*

## Hers

“Kateri, can I borrow your car tomorrow?” Rose asked, as she got ready to leave for play practice on Friday evening.

“What for?” Her roommate was sitting on the ground, index cards and loose-leaf paper spread out around her, her wild black hair all in disarray around her almond-shaped eyes, which were fixed on her work. She was preparing for a test, in one of her sporadic periods of intense devotion to schoolwork.

“I need to go looking for a barn in the country that belongs to my family,” Rose explained.

Kateri shook her head. “Sorry, got a protest tomorrow.”

That was her roommate—study, study, then protest, protest. Rose mused as she looked at her friend. Kateri went down to the hospital every Saturday morning to lead prayers for the children who were being aborted there. Her commitment to pro-life activism was a consuming passion that dictated her actions like clockwork.

“Sorry, otherwise I wouldn’t mind,” Kateri said.

“That’s all right,” Rose mused. “Who else around here is friendly enough to lend out a car?”

“Why don’t you ask one of those Cor guys? You certainly hang out with them enough.”

"You know, the first few times I heard you call them that, I thought you meant students enrolled in the Marine Corps or something." Rose said, flipping a brush through her ponytail. "But the name does fit. They're so into weapons and war."

Kateri rolled her eyes. "Thoughtless violence," she said. "Overgrown boys."

"Well, after all, they *are* boys," Rose pointed out. "Don't you like them?"

Kateri looked up at her roommate, her black eyes dismissive. "They're pretty odd," she said. "If you like that sort of thing. Which I can see you do. I don't have patience for those kinds of games."

Rose knew that Kateri, who was fairly offbeat herself, didn't seem to care much for overly colorful people. "You seem to be more interested in Mater Dei guys," Rose said, unable to resist teasing her.

"That's true," Kateri inclined her head.

Each of the three men's dorms had a particular general character. The men of Lumen Christi tended to be athletes and business majors, and the men of Mater Dei were mostly theology or philosophy majors—including several quiet, earnest young men who seemed to admire Kateri for her serious activism, and she had "dated" a few of them (in the odd Mercy College dictionary, this could mean simply eating meals and studying together) over the course of the semester. Rose had met one or two of them and had found them pleasant, but lacking the strong personality of her roommate.

The Sacra Cor dormitory was where the riffraff collected, or so the saying went—the male students who didn't fit into any particular mold. It was hard to predict just where they would stand on any one issue or practice. Among the Cor guys, the only two Rose knew of who supported Kateri's protests were Paul and another student, James Kelly. The rest would rather argue endlessly about the nuances of civil disobedience, or play video games.

"All right," Rose said, "Maybe I'll ask one of the Cor guys."

"Paul Fester seems friendly enough," Kateri said carelessly, and Rose couldn't help feeling a bit warm as she left the room.

On the way up to the theatre, she actually ran into Paul coming out of the library. They chatted for a few minutes, and she summoned up her courage. "Hey, Paul, I need a ride tomorrow."

"Where to?"

"There's an old barn in the country my family owns. My dad kept his old files there, and I need some of them for my bioethics paper. So I need a way to get out there."

"Oh, no problem—I could drive you," Paul said. "I have a car. And it sounds like fun. When do you want to go?"

"Just sometime tomorrow," Rose said, feeling relieved. "After breakfast."

“Sure thing. I’ll meet you at the caf and we can go,” Paul said, a grin creasing his face. He always looked like a little kid when he smiled.

“Thanks,” Rose said, “See you then!” She hurried on up to the theatre, relieved. And it would be fun to go with Paul. He seemed like the sort of person who would enjoy an outing of that sort.

At play practice, they were rehearsing the first scenes with the three princesses, Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan. It wasn’t a long scene, but it was still an important one. When Rose got there, she picked up her script and began to get into character. Some people had not yet arrived.

Finally, just as Dr. Morris started the rehearsal, the back door of the theater slammed open, and Donna and Tara, who were playing the wicked sisters, walked in. They glanced around, rather superciliously, at everyone staring in their direction, but didn’t apologize.

The director, Dr. Morris, was annoyed. “Three sisters, stage left, and wait for your cue,” he said.

“How are you?” Rose asked Donna, as the blond girl sat down next to her on a wooden bench backstage.

Donna said nothing in reply, but merely looked at her frostily, then turned away. She said something to Tara instead.

Rose dropped her eyes and turned back to her script. She was getting used to this sort of treatment from Donna, almost as though Donna were perpetually rehearsing her part as the evil older sister, even offstage. It certainly made it easier to act with Donna onstage, but offstage it was distinctly uncomfortable, as though the lines between illusion and reality were being deliberately blurred.

When rehearsal was over, she stayed behind to talk to Dr. Morris about becoming a theatrical assistant, which was the student work job she had applied for. By the time she left the theatre, all the other students had left.

Shrugging her shoulders, she walked out of the building and started down the hill to the dorm, whistling to herself.

It was much nicer walking here at night than in the City, and she felt safer. But as she rounded the curve of the building, an eerie sensation came over her as she passed through an arch of dark bushes. It was almost as though she could feel something—or someone—watching her.

Setting her jaw, she kept walking, her head up, outwardly careless, but inside, ready to break into a run if she needed to. She passed the clump of shrubbery and restrained herself from looking over her shoulder.

But she could feel it: *someone is there. I’m not looking back*, she told herself.

There was a sound behind her—of footsteps? A faint pattering sound.

Now she was passing down a row of trees. The sound continued. Against her will, her heart began to beat harder.

*All right, go ahead and look,* she told herself.

But when she did, she saw no one.

*I'm being silly,* she thought, but she turned quickly into the campus chapel to recollect herself.

It was deserted, but still she felt safer inside the church. She padded up the carpeted aisle to the Mary altar and knelt to pray. Being far from home had intensified her attachment to the Blessed Mother, and she prayed a loose string of Hail Marys and blessed herself with a deep breath. Time to walk the rest of the way home.

She exited the chapel fearlessly and hurried down the steps to the drive that led back up to the women's dorms.

But no sooner had she reached the road than she felt the odd sensation coming over her again and heard the barest sounds of something behind her. Whatever it was that had lost sight of her in the chapel was coming after her again.

She was closer to the dorm, so now she broke into a run, hugging herself, pretending that the autumn cold was driving her indoors. Pounding the cement she rushed down the drive, hit the doors running and sped inside.

Safe, she slowed to a jog, but her heart was still racing. Hurrying down the hallway to her room, she hoped against hope that Kateri would be back from the library early tonight. But the dorm room was empty.

Shivering, she clicked on her homey bedside lamp and turned off the overheads so that the room looked more inviting. She sat down in the corner, in the chair Fish had brought her, and dropped her books.

*What happened out there?*

She tried to relax and put it out of her mind, but the attempt was useless, and she gave up. Shamelessly she pulled out her phone card and dialed Fish's number.