

Rose is Wearing Red

A Short Story

by

Kellie A. Goodall

P.O. Box 751

Quitman, AR 72131

Phone 501-270-1262

Blue, so very blue. That's how she felt. Why if she could look in a mirror, she imagined she would certainly see herself matching the old blue wallpaper in the bedroom where she laid. But night had sat down around their house quickly that fall evening and the dark blinded her. It was just as well. She need not see the tears that burned her cheeks or the red that filled her eyes.

When the new morning came Rose awoke with hope...again. Tears gone and crinoline on, she swatted at the fullness of the skirt around her. She fluffed the soft brown locks of hair on her head as she followed the smell of toast warming in the kitchen. Eating breakfast with her mother and father had been something like sitting in a library for endless mornings now. They were almost silent as they tended their plates before them on the table. Father turned a page of the newspaper. Rose didn't believe he actually read a single word of it. Trying to make Rose and her mother think that he wasn't concerned was a full time self-inflicted responsibility. Gran was dying. They all knew it.

Gran was so beautiful. Rose didn't know how it could be for a woman of such age, but she was really beautiful. Gran lay in her bed like a porcelain figurine lays pressed into its silk lined box. Her form, still and white. Her eyes grey and cool like the morning's fog. As she lay there, a tiny pink flower made of ribbon on the yoke of Gran's gown rocked back and forth on her chest. Threads had given way over the years. The flower nodded as Gran carefully and deliberately took each of her breaths. Rose entered the room just after breakfast. Today was no different than the previous ones had been for a very long time. Rose felt the pressing weight of time pushing away hope, bringing the inevitable closer. The woman who laid here as helpless and frail as a fawn once met every day with movement and force and happiness. She loved her Rose. Teaching her and singing with her. Planting gardens and sewing aprons with her. Gran had always been there. Rose had always depended on that.

"Gran? How ya' doin'?" Rose knew that an answer from her grandmother

would be an arduous task. Gran summoned her strength, drawing air into her chest. The ribbon flower nodded. "Good." The word came out clad in a loud whisper. It felt to Rose that every time her grandmother uttered a word she expelled a little of the faint life she had left. Gran smiled and slowly turned her head towards Rose. Her eyes met Rose's just as a warm and golden ray of sunlight entered the room between the heavy curtains. Having sat down beside her grandmother's bed in a small wooden chair, Rose scooted closer. The wooden chair legs squawked against the wooden floor like a turkey calling out. Rose giggled. Gran's eyes blinked against her small white cheeks that formed above her smile. The giggle Rose emitted had given just a little life back. It was in this way, from moment to moment, that Gran's life was balancing between death and a daily struggle at best.

Dr. Robbins had taken to stopping by the house every few days to check on Gran. Trips into town to his office had gone by the wayside like Gran's strength. Months ago, the doctor had sent her off to spend time in a cage they called an "iron lung". Horrible, but it had prolonged her life. She had stayed tucked inside that heavy cage until they were told that it wouldn't help her any further. Rose had travelled to the hospital as often as her parents would take her. She remembered how Gran looked in the hospital...like a tiny doll in the fist of a monster. Rose would cry when she left the hospital. She would always cry.

"Rose!", her father called. Rose came back to the present. "We're leaving now." Her parents seemed to keep themselves occupied with matters outside of the house, a rather passive way to avoid dealing with Gran's path to departure. Rose pulled aside the heavy curtain to see them walk to the 1953 Pontiac Chieftain. Baby blue and brand spankin' new. Beautiful. The heavy doors closed with a loud certainty. The engine started. Such a grand rumble. Rose's father had been teaching her to drive in this massive machine. Mother fussed, but allowed it. The Pontiac drifted away down the dirt road, rusty leaves jumped and rolled behind it as it went. Rose

pulled back the curtains further. Sunlight flooded in. Gran winced in the brightness but pushed her chin up just slightly as if to bask in its warmth. Mother felt the sunlight was harmful to someone so feeble. Gran preferred the light, the positive and comforting light from the heavens.

"Remember?" Gran said as she forced her chest down to speak.

"What Gran? Remember what?"

"When we climbed."

"Sugarloaf? When we climbed Sugarloaf Mountain?"

Gran's eyes confirmed Rose's answer.

"Oh yes! Those were the best of times!"

From just the few words she had spoken, Gran drifted into an exhausted sleep. The sun shone on her almost translucent skin. Rose began to dream as she stared at her grandmother...dream of the many times they had climbed that mountain together. As they walked, Gran would share stories of her childhood in Sugar Loaf, Arkansas. Stories of horses and young boyfriends and picnics and holidays. Stories about the happiest things in the world. Gran would tell her about the Seven Springs, waters that were healing in nature and beguiling to the many visitors that came for a drink of hope. From the top of Sugarloaf they would look below at the town, now called Heber Springs. Time had changed more than just the name of the town. Rose would never tire of listening to Gran talk. Really, really the best of times. Each time they reached the top of the mountain, they would wrap their arms around each other and embrace. Gran would always whisper in her ear, "Roses are red, violets are blue, we're on top of the world and I love you." It sounded like a melody to Rose. She never tired of hearing it. She never failed to smile as Gran whispered the verse to her.

A deep rumbling entered Rose's day dream. It was Mother and Father rolling back in the Chieftain. Rose quickly turned to pull the curtains together again. Gran laid quiet, still sleeping. Rose slumped in her chair, elbows on knees, chin in hands. As she watched over her grandmother, she wasn't aware of her own eyelids slowly closing. Together in the darkened

room they dreamt and exchanged breaths.

Morning came again. Rose awoke and dressed. Today she chose a red dress. It had always been Gran's favorite. She would wear her red dress for Gran. Rose sat at the table in the library that smelled like warm toast. She couldn't eat even though Mother had prepared a fine breakfast. Rose felt particularly eager to see her grandmother. Rose saw fresh jugs of the healing spring water lined up on the counter. A faint smell of sulphur lingered in the air. She glanced at the back of the upright newspaper, then at her mother who stared at a cup she held with purple posies in a ring around it. She didn't imagine that her mother nor her father even realized she was sitting at the table with them. Rose stood up and left the table.

Entering Gran's room something felt different. Rose's eyebrows pinched together as she neared the bed. Her eyes were drawn to a bottle of spring water that now lay on the floor underneath the bed's edge. Its stopper gone, the water had leveled itself by pouring out onto the floor. Rose imagined that Gran would say the bottle was half full, not half empty. Gran coughed, Rose leaned in.

"Gran?"

"Rose.", came the reply, but just barely. "I'm leaving."

"Oh Gran, no." The words came out of Rose's mouth as slowly as the realization of what her grandmother was saying took meaning.

"I'll get Father." Rose suggested.

"No dear."

Gran reached towards her bedside table. A piece of paper that was crumpled in her frail fingers around a small pencil fell onto a doilie that had been created by those same fingers long ago.

"Not here." Gran looked into Rose's teary eyes. "The mountain." Each word was emitted with purpose and as much clarity as she could afford.

Rose heard the door in the kitchen close and a loud clap as the screen door was left to find its place against the old painted, wooden threshold. Rose

turned and stepped away from her grandmother. Entering the kitchen, Rose looked out the back door. Mother and Father walked towards the barn. Hens scattered around their feet. Rose knew that tending the hen house took just a little while, but maybe long enough.

She turned back towards Gran's room with a solemn focus. She entered Gran's room to find her sitting upright. "Gran!" Rose lunged towards her and placed her hands gently on Gran's shoulders.

Gran leaned forward, knowing that if Rose didn't catch her she would drop to the floor, but trusted the decision. Gran's deliberate leaning and Rose's actions to prevent her from falling stood Gran right up on her feet. Rose wrapped her arms around Gran tightly as her grandmother's stance began to fail. Rose leaned over and slid her left arm down the back of Gran's warm velvety gown...and lifted. Rose was cradling Gran in her arms. She likened it to having caught a small bird, weightless and precious. Gran fixed her trusting eyes on Rose's for a moment, then tucked her face into Rose's shoulder. Rose pointed Gran's feet towards the bedroom door. White cotton socks hung loosely around her Gran's tiny ankles. Rose walked through the house carefully. The wooden floor beneath Rose's feet always creaked just a little when she passed over it, but this morning, even with a passenger in her arms, there were no creaks. The old floor, witness to all of the lives that had lived there was oddly silent.

Rose backed against the front door of the house and pushed it aside. As they arrived on the front porch the cool morning air rushed around them, the damp smell of autumn leaves greeted them. On towards the Chieftain they went. Out of the shade of the trees, the sun lay down on them like a warm blanket. Gran gathered her strength as Rose sat her socked feet on the ground and opened the blue door.

Once Gran was settled in the front seat, Rose took her position behind the steering wheel. Just as Rose put her hands on the steering wheel, she heard faintly, the back door of the kitchen clap closed. She started the machine

like Father had taught her...and they were off.

Within minutes, they had arrived at Sugarloaf Mountain. It was comforting to be there. Gran shifted in her seat. The mighty blue Chieftain rolled to a stop at the base of the mountain. Beneath the blue sky were tall trees that surrounded and watched over them. Golden leaves gently showered down silently around the car. Rose scooted close to Gran and held her in her arms. Gran's breathing began to slow, her body relaxed.

Back at the house, confusion had taken hold. Mother and Father stood in the spot where the Chieftain had sat. The sheriff stood in front of them. Hands were moving and pointing, father held a piece of paper. He could hardly speak. The sheriff touched Father's arm. "Just tell me what you know." he instructed.

Father said "Rose is wearing red, the Chieftain is blue, the note from my mother says "I love you."