

Overgrown (When Rose Flew Away)

When Rose was born, she didn't cry. Her parents expected a pink and wrinkled baby, but they were given a child with skin the color of milk and smooth as riverstone. Her hair was rose-gold and long, much too long for a baby. She was the ugliest thing her parents had ever seen. The father was adamant she would not be allowed in the house, so they set up a nursery in the backyard shed and immediately cut all her hair off. The father said if they were lucky, someone would come and take her, and they could try again.

The mother pitied Rose, and, even though the father begged her not to, visited her in the shed every night. She would wash Rose's face and coo What a pretty girl. when all the dirt was gone, then sit by her side and read a chapter of *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. She told Rose about a little baby Peter, only seven days old, who up and flew away from home. All babies are part bird, she told Rose, and you only have to believe to regain your flying abilities. The night Peter Pan decided to leave Kensington Gardens to return home, Rose's mother left without giving her a kiss. She never came back.

All at once, Rose was alone in the dark shed without any fresh air, and the dirt built up in her nose. She wailed all day and night for someone to come clean her and let her know how the story ended, and if Peter ever found his mother. During her time alone, she tried to imagine Queen Mab was with her. She wanted to fly away to Kensington Gardens. All babies are part bird. Rose closed her eyes tight until her tiny lungs shook, and she climbed out of her cradle.

From that day on, she followed the moon, because she didn't know where else to go. It eventually led her down a long winding road, and a big empty house. For the next fifteen years, Rose lived there alone. The moon showed her an orchard down the road where she could take all the fruit she needed. Rose wanted for nothing. Sometimes, she spent entire hours brushing her hair.

Having left when she was only a newborn, she never learned to talk, and had only learned to communicate by way of the flowerbeds in the garden out back. She liked it better this way, away from harsh voices and wrinkled women who leave you and dripping snot with all the germs, and she couldn't even see the sky from the shed they had left her in—too many buildings and too much smoke. The whole debacle with her parents had taught her that she didn't like people very much. In fact, Rose only liked a few things—the moon, her garden plants, books with definitive endings, and her hair.

The only person Rose ever saw after following the moon out of her cradle was an old woman who lived down the road. Sometimes, they would meet on the street when Rose was carrying baskets of fruit home, and the woman would ask if she needed any help. Rose did not know how to vocalize a reply, but even if she did, she would not want to talk to that woman. Her knuckles were wrinkled like woven baskets. She looked like a tree, maybe, or a forest. Maybe not quite so pretty. Rose scurried away when that woman appeared, always dropping her fruit and squishing it beneath her feet. That didn't

stop the woman, though. Every time they met on the road, she spoke to Rose, and most days, Rose spent daylight in bed, too afraid to be bothered by the gnarled old thing.

Sometimes Rose wished she didn't like her plants so much. If it weren't for her sunflowers and staghorn ferns, she would probably never get out of bed. She would like to spend the rest of her life lying there and watching her hair grow. If she lay perfectly still, it would never get tangled, and if she locked the door there'd probably be no germs either. But, every so often, on cool mornings when the sun was nowhere to be found, Rose would have to brave the germs and the weight of the atmosphere and that ugly old woman to tend to her garden. This was one of those mornings.

She hadn't slept the night before; she had been up for days combing through her hair until it was light and airy. Because her bedroom had no windows, she wasn't even aware that day had started when she decided to visit the plants. She blinked her reflection goodbye before pulling on a heavy coat over her nightgown. It was the same gown, lilac and embroidered, that her parents had dressed her in the day she was born. It had stretched her whole life.

It took seven deep breaths behind the back door before Rose was ready to go outside. It always did. She was slow placing her bare feet on the dirt, but its doughy cushion comforted her, and she let relax her shoulders. The wind was like silk against her skin. She smiled.

Rose's mind waxed and waned as she fell into her work. She was not present in her body; rather, she was below the surface, following each root, and she was the sky. Her breath felt light and everything was feathers, but it was all shattered by a voice across the fence.

That twisted old woman was there, and her voice was like gravel on skin. She said that Rose should be wearing shoes. The ground was dirty. Rose thought that the red pigment on that woman's lips was far dirtier than the sweet earth between her toes, but she said nothing, as she always did. She continued trimming her plants.

But the woman was climbing over the fence and the stitches in her pants were like to burst. She was there with a watering can and her hair tugged into a yarnball bun. Rose's lips parted, but there was no sound. She ran her fingers through her hair, all the way down to her feet. It hadn't been cut since she climbed out of her cradle. That woman introduced herself as Ella, and said the garden was much too big for Rose to tend to all by herself.

The wind was picking up, then, and Rose's lungs were rising. It was all very cramped inside her chest, and she couldn't move. She only cried soft protest, but Ella must not have heard because she crouched and began watering a flowerbed, pressing too hard into the dirt, no respect for order—and, no, no it wasn't time for watering yet, and she couldn't start with the tulips. Rose stood still with her heart hammering for escape, and she was sick.

Rose was being dragged out of the ground and the wind shook the leaves of her plants. She thought she could hear them weeping, so she forced herself to keep working. But she was too aware, and she could feel the ants crawling beneath her knees. Ella was working too quickly, humming a tune, and the garden was shrinking. The wind had begun to tangle Rose's hair, and this only made her heart beat faster. She began running her fingers rapidly through her tangles. She thought maybe her skin was turning green.

Rose couldn't do it anymore. She slowly stood; the wind was like to knock her down. Ella asked if she needed anything to drink. Rose tugged harder at her scalp. She tried to make it to the back door, to hide forever beneath her quilt with only her reflection and her brush, but the wind was pushing her backwards. She didn't realize it, but she was screaming. Ella rushed to her side and reached for her hand. Rose clawed it away and forced herself through the back door.

Her vision was blurred, and she knocked frames off the walls as she tried to find her bedroom. It was too early, but she pleaded for the moon. Come back and save me. I want away from here. Her head was heavy upon her shoulders, and she worried she could no longer fly. She collapsed at the foot of a bookcase and clawed at her own skin. Her nose was filled. She could not breathe. She was so tired.

When she opened her eyes, she was in bed. Ella was sitting at her side. She asked if Rose wanted anything to eat. Rose closed her eyes tight until her tiny lungs shook. She pointed to a book lying on her bedside table and whimpered softly. Please. Ella picked up the book and began reading to Rose. She read for hours until the air was soft. Rose picked up her brush and began brushing through Ella's hair, thick and coarse, and their strands intertwined between the bristles until she could no longer tell them apart.