

Rose

Our father owned various houses. The one which interested him least was on what he considered a piece of valueless land in West Sussex. Its location pleased our mother because of its healthy surround and relative nearness to a railway station that was on a fast line to London.

The main function of this house was to accommodate children; secretly my siblings and I considered it to be our property. A sandy lane, almost obscured by phalanxes of gorse and several stubby fir trees, branched from a very minor country road and meandered past our house. A short, untended drive stopped abruptly in front of a large clapboard garage. From there a brick path led between vaguely defined, self-perpetuating flower beds to wind around to first the front and then the back door of a rather irrational and impromptu building. Everything behind it was more interesting than anything in front. From our back door, which was divided across as if we inhabited a loose box, a grassy plateau spread to a downward slope that led to a grove of silver birches and a shallow swamp of oily iridescent water studded with large tussocks of grass. One could sear fine cuts across the palm of one's hand by clutching at those blades of grass.

Beyond the swamp, the ground rose a little to meet the bank of a stream, which in places was overhung with water willows. Under the flowing water was ocher-colored sand strewn with round, rusty pebbles; long hairlike hanks of weed swung in the current. A heavy plank served us as a drawbridge, and we used a convenient horizontal limb of one of the willows as a balustrade. Our constant crossing and recrossing had worn stepped

paths up and down both banks of the stream. On the other side was a big bracken, heathery meadow.

DURING THE LONG summer holiday of 1935, toward the end of which I was to turn six years old, I found a friend. She lived at the farthest end of that meadow. We had several times glimpsed each other through the thick hawthorn and hazel hedges that bounded her garden. I envied her the little house she lived in—it was a tiny wooden house only one story high with a corrugated tin roof and a white veranda.

When I walked to the top of the meadow and stood by her hedge, she seemed to divine my presence and would soon appear, large and silent, always buttoned into a clean back-and-front pinafore, which I thought very chic. She wore a bow in her hair and usually carried a doll in her arms. Her smile melted my heart, and though I could not understand the reason for this, it sometimes brought tears to my eyes. Hoping to please her, I would carry in my pocket presents for her doll. My particular treasure at that time was a tin tea set with the face of Mickey or Minnie Mouse printed on every piece. Those tiny plates were more vivid to me than any of the modern art that ornamented our house.

On one visit, I might poke a cup through the hedge, on the next, a saucer or a plate. Each time, I would wave the paw of my toy monkey, and I was often rewarded with a tentative wave back from the arm of her doll. In return for pieces of my tea set, she offered me flower heads through the hedge, each one on a leaf—irises, delphinium petals, oxeye daisies, most often rosebuds.

I came to feel I would do anything to conjure that smile onto her face. We began to make quite a sizable gap in the hedge; I called it a window. I used to ask her to come close, then I would twirl about holding out my skirt and march up and down playing pretend musical instruments, sometimes ending these performances by leading imaginary circus animals up to the hedge

and asking them to bow to the grand lady at the window. I soon learned not to have neighing horses or roaring lions, for she was timid; her head would bob down from the window if I made too sudden a noise.

As our friendship progressed, I became aware that she did not understand all I said, and though she loved me to recite poems, she could not follow the words very well. Yet she was familiar with nursery rhymes and would silently mouth the words with me.

Toward the end of August, I had my birthday. I went to tell her I was now six years old and to give her a spoonful of the birthday pudding. I served it to her on the last of the Mickey Mouse plates. As I did so, I realized that, when asked what my birthday wish was, I should have requested not a picnic on the Downs but her presence at the birthday tea. So I said goodbye to her and ran home through the bracken grown taller than myself in the short time I had known my new friend. I jumped the summer shallow stream, then hopped from one tussock of grass to the next and hurried between the birches up to the “loggia,” which is what my mother called the pillared and thatched shelter that abutted the end of our house.

My mother had been taking her siesta. Seeing that she was now awake I went and stood by her day bed and asked her if I could change my mind about the birthday wish. I explained I wanted to bring a new friend to the garden to play and have tea.

“What is the name of your friend?” I amazed myself when I realized I could not answer the question.

“How old is she?” I could not answer that question either. I had never considered whether she had a name or an age. “How did you meet her?”

“Through the hedge of her garden.”

“Is she well bred?” Unanswerable.

“Well, is she a lady?” Upon recalling how large she was, I nodded. Yes, she was a lady, though in my heart I knew there was something wrong with the description. I suppose my doubt

must have shown in the expression on my face, for my mother laughed and said it was too late to rearrange things.

“But if you are still acquainted by the time the Christmas holiday comes, you might like to invite your new friend then.”

It seemed as bad as being told “When you are grown up,” but I knew better than to protest.

From then on it seemed to me that our nanny had her eye on me and was keeping me occupied. We went to London for a few days, and when we came home, the school trunks were being packed. I did nothing but wander about the house and garden, trying to use my boredom to prevent my last days of freedom from passing too quickly.

TWELVE WEEKS LATER, in the carefree joy of the first morning of our winter holidays, I ran down to the stream and crossed the plank over the now fast-flowing winter water, then raced up the bare meadow. Reaching the hedge, I found I could see through it very easily. My rush to see my friend was checked by a long, cold wait. When at last she appeared, she was wearing a heavy brown overcoat, over which was wrapped her usual pinafore tied round her waist by a piece of garden twine.

She attempted to run toward me, stumbling and clumsy. Not only were we entirely revealed to each other, but our hands could touch through the winter hedge. My friend started to cry; a desperate, touching ugliness filled her face. That was the first time I heard her voice. It came in low bellows. At once I pushed through the bare branches and stood beside her. I gave her my handkerchief, and I patted the back of her doll, which she clasped against her cheek. Just when I felt I could no longer bear her unhappiness and might run away, she took the doll and the handkerchief from her face and gave me a wobbly version of her beautiful smile.

I was so contrite at having neglected her for so long that I was unable to smile in return. I took her woolly-gloved hand and attempted to pull her through to my side of the hedge. I dis-

covered she was very cumbersome and also shy. She seemed intimidated by the prickles and branches. I pushed her head down and pulled more fervently. Suddenly she came bundling through the crackling winter twigs. She stood up and made one of her contented grunting noises that I was to grow to like so much.

On that first occasion of our being together we walked round the perimeter of the meadow across patches of dead bracken into the winter quietness of an area of tall pine trees. There we stood still. I asked my friend the name of her doll. She apparently could not find the word she wanted, so I asked her her own name. She said clearly and loudly, “Rose.” I told her it was a beautiful name and asked if her house was named after her—“Rose Cottage.” I had often spelled out the painted sign on the white front gate.

She thumped her chest and laughed in a range of sonorous sounds that expressed real mirth. She didn’t ask me my name. It didn’t seem to matter that I had been longing to tell her that, during the school term, I had changed it from “Finella” to “Anne” so as to be more like other people, and now there were four Annes in our school. We counted the trees we stood under, singing the numbers loudly into the cold air. She took my hand. She was moving so slowly that I was worried that her legs were “bad.” When I asked, she shook her head, but she let me lead her back to her house.

I DID NOT pull her through the hedge a second time. Instead we went by way of the field gate; knowing it was against my mother’s rules, I walked with her the little way along the road to Rose Cottage. We examined the painted sign, chanting “Rose Cottage” together before I opened her front gate, which gave onto a path tightly packed with closely clipped lavender borders. Beyond the lavender lay wintry, dug-over flower beds and vegetable patches. Her father was our local nurseryman.

I called to him, “Good morning. Please may Rose come to visit me soon?”

He did not turn his head, but Rose's mother opened the front door and shouted, "First you must ask your Mum if it's all right." Then she came down the path and, after stroking Rose's stiff straight hair, led her indoors.

AS WE SAT down to tea that afternoon I took care to appear casual. I remarked to the nanny that it was likely I would have a visitor to play with me the next day. She too declared I must first get my mother's permission. Evening came and our mother summoned her three youngest children: my older sister Moyra, me, and my brother Alan. We went down to the drawing room to listen to *Br'er Rabbit*, a book our mother very much enjoyed reading aloud. Hoping she had forgotten the uncomfortable conversation on my birthday, and waiting until she began turning the pages of *Br'er Rabbit*, I told her I had invited a friend to come to play, saying it airily while standing behind her.

My sister, not taken in by the lightness of my voice, caught the significance of what I was telling and not telling, and went into our family's routine support of any sibling who wanted to deceive. Without curiosity or much sympathy, she set about distracting our mother from formulating any searching questions. She snatched a cushion from beneath my brother, who was already seated in his position as favorite against our mother's knee. He gave an appropriate squeal, and that was that. I knew if necessary I could count on both of them as future witnesses that I had mentioned the visit to my mother and she had not objected to it.

I felt I had a valid reason to disregard the rule about the road. I had an excuse for walking up to that enticing white gate, to open it, and go along the narrow path between the lavender bushes and flower beds. I had a right to mount the three steps to Rose's shadowy veranda and lift the beautiful door knocker, carved in the shape of a hand with painted pink fingernails.

I rapped on the door; Rose's mother opened it. She did not invite me in, and she was hesitant about allowing her daughter

to come out. “Are you quite sure your Mum says it is all right bringing our Rose to your house?” I said emphatically, “Yes, Rose can come this very morning.”

I noticed that Rose’s mother did not make her wear her pinafore over her coat, and had replaced the length of twine with a leather belt. She pinned a handkerchief to Rose’s lapel—it had “Thursday” embroidered on it and a tiny rose with one leaf. When we got to the road, we examined the handkerchief together. She was very proud of it. To make conversation, I asked if her doll was well.

This was a mistake. She clutched her chest where the doll should have been and almost turned to go home, but I grabbed her hand and together we marched the little way along the road to the field gate. From there I had intended us to continue down the slope of the meadow, then across the plank into our garden. I explained that we needed to go that way because I was not really allowed to be on the road without a grownup—I was still not quite sure Rose had that status, though she was a great deal taller than I and had a very solid shape.

By the time we arrived at the stream she was already fearful. She stared at the water, stroking my arm and whimpering. I thought such a big person should not mind walking across a plank, and I said so. She looked so stricken that I was immediately sorry for saying it. We started back up the hill. It was slow going. She remained dejected and would not let me pull or push her along. I tried to cheer her by telling her of the nice things we might do at my house. When we reached the road, I proposed—again putting aside my mother’s rule—that this time we walk down it to the lane, but Rose only wanted to go back to her own home. Sadly resigned, I accompanied her to her gate and pushed it open for her. I waited till she had gone up the path. Her mother came to the door and I heard her say, “You were quick then. Did you go to the little lady’s house?”

I was taken aback when Rose nodded her head, and ashamed that I had led her to nod a lie to her mother. I knew I had misman-

aged Rose's treat. I waited awhile, watching her father as he dug a trench along a taut line of string he had pegged across one of his planting beds. I then gathered my courage and went to knock on Rose's front door.

I was nearly in tears as I tried to explain to her mother that we had not actually reached our house, the stream being too difficult for Rose to cross. Her mother came and stood between us, patting both our shoulders, saying, "Never mind now, never mind, our Rosie, you can go again tomorrow if that is all right with the little miss. I will walk you down the road." I felt she was a very kind person and was greatly relieved that I had not spoiled everything "for keeps."

The next day Rose's mum took us as far as the beginning of the lane. From there I led the way to our drive and into the part of the garden where we played. I had taken the toy monkey with me, and now I placed him on the seat of the swing. I pushed gently. When he fell off I propped him against a tree trunk and sat on the seat myself. As I swung into the air and looked down on Rose, she stood so alone and perplexed that I slowed the swing and jumped off. I showed her where her doll should sit beside the monkey, then I gently cajoled her onto the seat of the swing and placed each of her hands round a rope.

I pushed her very softly. I tried to make the kind of grunting noises I thought she might like to hear. At first her back was rigid with fear, but soon I could tell she was enjoying the sensation of swinging. When she had sufficient momentum I let go and walked round to the front of the swing so as to look at Rose's face. She was talking a little to herself, words that sounded like, "Good girl, Rosie, there's a good girl now." Meanwhile she cautiously tipped her foot to the ground and started pushing herself. It took quite a while for Rose to tire of the swing so that I could take her indoors.

AT FIRST ROSE would not climb the stairs. She stared at them aghast, so I put her hand on the banister and picked up one large

shoe and shoved it on the stair. I heaved at the other leg, and eventually she gave in and lifted it to the next step. My sister joined us and pushed from behind. The going got easier at each step. We were all giggling by the time we reached the landing and Rose and I turned into the nursery.

She would not take her coat off, but she sat down at the table where my brother Alan was playing with his Meccano set. He took no notice of us as I searched about for toys that might interest her. I got out the toy farm. She could name all the animals. When we finished playing with them, she put the little seated sheepdog close to her face and barked at it. As I packed the farm away she was loath to part with it. "Give it to her," my brother said gruffly, without even raising his eyes.

Suddenly she wanted to go home. Thinking it might only mean she wished to be excused, I took her to the bathroom. She did not appear to need to sit on the lavatory, but the wash basin amazed her. The shiny taps entranced her. She lovingly sniffed the lavender soap, and washed and washed her hands, soaking the hand towels. We ran hot and cold water into the bath and the basin, putting in and pulling out the plugs. We played with the water, grunting and growling companionably in the steam. When we had become too hot and damp, it seemed time to descend the stairs.

There I was stymied. She absolutely refused to go down. My sister stood at the bottom and watched as I sat on the top stair and tried to show Rose how one might descend sitting on one step after another. She hid her head in her arms and leaned against the wall.

Hearing my sister's and my concerted pleading, my mother appeared in the hall below. "Whoever have you got up there . . . what is your name?" She advanced upon us.

Because Rose did not reply, I said, "She is Rose."

"Well, Rose," said my mother, "downstairs in our kitchen we have glasses of milk and slices of cake. You know what they are, don't you? Now, you be a big, good girl and show these children

how well you can walk down a flight of stairs.” She took the doll from Rose’s embrace and gave it to me to carry. She put one of Rose’s hands on the banister rail, tucked the other firmly under her arm, and led her down the stairs.

My mother was as good as her word. She took Rose into the kitchen and told the cook to bring out a glass of milk and a slice of cake. We all crowded round as Rose was made to sit down, given a table napkin, and told to mop up her tears. We watched as Rose sullenly and greedily pushed lumps of cake into her mouth and washed them down with noisy gulps of milk. Her manner of eating and drinking at the same time so impressed my brother that for days, despite threats of punishment, he annoyed our nanny and upset me by imitating it at every meal.

“Now, you two girls must take Rose back to her house,” my mother said to my sister and me, and without saying goodbye to Rose, she left the kitchen.

We walked up the road very slowly. I was utterly dispirited and even a little frightened. Holding her doll against her cheek, Rose went into her house without once turning to look at me.

My sister and I ran home; we were late for lunch. It happened to be one of the days when my mother was not lunching out. We took our seats as she ended one of her mocking laughs. She was telling the assembled family that it was droll that I should choose a poor idiot girl to fall in love with. I was thunderstruck; I blushed and kept my eyes on my plate. No one looked at me as I wept.

I escaped from the dining room as soon as I could. I was sitting in the nursery looking out of the window when my brother and sister came in. “Well, I like idiots anyway,” declared my brother.

“Grownups are the idiots,” my sister added.

“Now, now,” said the nanny, and I knew she was going to admonish us with one of her philosophical homilies. One had to pay careful attention on these occasions because she was apt to ask for a summary—“Now, what have I just told you?” Experi-

ence had taught us that, though the sense of these scoldings was often obscure, hidden among the plays on opposites were “useful hints” which she expected us to “take to heart.”

The homily went something like this: “Two Wrongs don’t make a Right! But you, young lady, are going to have to learn that in this family they sometimes do. Lots of things that by Rights should be Wrong are Right in this house. So what if your poor Rosie is not Right in her head, that does not mean it is Wrong to love her if you have a mind to. But it was not Right to invite her here. You ought to have guessed she was the Wrong sort for the likes of your ma. I don’t know that you will ever find a way to Right the Wrong you did your poor friend. You would do better to choose the Right kind of friends from now on.”

On this occasion she did not try, as she so often did, to even her number of rights and wrongs or rhetorically ask, “Well, am I Right?” or “Well, am I Wrong?” I think we had all lost count.