



Roses

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Gabriel was remembering his old white door in the souk, the door he had painted in Tangier one very hot Sunday, 40 years ago when drunk on Anis. He was remembering his old door and his old home while sitting in the garden of No. 9 Vale Road North Acton, his home now.

Ahead of him he could see more than 40 rose bushes all squashed together in clumps. Not enough space for them really but he liked that. He had planted them like that himself over the past 10 years. And now they looked like a painting, with each bush a clashing daub splodged tightly against its neighbour.

There were so many, he could barely see his beloved shed at the far boundary by the railway where the track was sparking expectantly for a Central line tube that was about to fly through. Gabriel loved being in his shed when the trains shot past and rattled his shack with the excitement of their central London destinations but he had been going into it less and less lately. These days he had taken to sitting in the garden just to look at his roses.

A bumblebee rumbled about his head. As he followed its trajectory towards his bushes Gabriel noted that he had never really liked flowers much before, not as a middle aged, nor young man. No,.... in those days when he was in his prime the slant eyed women he cleaned off the streets and brought in for a night in the cells told him he filled his officer's uniform well. He had liked that.

He had never been a Latin lover, nothing as corny as that. He was a serious man who even out of uniform liked to unsettle people with his stern policeman's gaze. Just to remind them how close they were to getting into trouble. The women liked that about him and he liked them, the Senoritas, the Senoras and the women of the street.

But no, flowers had never been part of his charm offensive with women.

He couldn't remember ever buying a bunch for Catalina, his wife not even in the early days when he had wooed her. Instead he had offered her clever bunches of words which she had fallen for. Tumbling to his silver stories and the shock of his deadpan jokes.

As he noticed the West London sky above him begin to cloud over with the promise of later rain he remembered how he had loved the North African sun and the sea and recalled how much he had missed them on his skin once his exile in this land of damp grizzle, grey skies and bland food had taken root in his bones.

That was when his drinking had got worse.

To be fair though the drink had been there before his move to England. There had always been the drink. He couldn't blame this country for that although it was true to say that once here, the rituals surrounding it had changed, and he had become more antisocial. Locking himself in his darkened room to watch High Chapparral, or Bonanza, on his crackly black and white tv that was stacked on a chest of drawers at the end of his bed in his stuffy bedroom. He would sleep the rest of the day with the telly on and he would drink.

His memory of that time was so hazed by the alcohol now that he couldn't be entirely sure of specific dates but he had a sense that it was then when his days and nights no longer had discernible edges that his family began to move out.

His son, Tony, with his wife Orelia and their two boys who lived in the top floor flat, went to a housing association place in Northolt near to the Renault garage where Tony worked. Tony had said that they needed more room. His daughter, Paqua had already vacated her room on the middle floor by then. She had decamped to somewhere in Gloucestershire. Gabriel couldn't remember exactly where as he'd never been to visit, had never been invited. Possibly Cheltenham or was it Bristol?

As his house emptied itself in his memory all over again, a plane flew by overhead bound for Heathrow, leaving a trail behind it as punctuation. Where was he? Oh yes,... his youngest daughter, Chiri, she left too. Taking her little girl Lucy with her. Chiri had ricocheted out of her middle floor room and premature marriage like a stuttering top. Crashing and banging all the way, determined to get the hell out at whatever cost. She followed Paqua first to the South West, then went chasing after some man as usual. Another arsehole. Gabriel thought, letting out an involuntary

chuckle. That tosser had been older but not much wiser than Ronnie, Chiri's first husband to whom she'd been a, pregnant, child bride.

Isabel his eldest child, had never lived in the house in Acton at all. She'd been their messenger, their scout. Flying off from Tangier at barely 18, like a dove, in search, not of dry land but new land, a land that they would all move to eventually. She had taken the money from that beauty contest she'd won and had bolted to no-one knew where at first. Until Catalina's sister Dolores, who lived in London sent them a telegram to say that Isabel had been seen in Bloomsbury singing French songs in the park at lunchtime. She was easy to spot, Dolores had said, his runaway daughter, a natural, dark-haired beauty who moved like a dancer and was a stark contrast to all the beehived, English tarts that Dolores said click-clacked their way about Russell Square with scandalous cigarettes dangling out of their pan-sticked mouths.

His wife, Catalina cried when she heard that Isabel was ok. But Gabriel had been in a filthy mood and had simply struck her to mark the occasion. He had often struck her with a, casualness that now made him wince to recall.

Sometimes he had hit her just because he was bored. But then again he had probably been drunk too. Would he feel the same way now he wondered? With the chemo he was on for his leukemia he couldn't drink at all anymore because it made him sick. The two didn't mix, chemo and brandy. And he was too weak for violence anyway. So maybe now it could be different, would be different between them? He would probably never find out as Catalina had gone.

Paqua had helped her of course. His second daughter had always been the one he knew would mount the vendetta against him if anyone was going to. It was her style. She was the joker in his pack but also the sly one, the schemer in the family. The one who knew how to wait for the right moment. And he had to hand it to her, she had really picked her moment this time. Gabriel let out another spurt of laughter at the nerve and audacity of his daughter's manoeuvre.

It was the second time he'd gone into hospital for a transfusion. He'd got so weak with the cancer that was folding him into itself and the chemo that was poisoning his system that he couldn't function anymore and was in terrible pain. A pain that had made him shrink to nearly half his size. While he had been in hospital receiving respite care, Paqua came to visit and with a briskness that was her trademark,

commandeered her mother saying that Catalina needed a holiday from being his nursemaid. The doctors were looking after him. He'd be alright. That was four months ago. And his wife still hadn't come back.

Not long after that he'd started sitting in the garden to watch his roses.

He liked to see how each day they changed a little. How buds opened. How blooms burst, how some, stained at the edges of their petals by the pelting rain began to fall apart like women dropping their skirts. Looking at them sometimes reminded him of a time without pain. A time when he had had the strength to plant them, to turn the earth, to dig the holes for the root balls of the bushes he then set into the wet, wormy ground. A time when he had still been a man and not a bag of sickness, of failing flesh and chemicals. A time when if someone came to visit him, he would still let them in.

Not now. Not anymore. These days he couldn't bring himself to answer the door or the phone. Recently, his English neighbour, Denise, a woman of about 60, had begun to look out for him over the garden fence.

"Alright Gabriel" She'd say, saying his name like the English call the angel of annunciation so that he would still do a double take before realizing that it was him she was speaking to.

"Yes, yes Denise, I'm ok, good today, very good." He'd say back.

"Well, that's good news isn't it Gabriel. Very good news isn't it?"

A couple of weeks ago Denise had started cooking him a meal a day. She would pass it to him over the garden fence. It was the only food he was eating now. A few days ago she had even surprised him with bulbs and a few plants from the garden centre up the road.

"I'll plant them in pots for you, shall I Gabriel" She'd said when she'd brought them round. "Be nice to see them come up next year, first sign of spring Hyacinths, that'll be nice won't it?"