

Exile

Volume 45 | Number 2

Article 26

1998

The Rose

Rachel Bolton
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bolton, Rachel (1998) "The Rose," *Exile*: Vol. 45 : No. 2 , Article 26.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol45/iss2/26>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

The Rose

She and I have been like brother and sister ever since I was seven years old—Rosie, I mean. I guess I needed a substitute sibling since I didn't have a real one, and she had a handful of older sisters but no brothers, so maybe she wanted an icky little boy to boss around. I was the one she picked. Not that I was anything special. My only virtue was convenience. Our houses shared a backyard fence, and the next icky boy lived way down the block. But sometimes I liked to imagine she had been drawn to me by a force, like magnets or static cling. For one thing I had a sandbox in my back yard, rare in my neighborhood, and for another I had it on the authority of my grandmother that I was cute as a button. That was very encouraging—well, until I got a look inside her button box. If those specimens were her basis of comparison, then I was about as good-looking as a bulbous disc covered in stained old tweed. Still, there was the sandbox. And Rosie didn't seem to mind my being a bit round and smudged.

Her full name was:

"Rosemary Lynn Wade. What's yours?"

"Pete."

"No, I mean your *whole* name."

"Peter Keith MacIntyre."

It was the brightest, stickiest part of July, and we met, naturally, over the backyard fence. I had been gouging holes into the flowerbed along its base with Grammy's gardening trowel—Grammy was the one I lived with—and when I looked up from my work I found Rosie standing there. I had seen her before, coming and going from her house, and occasionally at school, but we had never actually spoken until she appeared that day and wanted to know what I was doing.

"Digging," I answered, sitting back on my heels.

"What for?"

"Bugs," said the part of me that couldn't help trying to make her go away. It was hard to enjoy getting dirty when a Rosemary Lynn Wade was staring down with her arms crossed, looking like she might just go rat on you.

"Can I come over?" she asked. I thought about this for a second, then nodded. She immediately scaled the low split-rail fence, and I cringed when I saw her foot slip as she turned to come back down on my side. The inevitable shot through my mind: she would fall, she would cry, Grammy would come running, and I would get *such* a time of it for rooting up the flowers. But I underestimated her in my ignorance, because apart from a grunt, nothing happened when she hit the ground. She just brushed off the dirt, gave her head a shake to straighten her short brown hair, and poked an inquisitive finger into the hole I had dug.

Well, I was impressed.

"Do you like worms?" I hazarded. "I've got one." I showed her an empty coffee can with my discovery writhing fretfully on the bottom. Wrinkling her nose, she took the can from me and reached inside. "*Disgusting*," she said, with the worm flipflopping on her palm in the sun. She picked it up between two fingers for a closer look, unafraid. I had just held it at arm's length on the trowel.

And that was all it took. I think we saw each other every day the rest of that summer, at least after I was done being grounded for digging up some prized tulip bulb or other. The Blue Tulip. I capitalized it in my mind because Grammy made it sound like an object of worship. I used to tell Rosie—that's what I always called her, even when she wanted to be "Mary-Lynn"—that someday I'd open a restaurant and name it The Blue Tulip. And then we'd snicker and play Restaurant: she would be the elegant lady coming in for a light lunch, and I'd be the waiter.

"What may I serve you, ma'am?" I'd say. And she would order petunia pie, snapdragon soufflé and rose water, and pay the bill with blades of grass.

I should have guessed we'd end up doing theatre. Rosie was certainly dramatic from the first moment she came crashing over the fence into my life, and both of us imaginative. My first foray into acting came when the Paul Lawrence Dunbar High School Thespians put on *The Crucible*. I was about fifteen, I guess, because it was my sophomore year there. I had joined the club as a freshman, but since I didn't have the guts then to actually audition, I instead made props and moved sets for that year's rather amateurish productions: *Alice in Wonderland* and *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. But Mrs. Gilbert, our aging director, decided to retire that year, and when fall rolled around the troupe found itself led by a thirty-something bundle of energy and will called Beverly Brennan. Instead of bifocals and a penchant for the fluffy, she had a *vision*. Our piano player Jim, for years a fixture in every sugary show, found himself nonplussed when she announced that instead of the usual cheerful orphans and singing princesses we would be delving into hysteria, lechery and Drama with a capital D.

I so desperately wanted a part that it was just about silly, so Rosie became a Thespian too in order to be moral support for me while I took the plunge and auditioned. To our surprise, we both got a part. Bev—who actually refused to be called Mrs. Brennan—believed in giving everyone a chance on stage, and she had a knack for coaxing out of you whatever raw talent you possessed. By opening night I was a pretty decent Second Nameless Puritan in the courtroom scene, and Rosie—good lord, Rosie! She was cast as the scheming wench Abigail Williams, one of the lead roles, and she was brilliant.

I remember watching her during rehearsals, venomously threatening the other Puritan girls not to reveal their goings-on in the woods of Salem. The way she said "I will bring ye a pointy reckoning that will shudder ye!" shuddered *me*. But the best bit was listening from the wings during the real performances. When Rosie was at her best, the auditorium was *silent*. No gum wrappers crumpling, no restlessness in the seats. I wish I could describe what it's like to see a whole audience riveted by talent they never would have expected on a high school stage. All I can tell you is that I didn't want it to end. I wanted stunned, soundless awe in place of applause, and I wanted to savor it, stretching on endlessly with Rosie at its center. Even now, a decade plus-a-bit later, I sometimes get the crazy wish that it was still going.

It couldn't, though. We graduated, then went to our separate colleges and graduated again, and then got our masters' in theatre. I missed her during college and beyond, although we always saw each other over the holidays. Even when she was right there in

front of me, watching TV in Grammy's living room or wrapping Christmas presents in her parents' basement, I couldn't help thinking ahead to when she would want to live in New York, where the real theatre action was. My best friend in the world—and I'd only get to see her if I went there and bought a front-row ticket. It was decidedly depressing.

I remember when I got the news. I was in the bathtub when the phone rang, and I had to climb out and open the door a tiny, modest crack to take the receiver from Grammy.

"Hi Pete, it's me. Guess what!" Rosie's voice was higher than normal with excitement.

"What?" I asked, sloshing back into the tub.

"Guess," she said.

"I have no idea." I had lost my washcloth and was distractedly trying to recover it without getting the phone in the water.

"Oh come on, take a guess."

"You found a cure for rodent obesity?"

"No!" she laughed. "I got an apartment and a job."

I dropped the washcloth again and didn't care where it went.

"New York, Peter!" she continued. "New York! Think of it!"

"Congratulations," I managed. It sounded dumb. "What kind of job?"

"Promise not to laugh."

"I promise," I said automatically.

"Well—it's at a florist's. Don't ask—I just saw the ad and thought it would be better than waiting tables. And the apartment—well, it's not an apartment really, not a big one, only two rooms, but it'll do..."

She chattered on excitedly, and I thought, *Well, that's that.*

As for me, I've always stayed here—Columbus, Ohio. I realized early on that I wasn't meant for the stage like she was: my place was behind it, moving sets, finding props, running lights. And most of all, stage managing. I loved it—I still love it. It's what I do. My business card says *9th Muse Community Theatre, Peter K. MacIntyre, Stage Manager*. It's me who drills the stage crew on changing the scenery in the shortest possible time, and me who directs them over the headsets during the performances. It's me who gets the actors off their behinds, sometimes putting out their cigarettes myself and giving them a shove—polite but firm—to make their cues on time. I don't yell. Polite but firm gets you much more respect. I roam the whole backstage, sometimes running. I am everywhere all at once; I am the link between performers and audience, hearing both perspectives and making them mesh. My greatest pride is knowing that if I were not there, the shows I manage would fall apart.

I've tried to pattern myself as much as possible after the example Bev gave us back at Dunbar—the commitment to good theatre that made her lay down an entire floor of rough pine planks with real dirt between the cracks for us Puritans to walk, pray, scream and moralize over. She was also ruthless, of course. She could make you agree to be on the publicity committee, sew costumes and bake refreshments before you even realized you'd opened your mouth. My own lack of ruthlessness has probably kept me from achieving all I could have by now—like convincing my boss to let me direct a show, I mean *really* direct—but I'm trying to make it in my own less-forceful way. Maybe I

could be in New York too, if I had wanted it—if I had tried. But I've taken things slowly, steadily, and I am where I am.

And then, suddenly, Rosie was here too.

I tried not to be too glad about it. Running out of money and patience, having a panicky breakdown of sorts, suddenly hating New York and moving back home was nothing to be glad about. I knew it meant her dreams were on hold. But she was back, and I couldn't help smiling when I thought of it.

Bev Brennan had a daughter, Diane, the same age as Rosie and me. She was well-known around school for two reasons, one of them her mother's theatrical successes. But Diane was actually far better known—I almost said notorious—for her relationship with Randall T. Bender. By our senior year, Diane and Randy had been together so long that they were practically proverbial. In any case, I can't say I was surprised when, one autumn afternoon in 1998, a large envelope of creamy, nobbly, expensive paper showed up in my mailbox, wherein Mr. and Mrs. William Brennan cordially invited me to a reception in honor of their daughter Diane Elizabeth, upon the occasion of her marriage to Randall Thomas Bender.

My only recent knowledge of the couple had come through the rumor mill: something about both having just about finished medical school. I hadn't even known they wanted to be doctors—I wasn't close with either one at Dunbar. I figured it must have been Bev who included me—and Rosie too, I soon found out—on the guest list for the big event. Though I wasn't certain I'd even recognize Randy any more, and Rosie had never really cared much for Diane, Bev-loyalty outweighed our indifference to the couple enough for us to R.S.V.P. in the affirmative.

"Pete, I don't think I'm going to go to this thing after all."

It was the day before the wedding, and when the phone rang I suspected it would be a problem. I was right.

"What? But you R.S.V.P'd. They've got a place card with your name on it and everything."

"I know, but nobody'll miss me except Bev, and she'll be too busy to really care."

"And what am I supposed to do? Talk to myself all night? I had you written in my dance card," I wheedled.

"You'll be all right, Pete. Anyway, you know I don't dance. That's your thing."

"But why don't you want to go?"

Silence.

"Rosie, you still there?"

"Yeah. Look, I just don't want to, OK?"

"But—" I stopped and thought. "Hey, are you busy right now?"

"Yes, I'm on the phone."

"You know that's not what I mean."

"I'm about to make dinner. Why?"

"Well, I was thinking maybe I could come over—"

"And change my mind?" she interrupted darkly.

"Maybe," I admitted. "What are you making?"

"Stir-fry. Come over if you want but I'm not going." Click.

I frowned and hung up the receiver. There were times when Rosie mystified me, and they tended to involve weddings. For instance—that job of hers in New York, at the florist's, where she wrestled buds and leaves into shape when she wasn't auditioning or rehearsing.

"I despise wedding bouquets," she told me over the phone during one of our occasional long-distance catch-up sessions.

"But I thought you were good at them," I said.

"I am. But I hate them."

"Don't you like flowers?"

"I wouldn't work there if I didn't like flowers," she said snappishly. "Well, maybe I would. I don't know what else I'd do to pay the bills."

"Then what's the problem?"

"Hell, I don't know. I just can't stand them. All day nothing but bouquets and church altar decorations and runners for down the aisle and boutonnieres and corsages, and they all look so goddamn alike."

I laughed. "Well, they're supposed to. It wouldn't be much of a wedding if one bridesmaid had a little sprig of something and another was foundering under an enormous bunch of something else."

"It's stupid," Rosie continued, obviously not interested in my opinion. "Ripping up flowers and making them behave and be orderly when they would probably be much happier left alone in the dirt."

"Whatever you say, dear," I had said.

And then, of course, the whole business with Bill, which I just couldn't understand. They were nothing alike. Talk about making things behave and be orderly—that was his whole life, as far as I could tell, and yet there she was, wearing his diamond ring. Mystifying. Granted, I only met the guy once, but I didn't like what I saw. When she came back home, he went along for some reason, saw her safely to her new, cheap, hometown apartment, stayed a few days and went back to New York to keep an eye on his accounts and wait for her to return for the wedding. Rosie invited me over while he was there, for a housewarming/homecoming/boyfriend-soon-to-be-leaving type of thing.

"Bill," she said, hanging onto his arm in a strangely un-Rosie-like way, "I'd like you to meet Peter." She seemed nervous, either wanting me to like him or wanting him to like me, I wasn't sure which.

We shook hands and eyed each other. I believe he may have said, "It's a pleasure," but I was too busy eyeing to be sure. Crisp shirt, dark slacks. No tie. Shiny tasseled loafers and a same-color belt. Gold watch. Dark hair, recently combed. Shifty eyes (I thought). Not unattractive from a woman's point of view, I supposed, but my own impulse was to dislike him. I wondered what he was thinking about me: *shirt not ironed, non-matching pants, scuffed shoes, flyaway hair, been eating too many McBurgers.* We

both flashed a toothy smile and I had a feeling he didn't like me either.

"So, Bill," I said, when we were sitting around the living room with drinks and hors d'oeuvres. "How did you two meet?" Rosie had already told me but I felt like making him talk. I waited till he had his mouth full, too.

"Well," he said, clearing his throat and swallowing hastily, "My accounting firm does the books for Rosie's agency, and we ran into one another there. Literally. I spilled my coffee on her and took her to lunch to make up for it, and it all just happened. Four months later, here we are." He gave her the grin, and she actually *simpered*.

"I hear you've known each other a long time," he said to me.

"Twenty years," I said. "When's the wedding?"

"As soon as we can get all the arrangements made," he answered. "Right, honey?"

Rosie just smiled.

I felt nauseous remembering it on the way to her apartment. Not wanting to show up in a bad mood, since it would hurt my chances of changing her mind, I made myself think of something else—but only ended up humming the Rosie Song. I'd heard it on the radio in high school—a chain-gang-marching-around kind of song. When I told her about it, she made me sing it for her. It was a summer night, the weekend Grammy was away for her annual church women's convention, and we were sitting around under the backyard maple tree with an illicit six-pack. We weren't drunk, but we were in a silly enough mood and laughing so much that we thought we must be. So I sang it for her, marching around dragging one leg and clanking two beer cans to sound like chains:

Be my woman, girl, I'll be your man,

Be my woman, girl, I'll be your man,

My Rosie—when I'm free—

My Rosie—when I'm free!

Stick to the promise, girl, that you made me,

Stick to the promise, girl, that you made me.

My Rosie—when I'm free—

My Rosie, when I'm free!

We had ended up collapsed in the grass, snickering till the tears fell. That was another moment in my life that I wanted never to end.

"Hello," Rosie said, ushering me through her front door. "I knew you wouldn't be able to resist mooching a meal off me."

"What can I say, Rosie, you know your way around a wok."

"And you, as we know, wouldn't know a wok if it smacked you in the head," she added. "I don't know how you survive. Do you eat at all?"

"The odd twig and berry. Bits of bark, you know." I followed her to the kitchen and availed myself of an open box of crackers on the counter. Rosie was rooting around in a cabinet and swearing under her breath.

"Joyce Chen pan gone AWOL?" I asked.

"No, the rice steamer. Half of it, anyway. I can't find the lid."

"So use a saucepan."

She sat back on her heels and said pointedly, "I believe we already established that you know less than nothing about the culinary arts."

"That's not true," I said, "I make excellent Kraft Macaroni and Cheese."

"That is not art."

"Perhaps," I said. "But it's the cheesiest."

"No, *you're* the cheesiest. You're a block of sharp Wisconsin cheddar. Quit eating my Wheat Thins and look in that cupboard, would you?"

"I hear and obey," I said, and took a look. "This wouldn't be it, would it?" I held up a flattened bamboo object that had been smashed under an iron skillet.

"Damn," said Rosie. "I'll need a saucepan after all."

She clattered around for a while with pots and woks and oil and peapods, and I settled myself on one of the bar stools by the counter.

"Be a dear and clean those, would you?" Rosie asked, pointing at a plastic-wrapped Styrofoam container of muddy mushrooms. She pulled a brush of some sort out of a drawer and tossed it in my direction.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" I asked, turning it over in my fingers. "Groom their spores?"

"Brush off the dirt," she said. "Then rinse, but take it easy so they don't get too soggy."

"Well, all right," I said dubiously, and broke open the plastic wrap. Meanwhile Rosie got out a cleaver and started whacking a frozen piece of chicken into strips.

"So talk to me," she said after a minute. "Or else put some music on. Or both. It's too quiet in here—it makes me think you're plotting something."

"What do you want to listen to?" I asked.

"I don't care. Pick something."

I brushed my hands together to get the mushroom-gunk off and fished through Rosie's tumbled-together box of CDs in the living room. Nothing looked too appealing. *Cabaret*—probably too cheerful. Mozart's *Requiem*—too morbid. *Earth, Wind and Fire*—hell no! I settled on something jazzy and returned to my mushrooms.

"I despise this CD," Rosie said, when the first song came on. "It's nothing but whiney soprano sax spiraling all over the place as if it had nothing better to do. That and the occasional cymbal clang."

"Then why'd you buy it?"

"I didn't, it was a present from Bill. He has horrible taste in music. He actually owns every single Yanni album, can you imagine?"

"Lord save us," I said.

"Well, exactly. I'm trying to think of some little 'accident' to get rid of them. A box knocked out the window of the apartment or something."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that," I said. "How come you didn't just move in with him when you lost your job? Didn't he have the space?"

"It wasn't a question of *space*," Rosie said, stirring her sizzling chicken strips somewhat ferociously. "I just didn't, is all."

"But how come?"

"Must we talk about this?" She grabbed the box of rice from the counter and measured some into her boiling water, then smacked a lid onto the pot with a clang.

"I didn't know it was that big a deal," I said. "I'm sorry."

"It's not a big deal, I just..." She put down her cooking spoon and pushed her hair back from her face. "I just didn't want to be depending on him."

"He's your fiancé," I said. "You'd have been depending on each other."

"No," said Rosie. "He has a job, I didn't. Except for my old job here to come back to. Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'm not—I wasn't ready. But I will be. Aren't you finished with those mushrooms yet?"

"Oh," I said. "Yeah, sorry. Here." I pushed the container across the counter. In the background, the soprano sax began a prolonged wail, rather like the siren of a fire engine.

"I can't take it," Rosie said. She wiped her hands on a dishtowel and went to pick another CD. Something mellow—Enya, I thought. An ethereal voice like a summer midnight.

"Does Bill ever sing you the Rosie Song?" I asked when she returned to the kitchen.

"What, Simon and Garfunkel?" She pulled up a stool next to me. "'Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme'?"

"No, not that—the chain gang one. 'Be my woman, girl.'"

She looked amused. "God, I haven't thought of that in so long. I can't even picture him singing it. He's not really the singing type."

"What type is he?"

"The *non*-singing type, obviously," she answered, sounding irritated.

"Oh. I didn't know there was such a type."

"Not everybody's a theater person, Peter. Most of the world isn't, you know."

"That doesn't mean they can't sing and dance and enjoy themselves," I protested.

"Oh, Bill enjoys himself. He just doesn't sing."

"Does he dance?"

"I don't know. But that's only because I don't like it myself, so we never have."

"Well, you'll have to dance at the reception tomorrow," I said craftily.

"Peter Keith, I am *not* going to the reception tomorrow."

There was a sudden hissing noise from the stove as Rosie's rice boiled over into the flames.

"Holy hell!" she yelped, jumping up. "I left the burner on high. Goddamn."

Enya did all the talking after that until the pots and pans and plates were on the table.

"This is really good, Rosie," I said, tasting a bite. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she answered quietly. And then added hurriedly, "Look, I'm sorry I snapped at you so much before. You know I'm glad you came over, don't you?"

"Yeah," I said. "You're just stressed, I understand."

"This isn't where I imagined myself at age almost-twenty-eight..."

"You don't have to explain, not to me," I said.

"I know," she said. "I'm just explaining to myself."

"How long's it been since you saw Bev?" I asked.

She sighed and said, "Very long."

We fell silent again, but it was the comfortable silence of friends familiar enough with each other not to require a solid stream of words. Finally, Rosie ate the last mushroom from the pan and asked,

"So what are you wearing to this thing?"

I grinned, knowing that meant she had changed her mind about not going.

"I don't want us to be conspicuous," she added.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe my gray slacks."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" She twitched an eyebrow. "They're awfully tight. Maybe you better wait on those until they invent the pants equivalent of a shoehorn for your fat ass."

"My what?"

"Your. Big. Fat. Ass. Although 'fat' doesn't do you justice. It fails," she said, waving her fork expressively, "to encompass the vastness—the sheer *scope* of your posterior region. I say *region* to evoke the geographical connotations which are, of course, a *propos*. Each cheek a continent, each dimple a country."

I bore this placidly, knowing she was just trying to annoy me into saying, "Maybe you *should* stay home after all." Ok, so I could have stood to lose a few pounds, but even at my largest I could *never* be, as she proceeded to suggest, a peach for Halloween.

"No costume necessary. Just bend over. Shall I demonstrate?" She twisted around and stuck her butt out.

I ignored her. "I have to get going—work to do. I'll pick you up at five-thirty."

She twitched an eyebrow, then moved to the stove and scraped at one of the burnt rice blobs while I put on my coat.

"Don't wear that damn purple shirt," she said. "I'm not going if you look like a blueberry."

I ignored that too.

She was right, though—my sense of style was terrible and we both knew it. So as usual, I showed up at her door with various possibilities and she chose the things that looked the least awful. She herself had not yet dressed, unless, I thought to myself, sweatpants were a new fashion trend. She made her selections and sent me off to change.

"There now," she said as I exited the bathroom, "you look more or less presentable. Remember this. Dark slacks, light shirt. Not the other way around."

"Yes, master," I said in my best fawning sycophant voice.

"Did you put gel in your hair?" she accused, frowning.

"Just a little. It was sticking out."

"Peter Keith! What have I told you about that?"

"Greasy mob boss," I said tiredly.

"Exactly." She fluffed my sticky locks until they projected outwards from my scalp in various unnatural, but, she assured me, terribly stylish directions.

"Now don't touch and you should be fine," she said. "Let me throw something on and then we can go."

I surreptitiously flattened a few of the spikier areas while she disappeared into her bedroom, and thankfully she didn't notice—or if she did, she let it go, since I was complimenting her on the outfit she had put on. I don't know whether it was a *dress* or a *gown*, because I'm bad at these distinctions, but whatever it was, it was black, sparkly

and damn cool, and I said so.

"Thanks, dear. Now come on, let's get this thing over with."

The wedding reception was—well, it was a wedding reception. A rented ballroom at the local Radisson, stiff starched tablecloths, a DJ in a too-tight suit consulting his music lists: sappy songs, happy songs, songs for when people start getting drunk. A gift table piled with things in silver-white paper, a catered buffet steaming under silver domes, and little glasses of wine at each place to toast the bride and groom. Diane, I recalled, hadn't been interested in anything that, to me, was Bev: the bold, the avant garde, in a word, the theatrical. So I guessed I was seeing the daughter's hand in the pale, milky candles, fake pearl garlands and assorted flowery things that littered the room, all of them festooned or beribboned or otherwise foofied up with the peachy theme color of the Brennan-Bender nuptial feast.

"This is my idea of hell," Rosie whispered to me as we sat at our assigned table amidst a handful of apparently random people, taking furtive sips of the wine before the newlyweds arrived. "Just look at this." She flicked a fingernail against one of the ivy vines hanging off the wad of lilies and peach netting that formed a centerpiece. "I feel like I'm in a Disney movie. Like one of those old ones with the girl from *The Parent Trap* where everything's all happy and covered with bows."

"Hayley Mills?" I said.

"Right, her. *Pollyanna*, that's what I was thinking of. It's goddamn *Pollyanna*."

"Well, it's only for a few hours."

"I'm not doing this at my wedding," Rosie added, snapping an ivy leaf off the vine. "I don't like ruffles and bows and I hate this gauzy blissful tulle fabric crap."

"Aren't you cheerful this evening!"

"The ivy's not so bad," she continued, ignoring me. "I think I'll have a green wedding. I'll have the reception outside and make everyone come dressed as woodland sprites."

"Including Bill?"

"Especially Bill. Green tights—what do you think?"

"Fat chance," I said, sipping my wine. "Unless they're pinstriped."

"Shut up!" She tossed her crumpled leaf onto the tablecloth and pulled off another one. "You barely know him."

There was a sullen pause for some three minutes, until the wedding photographer shoved his telephoto lens into our faces and demanded us to smile.

"Maybe I'll just get married in blood-red velvet," Rosie continued darkly after he wandered off to accost more of the unsuspecting. "With a plunging neckline and stiletto heels. And for a bouquet, a single black rose tied with a black ribbon. None of this white shit."

"Excuse me a minute," I said, avoiding comment by taking our now-empty wine glasses to the open bar for a refill. On the way I ran into the mother of the bride herself, beaming happily in a long electric blue dress and some sort of matching turban.

"Pete MacIntyre!" she cried, and enveloped me in one of her huge, crushing

We fell silent again, but it was the comfortable silence of friends familiar enough with each other not to require a solid stream of words. Finally, Rosie ate the last mushroom from the pan and asked,

"So what are you wearing to this thing?"

I grinned, knowing that meant she had changed her mind about not going.

"I don't want us to be conspicuous," she added.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe my gray slacks."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" She twitched an eyebrow. "They're awfully tight. Maybe you better wait on those until they invent the pants equivalent of a shoehorn for your fat ass."

"My what?"

"Your. Big. Fat. Ass. Although 'fat' doesn't do you justice. It fails," she said, waving her fork expressively, "to encompass the vastness—the sheer *scope* of your posterior region. I say *region* to evoke the geographical connotations which are, of course, *a propos*. Each cheek a continent, each dimple a country."

I bore this placidly, knowing she was just trying to annoy me into saying, "Maybe you *should* stay home after all." Ok, so I could have stood to lose a few pounds, but even at my largest I could *never* be, as she proceeded to suggest, a peach for Halloween.

"No costume necessary. Just bend over. Shall I demonstrate?" She twisted around and stuck her butt out.

I ignored her. "I have to get going—work to do. I'll pick you up at five-thirty."

She twitched an eyebrow, then moved to the stove and scraped at one of the burnt rice blobs while I put on my coat.

"Don't wear that damn purple shirt," she said. "I'm not going if you look like a blueberry."

I ignored that too.

She was right, though—my sense of style was terrible and we both knew it. So as usual, I showed up at her door with various possibilities and she chose the things that looked the least awful. She herself had not yet dressed, unless, I thought to myself, sweatpants were a new fashion trend. She made her selections and sent me off to change.

"There now," she said as I exited the bathroom, "you look more or less presentable. Remember this. Dark slacks, light shirt. Not the other way around."

"Yes, master," I said in my best fawning sycophant voice.

"Did you put gel in your hair?" she accused, frowning.

"Just a little. It was sticking out."

"Peter Keith! What have I told you about that?"

"Greasy mob boss," I said tiredly.

"Exactly." She fluffed my sticky locks until they projected outwards from my scalp in various unnatural, but, she assured me, terribly stylish directions.

"Now don't touch and you should be fine," she said. "Let me throw something on and then we can go."

I surreptitiously flattened a few of the spikier areas while she disappeared into her bedroom, and thankfully she didn't notice—or if she did, she let it go, since I was complimenting her on the outfit she had put on. I don't know whether it was a *dress* or a *gown*, because I'm bad at these distinctions, but whatever it was, it was black, sparkly

and damn cool, and I said so.

"Thanks, dear. Now come on, let's get this thing over with."

The wedding reception was—well, it was a wedding reception. A rented ballroom at the local Radisson, stiff starched tablecloths, a DJ in a too-tight suit consulting his music lists: sappy songs, happy songs, songs for when people start getting drunk. A gift table piled with things in silver-white paper, a catered buffet steaming under silver domes, and little glasses of wine at each place to toast the bride and groom. Diane, I recalled, hadn't been interested in anything that, to me, was Bev: the bold, the avant garde, in a word, the theatrical. So I guessed I was seeing the daughter's hand in the pale, milky candles, fake pearl garlands and assorted flowery things that littered the room, all of them festooned or beribboned or otherwise foofied up with the peachy theme color of the Brennan-Bender nuptial feast.

"This is my idea of hell," Rosie whispered to me as we sat at our assigned table amidst a handful of apparently random people, taking furtive sips of the wine before the newlyweds arrived. "Just look at this." She flicked a fingernail against one of the ivy vines hanging off the wad of lilies and peach netting that formed a centerpiece. "I feel like I'm in a Disney movie. Like one of those old ones with the girl from *The Parent Trap* where everything's all happy and covered with bows."

"Hayley Mills?" I said.

"Right, her. *Pollyanna*, that's what I was thinking of. It's goddamn *Pollyanna*."

"Well, it's only for a few hours."

"I'm not doing this at my wedding," Rosie added, snapping an ivy leaf off the vine. "I don't like ruffles and bows and I hate this gauzy blissful tulle fabric crap."

"Aren't you cheerful this evening!"

"The ivy's not so bad," she continued, ignoring me. "I think I'll have a green wedding. I'll have the reception outside and make everyone come dressed as woodland sprites."

"Including Bill?"

"Especially Bill. Green tights—what do you think?"

"Fat chance," I said, sipping my wine. "Unless they're pinstriped."

"Shut up!" She tossed her crumpled leaf onto the tablecloth and pulled off another one. "You barely know him."

There was a sullen pause for some three minutes, until the wedding photographer shoved his telephoto lens into our faces and demanded us to smile.

"Maybe I'll just get married in blood-red velvet," Rosie continued darkly after he wandered off to accost more of the unsuspecting. "With a plunging neckline and stiletto heels. And for a bouquet, a single black rose tied with a black ribbon. None of this white shit."

"Excuse me a minute," I said, avoiding comment by taking our now-empty wine glasses to the open bar for a refill. On the way I ran into the mother of the bride herself, beaming happily in a long electric blue dress and some sort of matching turban.

"Pete MacIntyre!" she cried, and enveloped me in one of her huge, crushing

hugs.

"Bev, I'm so glad to see you!" I said, wheezing slightly as she squeezed the air out of my lungs. "Congratulations, it's about time they got married."

"Isn't it though!" she agreed. "I started dropping hints about grandkids to comfort me in my dotage and they finally caught on."

I laughed. "Dotage? Bev, if you don't go by years you're the youngest woman in this room. You look great, by the way. I like the dress."

"Dress!" she scoffed. "It's a caftan, darling. I'm aiming for something a la Gloria Swanson. And aren't you the handsome one, too!" she added, looking me over.

"Thanks," I said shyly. "Rosemary picked out the clothes."

"Did she! Well, the girl has an eye. Is she here yet?"

I nodded. "She's over there." I pointed.

"Not looking the most cheerful, I see," Bev mused. "I heard about her rough times. I can't understand it. She was *so* good. This is why I hate New York," she said firmly. "Might as well throw yourself to ravenous jackals. Oh, excuse me, the DJ is beckoning. Go take that girl a drink and make her enjoy herself."

"I'm trying," I assured her.

I resumed my place at Rosie's side, armed with fresh glasses of wine. A little pile of torn ivy had developed on the tablecloth during my absence. She scooped it up and deposited it back into the centerpiece as I sat down.

"Thank God," she said, pouncing on the new wine glass. "I'm bored out of my mind. None of these people has said a word yet, not one stinking word. I don't appreciate being stuck in with the rejects and loners, not at all. What time is it? Shouldn't they be here by now?" "They" meant Mr. and Mrs. Bender, the only trace of whose presence so far was their gold-lettered names entwining on the peach matchbook covers scattered around the tables. Rosie had one in her hand.

"Quarter of seven," I said. "They're probably smooching in the limo."

"Would you marry someone called Randy Bender?" Rosie asked, pondering the matchbook. "I wouldn't."

"Well, I'm sure Bill will be glad to hear it. Were you about to light those leaves on fire?"

"No," she said defensively.

"You were, weren't you."

Silence.

"Rosemary!"

"Well, maybe. Not actually. I wouldn't *actually* have done it. I mean, really. It was merely a fantasy."

Merely a fantasy? Bracing myself for her reaction, I said a bit severely, "Would you please snap out of it? Honestly, Rosie, if you don't want to get married, give him back the damn diamond and stop all this moping around!"

I thought flames were going to shoot from her eyes.

"What are you talking about? I love Bill. I wouldn't have said yes if I didn't intend to go through with it so just shut up!" She kept her voice to a whisper but enunciated fiercely.

"All right, all right, calm down," I said. "I was just taking a guess."

Further expostulation on Rosie's part was prevented by a sudden outburst of applause heralding the grand entrance of the newlyweds. She channeled the residual wrath into her clapping, the supersonic sort before which mortal eardrums quail. I expected accompanying gnashing of teeth, but as Diane and Randy paraded by she gave them a warm smile at odds with her reddening palms.

Thank God for wedding cake and champagne, that's all I can say. Things remained more or less terse at our table throughout the toasting and the buffet, and it wasn't until Rosie and I had ingested some sugary icing and imbibed some fairly decent bubbly that she forgot to keep on being annoyed.

Meanwhile, the DJ broke out the sappy songs in full force.

"Ladies and gentlemen," his voice boomed through the speakers, trailed by a screech of feedback: "May I present, in their first dance, Mr. and Mrs. Bender!"

The photographer and his spotlight-wielding lackey maneuvered to catch the bride's shy smile as Randy took her by the hand. He led the way to the dance floor through a cloud of polite applause, and they stood together at its center, awaiting the music. Diane's satin gown glowed, reflecting flickers of candlelight gently diffused by yards of veiling.

"Pollyanna or not," I whispered, "you have to admit she looks beautiful." Rosie didn't answer.

The DJ pushed a button and an awful, sugary, sentimental song began. I can't remember exactly what song; memory has mercifully blocked the details.

Lyrics lyrics awful sappy lyrics... (whatever they were.)

Rosie and I gave each other an appalled sort of a look.

Lyrics lyrics even more awful lyrics

"Good lord," I said. "Can you believe *that's* going to be their song for the *rest of their lives!*"

"Horrible," Rosie answered. "I think we're going to need more champagne."

I agreed, and we drowned our sorrows for the next two songs. But the first notes of the third one made me smile even as Rosie grimaced, or maybe *because* she grimaced.

Some say love / It is a river / That drowns the tender reed...

"Now we *have* to dance," I said, grinning.

"No, we do not."

Some say love / It is a razor / That leaves the soul to bleed...

"But it's your name-song," I said. "One of them anyway."

Rosie didn't reply, but I could tell she was considering.

Some say love / It is a hunger / An endless aching need...

"My name is not The Rose."

"Well, close enough." I stood up and held out my hand.

I say love / It is a flower / And you its only seed.

"Oh, all right!" She crumpled up her napkin and dropped it on the table. "If you're going to twist my arm." I led the way to an open space among the couples on the dance floor, and silently we began to sway along with them.

"Sometimes," I said, searching for a non-inflammatory topic to break the silence, "I wish we were still in my backyard, you know? Pulling bugs out of the flowerbed like when we first met."

Rosie nodded. "I remember you so exactly from that day. You had on a shirt with green stripes. And you were grubby and sweaty and repellant."

"I was harmonizing with nature, thank you."

"You can't harmonize with something that doesn't care whether you live or die. All you can do is be glad it's indifferent instead of vindictive."

She always did know how to kill a conversation.

"If I was Thoreau I'd smack you in the head for that."

"And if I was Joseph Conrad I'd kick your ass. In fact, Peter, I'm not so sure the world is even all that indifferent. Lately it strikes me as downright vindictive."

She sighed grimly. I held her a bit closer and just danced. I've been told I dance very well—and not just by my grandmother, either. Back in the school days, while anticipating a dance or a party, I could sing "I got music, I got rhythm" without feeling hypocritical, even if "I got my gal, who could ask for anything more" tended to subside into a self-conscious hum. But I digress. When I led my prom dates out onto the floor of the gym, or approached a girl in the seething college crowd at homecoming, some instinct always arose—and practice, training, even thought all became unnecessary. That was true as Rosie and I danced. If I had thought about it, I couldn't have said I was leading, or that she followed. Somehow, it was irrelevant.

I found myself singing along quietly as the song ended:

*When the nights have been too lonely / And the road has been too long
And you think that love is only / For the lucky and the strong...*

"Sing it, Bette," said Rosie dryly.

Just remember in the winter / Far beneath the bitter snow

Lies the seed that with the sun's love / In the spring becomes the Rose.

"Don't look so unhappy," I whispered as the last notes died away. She just smiled ruefully and shrugged.

"Can't help it," she said.

And then some weirdly poetic mood hit me, and as the next song began—Unchained Melody, if you're curious—I said something so cheesy I don't even want to repeat it.

"Do you not see," I quoted softly, after a few measures of music, "'how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul?'" Rosie looked at me for a long moment, one eyebrow raised.

"Who said that?" she demanded suspiciously.

"Keats, I think."

"Do you believe him? Honestly."

"Well—yes," I said slowly. "I mean, so what if the world doesn't care? I live in my own world, not the world's world. I'm not just automatically screwed."

"I guess I prefer unadulterated pessimism," she replied with a tiny smile. Then she gave a short, self-conscious laugh and added, "For a second there, when you did that quote, I thought you were trying to be romantic or something."

"Well, I was."

"Small-r-romantic, not big-R."

"Who, me?" I said dryly. "Romance isn't my strong suit, remember?"

"Did I say that?"

I nodded. "When I wanted to ask what's-her-name on a date—Lisa something. Lisa Wallis. And you let me practice on you first."

A smile flickered across her lips.

"That's right, I remember," she said. "You used dandelions for a bouquet."

"I thought they were pretty."

"They're weeds. That's not romantic."

"Well, one man's weed—"

"—is a weed is a weed is a weed."

"Ah, but they make a delicious salad."

Another tiny smile.

"Girls don't want a delicious salad, Peter."

"Good lord, that must be why I'm alone. To think, all that good lettuce wasted." She sighed heavily.

"Well, what *do* they want, then? The autographed works of Conrad? Unbreakable rice steamers?" I was really trying hard, but she just gave me that *look* that means HOPELESS. Another strange impulse hit me and I started to very obnoxiously whirl her around the dance floor, knowing it would make her crazy.

"Oh, Pete, stop it!" she said. "You're gonna knock someone over!"

"No I'm not."

"You are too."

"Am not."

"I'm telling you, somebody's going to break a hip and you'll have to pay for it."

"So be it." I was getting dizzy as dammit, and I even have very dependable inner ears, so Rosie must have been reeling too. I think the champagne had kicked in, because soon she clung to me, snickering in spite of herself.

"You bastard. Let go! I'll throw up."

"No way. Now that I've got you on your feet I'm keeping you there!" Relentlessly, I spun us faster, weaving my way through the relatives swaying cheek-to-cheek while the music began spiraling toward its end. You could have taken us for Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, except for Rosie's now-convulsive, almost unbalanced, laughter.

"You know what women want?" she said. "They want to dance even if they lie and say they don't. They want to fucking *dance*!" she cried again, holding onto me almost fiercely. Tears began to fall, as they always did when she laughed to the point of breathlessness or descended into despondency, sliding down the line of contact between our faces. Her laughter came in shuddering bursts like sobs—or maybe she sobbed as if laughing. We hit against a wall and leaned our shoulders against it for support, faces still pressed together while the room began to spin in our stead.

"We should have gone to the prom together," Rosie said suddenly between gasps. "We could have danced every song..." She trailed off, her fingernails digging into my shoulders. The song had ended, and I could feel the stares—not on the back of my neck, like you're supposed to, but in my chest, where something unpleasant seemed to ricochet from rib to rib. I kept my arms around Rosie, stroking her hair because I didn't

know what else to do, but she unstuck her damp cheek from mine and scrubbed the back of her hand across her eyes. "The goddamn high school prom," she muttered. "Hell, I'm going to be sick—"

She broke away and staggered across the dance floor, arms outstretched to aid her balance. I glanced around and found all the eyes suddenly pretending to look in other directions, which only made the feeling in my chest jump with even more awful vigor. The murmurs of those present brought back a sudden disjointed memory of being Second Nameless Puritan in the crowd scenes in *The Crucible*, muttering *watermelonwatermelon* over and over to create a realistic hum. For a second I was in high school again, not a dizzy idiot at a wedding but a clueless adolescent wondering what I'd done to make my prom date flee.

I found Rosie slumped on an upholstered bench some yards down the hall, sniffing.

Forever the idiot, all I could think to say as I sat down was "Hi."

She listlessly waved a silent "hi" of her own, not looking at me, and finally asked, "Do they all think I'm insane?"

"No," I said. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, staring at her fingernails.

"You don't feel sick?"

"No, it was the spinning. I'm all right."

"I was trying to cheer you up, believe it or not. I'm sorry. Talk about your pointy reckonings..."

"What do you mean?" She looked at me blankly.

"Oh, that was my favorite line of yours—"

"—from *The Crucible*," she finished, nodding as she remembered. "Let it go, Peter. This is life. It doesn't have to sound good or be *pithy*. Pith is irrelevant. Let there be no pith here."

"You're right," I said. "Sorry."

"I don't know why you've put up with me all these years. I'm so rotten. Why can't you be rotten too? Then I wouldn't have to feel so bad about it."

"But rotten's only fun if someone else has to put up with it."

She gave me a dark look.

"Sorry, sorry," I mumbled. "Pithy again..."

She flailed a hand irately, saying, "See what I'm talking about?! I give you a bossy stare and you say *sorry, sorry*. You *let* me be rotten! It's *you*!"

"It is not!" I said, indignant. "You were you before we even met."

"Well, then you certainly haven't helped straighten me out any, have you!"

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not responsible for your personality flaws. And what are you talking about anyway? We argue all the time!"

"Not about *important* stuff."

"Oh, like pithiness?" I asked sarcastically.

"No, fool! Like *Bill*."

"Bill!" I yelped. "When I said something about Bill you about bit my head off!"

"Well, I didn't mean it! I was *that* close to—"

"To what? To being a rational person for once?"

"To admitting," she said slowly, between clenched teeth, "that you were right."

I stopped trying to come up with stinging retorts and just said, "Oh."

"Oh indeed."

"So what are you going to do?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe—well, like you said. Maybe give him back the damn diamond and stop all this moping around." I saw she had taken the ring off, and was turning it over in her palm, as if she hadn't really taken a good look at it before.

"Rosie," I said, watching her, "I was exaggerating. Please don't do anything you'll regret." But another little burst of adrenaline was shooting through my midsection—a slender hope, spinning out fine and soft as a spider's thread.

"Too late for that," she said.

"But don't you love him at all?" I wouldn't have asked if I thought she might say yes. I wouldn't have wanted to hear it.

She sighed. "I don't want my tombstone to say **COULD HAVE, BUT DIDN'T.**"

"It's not like you're eighty and diseased," I objected. "There's time yet. You shouldn't even be thinking about inscriptions. Or anything else if you don't feel like it yet."

"How did you do it?" she asked, suddenly looking me in the eye. "How did you get what you wanted without trying and I can't even claw my way through? What have you *got*?"

I could have said it, so easily. *I have you.* It wouldn't have answered her question but at least I would have said it. I thought. I swallowed. And I said,

"I don't know, Rosie."

She put the ring back on—but on the wrong hand, and nodded, as if in defeat.

"If you figure it out, tell me," she said quietly.

"I will," I said. "Are you ready to go back in?"

"No, let's just go, period. Drive me home and I'll heat us up some rice."

"Not scraped off the counter, I hope."

"Shut up and go get my purse," she said, smiling a little.

"Get your own purse, woman. I'm going to say goodbye to Bev." But we both knew I'd go get it anyway.

I slipped over to our table, where the unrelated persons sat drooling in various stages of catatonia, and picked up Rosie's small black bag. And a matchbook for a souvenir. And disentangled a flower from the half-destroyed centerpiece.

"Is she all right?" said a voice in my ear. I turned and found Bev peering over my shoulder with concern.

"Yes," I said. "Just a little worked up. You know."

Bev nodded.

"You're looking worn out yourself," she said. "Take her home, eat something, tuck her in bed. Tuck each other in."

I knew what she meant.

"It's not like that," I stammered. "We would never..." And I knew, sadly, that it

was true.

"Never's a long time," Bev said, patted me on the back, and moved off.

I looked at the flower I had pulled from the centerpiece—a lily of some sort, pale creamy white, beginning to wilt. One petal had caught a bead of candle wax.

"Might as well be a dandelion," I muttered. I tossed it back onto the tablecloth, turned and left.

Rosie was waiting for me in the hall with our coats.

"Bev says goodnight," I told her, handing over her purse.

"Goodnight, Bev," she murmured to the empty hallway.

I held her coat so she could put it on, and offered her my arm.

"I'll never get married," she said as we walked to the car. "I've decided."

"Never?"

"Well, at least not to Bill."

"I didn't like him anyway," I admitted.

"He didn't like you either." She laughed. "Silly man." I didn't know whether she meant me or him, and I didn't ask.

"So who *will* you marry?" —Did I say that? No, thank God—I only let it run through my head. That was a can of worms that didn't need opening.

"Whatcha thinking about?" Rosie asked. "Mr. Suddenly Quiet."

"Worms," I said.

She smiled.

"Like the day we met."

"Yeah." I said. "Here we are again."

—Rachel Bolton '99