Mourning Rose

a short story

by Erin O'Brien

Darrington was hunkered over his hard cider and rum, crying and mumbling a song I could not decipher. He would stay until I pushed him out into the night to stumble across the way, up that narrow staircase and into his poor wife's bed.

Outside, the air was easy and fair and not completely still. So unlike the tavern, with its lingering pipe smoke and the feeling of men with their needy eyes. There was one table left to scour.

My ears pricked at the sound of a cart. It neared the tavern and I hoped it would pass. But the rumble of its wheels stopped beneath shuffling reins and I sighed with disappointment.

To my surprise, it was the voice of Alvy Jameson calling whoa to her ass. The beast snorted and whinnied and finally settled after a few snaps of the reins.

"Sorry for the late hour, Rose," she said as she stepped in. Her tone was conciliatory, considering she was a woman with a handsome purse and a dead husband. "Have you time for one drink? Will you have one with me?"

She was dressed in burgundy velvet and looked at once sad and beautiful and spent. There was only Darrington left. The meats and cheeses were wrapped and put up on the cellar shelves. The corks were in place and all I had left to do before slipping between my bed linens was snuff the lanterns and ascend the staircase that led to my rooms. But the pleading in Alvy's eyes spoke to me and I had surely earned a pint that night, perhaps a whiskey as well.

"For a woman who has traded in her black cotton skirts for that of royalty, I will gladly pour a whiskey," I said. "Sit, Alvy."

She chose the table by the window, where the breeze wafted in. I urged Darrington to his feet. He rose without a fight. But before turning to the door, he looked at Alvy and began singing with the voice of an angel.

"O take me in your arms love, for keen doth the wind blow. O take me in your arms, love, for bitter is my deep woe."

His voice, stripped of the usual blubbering, struck us both. We blinked in the silence until I gathered myself and ushered him out, "To your wife with your gibberish, Darry," I said. He smiled a melancholy smile, belying the handsome man he once was. Then his brow collapsed in bewilderment. His head and shoulders sagged back into a droopy line. Finally his feet, clad in heavy leather, carried him away without another word.

I poured two pints of the better cider and pulled the bottle of Cavan's whiskey from the crevice behind the slotted block of oak that housed my knives.

"What stories have you, Alvy?"

"Ones that you may have heard before," she said.

"How could I possibly know the history of this beautiful skirt?" I took up a thick drape of it. "My my," I said in a low voice. So pleasurable was the velvet against my hand that I fondled it until Alvy took it from me to caress and worry herself.

"You know the man they call Baird?" she said, smoothing the velvet across her thighs.

My heart tumbled and broke in all the familiar places. I swallowed hard against the swell. Alvy did not wait for my answer. "He is a man like any other," she said. "He is a man like no other." She moved her eyes to the stones stacked on the porch of Keane's masonry shop across the way.

"Have that good cider then and tell me of Baird," I said. She was consumed with her thoughts and did not notice the red heat on my cheeks. Such was the nature of Baird's stain, this I knew. His salty taste and the fine down on his chest lingered long after his shadow passed through a woman's door.

"He is a dancer, a poet, a rogue," she said. "He was traveling with a troop of his kind. He's been through before."

"Yes," I said. "I know of these men." And of the oath Baird took to know no other woman but me if he were to return.

"Then you know what they are," she said. "But he was different than the others," Alvy's voice dipped in reverence. "The weave of his words, Rose, was the rarest thing. Every lie he spoke enchanted me." She paused. "I am a fool."

"You are no fool, Alvy," I said. "You are a woman."

The liquor and the deepness of the hour thinned the veneer that normally conceals women such as Alvy and me.

"The irony of men I most enjoy, Rose," said Alvy, "is the hardness, the evidence of desire, over which is stretched skin as soft as-"

"Velvet," I said, touching her skirt. "How long did you share a bed?"

"Five days and five nights," she said. "And had it been five years my desire would have been as fervent, my folds as welcoming."

The lanterns cast a forgiving light, softening the lines of her face and bathing her in a golden glow. I could not take my eyes from her. My throat went dry, so I drank.

"Imagine this," she said, "his lips are as lush and full as any woman's. These he pressed to my ear in the first light of dawn and said, 'Alvy,' as he pushed into me. 'Alvy, Alvy,' he said as he filled me, 'Today it is my prayer,'" she paused. "I let myself believe it."

As I had believed him when he said his prayer was *Rose* in exactly the same manner two winters before last. "This morning, was it?" I said.

"Yes," she said, "and then he left. He promised to return. I will hope for such--will die hoping--but it was surely another lie. I will not know him again." She arched one

eyebrow then tipped back the last drop of her cider. "Except for when I wrap myself in his velvet gift." She clutched at her skirt and spilled a handful of coins on the table.

"For the drink," she said. "And perhaps one day I will repay you the company."

"I'll take only that for the cider," I said, pushing the bulk of money back towards her. "The whiskey was my contribution."

Alvy nodded. "This is not a night for arguments," she said. "So I will thank you for the whiskey, Rose," she paused. "And for the gentleness in your voice."

I stood with her and draped my arm about her waist to walk her out. She smelled of the earth and the spent drink. The years had not padded her curves and she was lithe beneath her cloak. Had Baird taken her hands and stood with her before the firelight? Had he cupped her breast in his hand and moved his mouth to the hard nub there?

I turned to Alvy in the doorway and kissed her. Her return was neither indifferent nor desperate. We might have shared a bed, a move that had never seemed natural or appealing to me until that moment, but our respective wounds dappled the night. Hers were fresh and sharp. Mine were worn and dull. They simultaneously ignited and extinguished the desire between us.

Baird.

"To the comfort of your blankets and tears," I whispered, breathing in the richness of her hair. Alvy brushed her fingers against my cheek.

She mounted her cart and snapped the reins. The wheels turned slowly under the weary animal, but then she was a moving thing beneath the moon. She disappeared into the night as I basked in the warmth of her kiss.

I poured three fingers of the fine scotch whiskey into my empty cider pint. I unlaced my boots and hitched my foot upon the table. The satin ribbon around my ankle was faded, but still it shimmered with the memory of the night he tied it there.

I mourned for Alvy and myself. I mourned for Darrington and his wife. I mourned for Baird and his indelible shadow. I mourned for the castles and the warriors and the virgins.

END

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