



Creative Writing

Very Short Stories

The Rosary

“I remember!”

“Thank goodness, I remember.”

She pushed the words off her tongue, past dry, withered lips, and through the mask of her misshapen hands. The words sat for a moment like mist before vaporizing into the still air around her. She lifted her face from the cradle of her hands then, and eased upright in her chair — slowly, carefully, ignoring the popping sounds that came now with every movement of her spine — so she could look out onto the summertime lawn.

The bumble bees and the butterflies playing tag among the flowers seemed today to be painted with some cheap brand of watercolor — their wings left trails of yellow and black and orange across the pale blue backdrop of the sky. It was hard to watch the colors mixing and trailing and fading like that, so she rubbed her eyes to clear the scene. Funny, her fingers came away warm and wet.

But she *did* remember, and that was the key. Maybe it was the key she thought had been lost when they unpacked her things eighteen years ago, put her slippers near someone else’s bed and arranged her pictures on someone else’s bureau.

The man had come in just after lunch, that time of day when she and her neighbors were pushed or guided into the sunroom and allowed to sit. (They imagined, I guess, that it made some difference to her whether she sat looking at the walls of her room or out at the summertime lawn.) He had brought some cookies on a paper plate, and he brought some roses from the garden, roses with their stems still mean and thorny. She thought the flowers seemed to suit the man well.

The man drew up a hard plastic chair, ignoring the cushioned, comfortable ones around the room, and sat down next her. She knew the man wouldn’t stay long, would use the hard chair as an excuse to keep the visit short.

She listened to the man tell his stories — stories about people she did not know, about places she had not been, about things she would not see — and she nodded and smiled now and again, just to be polite. Soon her eyes would drift off to the lawn or her mind would drift back to her past, her past before this place and this man. And the man would watch, watch carefully for that drifting, because it signaled the end of his visit.

Today, the end came just fifteen minutes after it began, one of the shortest visits by far. But today, the man bent down and kissed her on the cheek and pressed something into her hand before he hurried out the door.

“I found this in a shoebox,” the man told her, “you keep it for me, okay?”

And then he was gone for another month.

When she opened her hand, she found a little rosary coiled up there. The cheap tin overlay was peeling from the crucifix and the little black beads had become misshapen by the rub of thumb and forefinger.

But she remembered.

She remembered stringing the beads one by one until she had counted ten in a row, then placing a bigger bead in the line before starting the next ten.

She remembered how she couldn’t afford the five dollars the Sisters had wanted for an “official” Communion rosary and how she had cried as she strung these beads. And she remembered the eight-year-old who carried them to the altar sixty years ago.

She remembered that the mean and thorny man, the once-a-month visitor, was that same little boy, and next month, and she would remember to tell him so.

And once she told him that, then he would remember, too. Remember to pack up her pictures and her slippers and guide her out of this place and back into his world.

He will remember, won’t he?

Goin' Home

"I can't believe this is happening," Mark thought, looking out the window, out onto the hospital lawn that had become more familiar to him than his own back yard. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head from side to side, hoping the movement would wipe away the image. When he looked again though, the scene was still playing out down there on the lawn. (He realized then that rubbing your eyes and shaking your head never *really* worked, it was just something TV characters did to make you understand that they couldn't believe what they were seeing.)

Mark's mom and dad were down there on the lawn, standing near the '97 Chevy Cavalier that was parked in the hospital drive. Looks like Dad had been patching the rust spots again — Mark noticed bright burgundy blotches of primer among the grayer, faded ones.

"She gets us here, Markie," his dad would tell him, "gets us here to be with you, and that's what counts."

Those were the days when Mark would cry — cry because the pain was stabbing at his body from his toes all the way up to his hair; cry because the morphine drip wasn't working and the doctors were afraid give him more; cry because Mom and Dad had to drive around in a 17-year-old car, held together with primer and prayers, just so they could keep paying for the doctors and the hospital and the hopelessness.

Today, though, the pain was gone, and Mark was excited to tell his mom and dad all about it. But they were just standing beside the car talking to Dr. Stevens.

Mark rapped on the sealed up window. (Funny, he couldn't feel the window under his fist). "Hey doc! Don't spill it for me! I want to tell 'em myself!" he shouted into the room.

He had opened his mouth to shout again when he saw his sister come onto the walking path that wound behind the hospital grounds. Emily was tall and beautiful and he worshiped her. At two, she was his 10-year-old nanny; at eight, his 16-year-old "girlfriend"; at 12, his 20-year-old goddess. She had won a scholarship to Yale two years before (at least his cancer hadn't ruined *that*), and the hurt of his missing her was almost as bad as the pain of his treatments. But she called often and she wrote even more, and the sound of her voice and the sight of her hand on the page was better than the best drugs the doctors could find.

She looked different today, though. Her clothes weren't hanging quite right. Her hair was hanging *all* wrong. Her beautiful face was puffy and bloated, almost like she was wearing a Halloween mask.

He knocked on the window again (and still couldn't feel it beneath his hand). "Emily!" he called, "Hey Emmie! Come on up! I'm feeling great today, come up and see!" But she didn't even glance toward the sound.

Mark looked back toward the knot of people standing near the car— Dr. Stevens, his mom and his dad. They all looked kinda grim today. Kinda like the way they had looked when they stood beside his bed and told him he had cancer. But they had already been there—had already done that—and besides, Dr. Stevens should be telling his folks that Mark was cured. He studied their faces for a few minutes, tried to read their lips, but he was too far away to make much sense of it all.

Finally, they began to move, slowly, like their shoes were caked with mud, his mom and dad toward the back of the car, Dr. Stevens toward the hospital entrance.

"Hey!" Mark called (to no one who could hear him), "That's my stuff! Why are you guys taking my stuff?" Mark watched as his dad opened the trunk and loaded his little suitcase inside and then watched some more as his baseball bat and cap, his radio and his comic books went in beside it.

His stuffed bulldog was the last to go, the one Emily had brought him home from school. Handsome Dan wore a scarf around his neck that said "YALE" on it, and a funny little cap with a "Y" on the front. He loved that goofy dog... it reminded him of Emmie. Dad settled it in next to his suitcase and slammed down the lid of the trunk.

"Hey!" Mark thought, "I'm goin' home! I'm finally goin' home! As soon as they finish puttin' my stuff in the car, they're comin' up for me!"

Mark was relieved that he finally understood what was going on, 'cause to tell the truth, he was gettin' kinda scared. He glanced down at his shoeless feet and clutched at the thin and worn hospital gown. "I guess I'd better get dressed." He said this out loud, just to seal the deal. But before he could turn or move or even look up, he heard car doors slam—bam, bam, bam—and he heard the Chevy's engine arguing with his dad's ignition key.

"Hey!" Mark shouted, "Hey, where are you guys goin'? Hey! Hey! Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeey....!" (And that last "hey" was a scream that even he couldn't hear.)

He watched the car and his mom and his dad and his beautiful Emmie drive away. He noticed that Dad had caught the tail end of Handsome Dan's scarf, (the one that said "YALE" on it) in the lid of the trunk, and he watched it dance down the drive behind the car.

Now the puffy, bloated mask was his to wear 'cause he couldn't stop his tears. Where were they going? Why did they leave him here? **WHAT WAS GOING ON?**

He turned away from the window then, thinking he should find a nurse or Dr. Stevens, and when he did, he noticed that his room was bare and that the IV drip was silent and that his bed had been stripped down to the mattress.

And he noticed — again — that he didn't feel any pain.

"I can't believe this is happening," Mark thought.

Sunday Visit

I'll always remember a strange bird I met one lazy Sunday afternoon in late spring, just before the heat of summer would make the flower buds pop into full color.

I had grabbed a cushion from the chaise lounge, stuffed a pillow under my arm, set my sunglasses on my head, picked up the Sunday edition of the Post-Gazette, and walked out into the back yard for a little springtime sunning.

My interest in the news faded pretty quickly when I realized that a nap—a nap in the sun—was exactly what I needed to make the day perfect. (I'm a firm believer in the ability of a nap to make a day perfect.) So I tossed the paper aside, settled back on the cushion, closed my eyes behind my shades, and almost immediately drifted into that first creamy level of doze, where the sound of a song on a radio or the bark of a dog in the neighborhood could become the players in a nap-time dream.

A squawk filtered into that doze though, soon after it had begun. At first, it was quiet and foggy and didn't really register in my subconscious. But then it became louder and more insistent, until it got so loud it jolted me wide awake.

My heart clenched just a second longer than normal — I thought I'd see a hawk swooping down ready to attack. I looked up toward the sky and down toward my feet, looked right and left, but the sky was still clear and blue and free of the shadow of a giant bird of prey.

Yet the squawk came again, louder than ever.

I propped myself up on my elbow and turned to look behind me.

There, about two feet from my cushion, sat a little robin, the most comical I'd ever seen. He was a chubby thing—all ruffled and in disarray — and two tufts of feathers grew out of his head. They sat like devil horns just above each eye, reaching up and then floating back just a bit over his young skull. He cocked his head at me and squawked again, not asking any questions it seemed, just making sure I understood he was there.

He took two hops closer, then lifted his stout little body into the air and fluttered off with shaky inexperience.

I grinned as I watched him sputter away and resumed my nap and my perfect springtime day.

Mass that Sunday evening ended at seven, and on the way home, I stopped for a gallon of chocolate chip ice cream. I had picked a carton that was nice and soft, so I was thinking about having a big scoop as I pulled my car into the driveway and cut the engine. But out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of a funny tuft of feather on the wall to my left, and there he sat—that same pudgy little bird from this afternoon.

How odd that I would see the same bird twice in one day! There must be a nest in one of my maples. He seemed to be trying to earn his wings, but was still much more comfortable hopping from place to place.

Another squawk and off he flew with a wobble.

I saw the bird twice again that Monday, once in the morning when the clouds were just white puffs in the sky, and once again that afternoon when the clouds had become angry and dark. That second time, the rain had already started, and the pelting drops quickly turned into driving sheets, forcing runnels of rain down the streets.

That second time, I saw the little bird try again to lift his weight into the sky and return to the safety of the nest, but the rain had added extra ballast to his wings. He was stranded in the yard at the mercy of the thickening storm.

I wanted to go out and scoop him up and bring him safely inside, but just then, another bird (his mother, maybe?) flew down from the maple and landed next to him on the lawn. She nudged him a few times with her head and beak, pleading with him it seemed, to find some shelter, but he was too weak and too tired to take her advice. When she understood that he couldn't fly, the older bird moved in closer to him. She actually spread one wing over his chubby little body and sat out the storm with him there. I guess any mother would do the same.

I saw the bird only one more time, on Tuesday morning. The day dawned cool and sunny, washed clean from Monday's storm. I started to smile when I saw him again, but my smile faded after just a second or two.

No demanding squawk this time, no questioning look from under those tufts of devil-horn feathers, no little dance as he tried to hop and flap himself airborne. Today, he was just silent and still.

I actually got a lump in my throat as I stared at that little bird who had made me laugh for the past two days. I stood there for a minute or two (and now I'm running late for work) — then walked out into the back yard again, this time to bury him under the maple and finally out of the rain for good.