

Roses

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The evening before Jim Wilson's family moved, he and Bob Olding rode their bikes down to the Provo River to swim one more time. The last five boys were just leaving the hole, so Bob and Jim had it to themselves. They liked swimming alone. The other boys had left their fire. Bob and Jim put some wood on before they took off their clothes. The swimming hole was fifteen feet deep and a hundred feet across. It had a ledge to dive off from and a rope tied to an overhanging cottonwood limb to swing on. A wide band of trees and willows screened the river from the few scattered houses.

Jim's family was moving to Idaho, and Bob didn't know what he was going to do. He and Jim were best friends and did everything together. Bob liked Jim's family a lot because they were friendly and welcoming and treated him as one of their own kids. Bob's father had died of sugar diabetes two years earlier in June, the same month Jim and his family had moved in, and the Wilsons living across the street helped Bob in his loneliness and sorrow. Bob's brother Jack was in the army and his mom worked late, so their house was often empty.

Later that night at the river, Bob and Jim were floating on their backs, counting falling stars, when Bob saw headlights coming down the lane through the high willows.

"Hey, look! Somebody's coming." Bob lowered his legs to tread water.

"Ah, nuts." Jim was treading water.

At the top of the river bank near where they'd left their bicycles, the headlights stopped and went out, and the car vanished against the dark trees. A man got out of the car and walked toward the fire.

"Hey, it's my dad," Jim said. "Hey, Dad!"

Jim's dad walked down to the water's edge and stood partly silhouetted by the fire. He was a big man. He wore overalls and a long-sleeved

work shirt. "You boys having a good time? You're kind of late, Son. Your mom sent me down to see if you were all right."

Bob and Jim swam in closer.

"We're just fine, Dad. Sorry Mom got worried. We forgot what time it was. The water's just great. Just perfect, Dad. The best it gets all year. Hey, why don't you come in?"

Looking at Jim's dad and hearing his voice, Bob clenched his jaws tight. Bob's dad had sometimes come down to swim with him until his diabetes got bad. Bob's brother Jack had come down, too, before he joined the army to fight in the war.

"It's really great, Dad."

Bob and Jim stood in the waist-deep water, their wet upper bodies shining in the light from the half moon, the fire reflecting off the water.

"It's been awhile." Jim's dad hesitated. "Sure, why not?"

He sat on the log by the fire to take off his shoes and socks, and then took off his clothes and piled them on the log. He waded in to his knees and then dove, swam under water and came up by Bob and Jim.

"Hey, this is great."

Jim's dad swam, dove off the ledge, and swung out on the rope, his body white in the moonlight. He ducked Jim, and then both Bob and Jim tried to duck him, but they couldn't do it, and he ducked them both, all three of them wrestling and going under and laughing when they came up. Feeling Jim's dad push him under felt like his own dad doing it, and Bob thought he might cry, but he didn't. He'd stopped crying about his dad. He, Jack, and their dad used to have great water fights.

Jim's dad didn't stay long. He got out, dried himself with his shirt, and got dressed. He told them he was putting money on the log so they could buy double-decker cones at Cook's Ice Cream on the way home, and said to enjoy themselves. Jim's dad was always telling Jim to enjoy himself.

"Now don't stay too much longer, you two. You don't want to worry your mothers."

"We won't."

Treading water, Bob watched Jim's dad vanish into the shadows. He heard the car door shut and the motor start and then saw the headlights come on. Jim's dad backed up to turn around. Bob watched the light against the high tree limbs until it vanished.

If Jim's family went to get an ice cream cone, drove up Provo Canyon

for a picnic, went to a movie, or did anything else fun, Jim's dad invited Bob. Jim's mom's kitchen was full of the smell of good food. She always had cookies and milk or a piece of pie or cake for Jim and Bob in the afternoons. Jim's dad invited Bob to supper if Bob was in the house in the evening. Bob's favorite dessert was chocolate pie with whipped cream. Working, Bob's mom didn't have much time to cook and bake. Bob and Jim were in the Scouts and the teachers' quorum together, and Jim's dad helped them earn their merit badges and took Bob with them on Scout campouts.

Bob understood that Jim's dad wanted him to feel welcome. His mom did too, but especially Jim's dad. Sometimes he would muss up Bob's hair or put his hand on his shoulder.

"How are things going, Bob? Things going okay? Can I do anything for you?"

One day Jim's mom told Bob that Mr. Wilson had lost his dad when he was a boy.

"His dad died, too?"

"Yes, I'm afraid he did, Bob. Mr. Wilson was just about your age too when his dad passed away. It was very sad."

Bob's eyes filled with tears, and Jim's mom put her arms around him and hugged him.

"Oh, Son, Son. I'm afraid there's a lot of unhappiness and misery in this old world."

When Bob helped Jim weed the vegetable and flower gardens or mow the lawn, Jim's dad gave them money for a soda or an ice cream. Jim's dad raised beautiful flowers and roses. He spent a lot of time fertilizing, pruning, and deadheading the roses that grew across the front of the house and along the path to the front door. People walking down Third West stopped to admire his roses and bent down to smell them.

Jim had a baby sister, an older sister still at home, two married sisters, one brother seventeen, and one older married brother who was in the army in the war like Bob's brother Jack. The family got together a lot for dinners and picnics. And they talked about babies, pregnancies, the war, jobs, money, the Church, and other family members. They laughed a lot, and made a lot of jokes, and made things seem natural and good. Jim's mom had a Brownie camera and was always taking snapshots, which she put up on a cork-board in the kitchen.

Jim's seventeen-year-old brother, Ken, had a steady girlfriend, Me-

lissa, and one Saturday when Bob was over for supper, Jim's dad told Ken just to take it easy because he'd been out Friday night till almost two.

"Now you just watch yourself, young man. You're only seventeen. I don't want you coming home to tell your mom and me that Melissa's pregnant."

"Ah, Dad, I got more sense than that, I hope. Pass the potatoes please."

"Well, I hope so, too. You're a good kid, and so is Melissa, so just keep it that way. You get that young lady home by twelve on weekends. Nothing you need to be doing after twelve."

"Ah, Dad."

"Just the same, you do as you're asked."

Nobody was embarrassed.

Jim pushed his baby sister in the baby buggy, and sometimes he had to change her diaper, and give her a bath, but it didn't embarrass him.

Bob never saw Jim's dad hit Jim or any of the other kids, or even threaten to. The Wilsons didn't have a list of rules and punishments. Jim knew what was right. His dad raised his voice sometimes, but he always talked to Jim about what he'd done wrong. Bob couldn't recall that Jim's dad ever punished Jim in any way. He didn't seem to believe in punishment. He was a kind, hopeful man. He didn't like people to swear; and one day when he heard Bob say, "Dammit to hell anyway," he called him on it, and Bob was embarrassed and apologized.

Even after two years, missing his dad was like an ache in his whole body. It was hard to tell other boys about how great his dad was if he was dead. Bob wanted to see his dad, hear him, and have his dad reach out to put his arm around him and hold him close like he used to, or even get mad at him sometimes. He wanted to look at his dad and see he had his dad's eyes or nose, was tall and thin like his dad, or maybe had his hair, and he wanted to smell his dad's good smell when he held him close. His dad had never whipped him.

"Your father watches over you from heaven, Son," Bob's mom told him. "He knows how hard it is for you. Your dad and I were married in the temple and we will all be together again someday. Families are eternal. You know that, Son."

Bob's mom showed him their family group sheets and pedigree charts and old photos of family members to prove to him how big their family was. She had photos of his dad when he was growing up and told

him stories, but Bob didn't find this very helpful. He didn't think that a dad who would be resurrected was as good as a live dad. Bob knew his mom was lonely, too, and worried about Jack being killed in the war, but he was too lonely himself to think about his mom much.

Bob and Jim swam for another fifteen minutes that night after Jim's dad left, and then they got out and stood by the fire. The summer night was warm, but they crouched down so they could dry off and feel the heat against their chests and arms. Then they got dressed and took the money Jim's dad had left. They didn't talk as they rode their bikes down the lane and through the dark tree-lined streets and through the pools of light under the corner lamps. After they bought their double-decker cones at Cook's, they walked their bikes and ate their cones slowly.

Jim's family left for Idaho the next afternoon. Jim's brother and sister had gone with the furniture van earlier. Neighbors and ward members stood around saying good-bye to the rest of Jim's family. Jim's dad shook Bob's hand. Then he pulled Bob to him and hugged him, both arms around him tight, pulling his face into his chest, as a dad would hug a son.

"You're a fine boy, Bob, and you've been a good friend to my Jim. You'll be okay."

Bob and Jim shook hands. Jim's mom hugged Bob and told him to be good.

Bob's mom stood by him as Jim's family drove off down Third West. She waved to Jim's mom. Deep in his pockets, Bob's hands were tight fists. He clamped his jaws hard.

"They're nice people. We'll miss them in the neighborhood. You'll miss Jim. It's hard when someone you love is gone."

Bob didn't say anything. Jim's dad's old Plymouth turned right on Third South, which was Highway 89, Jim's mom still waving from the open window, Jim's face in the open passenger window. He didn't wave.

Bob's mom ran her hand through his hair and kissed him on the cheek. "We're going to have chocolate pie with whipped cream for dessert tonight."

Bob looked up at his mom. She was smiling. He nodded. He turned and watched the corner where the Plymouth had vanished, and then, his hands still fists deep in his pockets, he followed his mom into the house.

That fall Bob turned fifteen and got a part-time job at the Cascade Print Shop cutting stock, printing wedding invitations on a small job

press, and cleaning up every evening. A man named Spears was the owner and ran the shop with another man named Mel Gibbs.

The day Spears hired Bob, he asked him about school and his family and who his father was. Bob told him his father was dead.

“Well, that’s too darn bad, kid. I’m sorry to hear it.”

The first day he sent Bob out to buy a pie and milk for an evening snack and told him if he worked hard he’d get a Christmas bonus and a paid summer vacation and time off at Christmas.

But by the end of the first week, Spears, who always had a cigarette in his mouth, started telling Bob jokes and stories about sex, as if that was the only thing he could think about or the only thing that pleased him, as if swearing and dirty words were the only words he knew. Men and boys needed sex all the time, and sex was a big joke that somehow women didn’t understand.

“We’re all wired the same inside, kid. Don’t fool yourself about that. Even those cute high-school girls you like so much.”

Spears enjoyed describing a world Bob didn’t know and to which Spears was trying to introduce him. Bob wanted the world to be a good place. He went to church; he was a Scout and had the priesthood; he wanted to be a good person like Jim’s dad said he was. Yet Bob listened, and sometimes he laughed. Spears was married and had a daughter, Betty, in college. Bob couldn’t understand how Spears could be such a bad person and a good person too and have a family. Spears called his wife Dolly, and she always kissed him on the cheek when she came into the shop. She phoned him every afternoon to tell him what she was cooking him for supper.

“Hello, honey,” Spears always said. “Are you having a nice day? Do you need anything? Can I bring anything home? Do you want to go to a movie or do something tonight?” Spears didn’t swear when he talked to Mrs. Spears.

But it was more than the bad language and the dirty stories; it was not trusting people, too. For Spears there was little goodness or trust in the world and not much that was worthwhile. Everybody was out to get what they could, so you had to be careful or you would be cheated and lied to. Drinking, drunken parties, and sex were the only things worth telling stories about or experiencing when you were young. It was as if for Spears there couldn’t be any innocence or goodness in anybody. He told Bob sto-

ries about all the crooked bankers, businessmen, and lawyers in Provo, some of them bishops. Spears wasn't a member of the Church.

"The war, kid. That shows what people are really like, don't it? Bombing and killing everybody? It's just because big businesses want to make a lot of money building bombers and tanks."

Bob couldn't get away from Spears. He needed to pay for clothes, school, and dates, and to help his mom, and he was learning how to do things in the shop. Good after-school jobs were hard to find. He couldn't give up a good job. Bob wanted Spears to be kind and good like Jim's dad and his own dad, and he couldn't understand why Spears had to be the way he was. He wanted to ask Spears what his own dad had been like, but he didn't.

It seemed strange to Bob that nobody except him knew what was happening. He thought there should be somebody to tell Spears to stop talking like he did, a policeman or Bishop Stark or maybe even his mom, but there wasn't anybody. He needed his dad or Jack to talk to Spears.

He wanted to say: "Why do you talk like this, Mr. Spears? Would you like your wife and your daughter Betty to hear you? Wouldn't that be embarrassing? Do you want them to know what you're really like? I don't want you to say those things or tell me dirty jokes anymore."

But Bob was afraid Spears might become angry and fire him. Spears taught Bob how to run the job press, set type for small jobs, and cut stock. He was often kind. Two or three times a week he gave Bob money and sent him to the Dairy Lunch next door to buy a pie or some other pastry and milk. He paid him well and gave him a Christmas bonus. If Bob had a date or wanted to leave work early for a football game or something, Spears swept up for him. Spears worked hard, was honest, and got the jobs out on time.

"Go ahead, kid. Have a good time. Enjoy yourself. You're only young once." If Bob had a date, just as he walked out the door, Spears would always say, "Tap her light, kid, okay?" And then Spears and Mel would laugh, although Bob didn't understand why. Spears always wanted to know his date's name and made Bob describe her, and the next afternoon he asked Bob what she was like and what they had done.

"You sure that's all you did, kid? You sure about that?" And he would laugh and tell a story about one of his old girlfriends when he was in high school—Brenda, Delores, Gladys, Mona, and Jolene. A girl was someone a boy had sex with and then told other boys about. Spears was al-

ways talking about the girls he made in high school. A girl wasn't worth going out with if a boy didn't make her. "Isn't that right, Mel?"

"Sure, kid. You don't want to spend all that hard-earned money for nothing."

Spears was always blinking and squinting his blue, milky eyes against the cigarette smoke when he talked. It seemed impossible to Spears that a boy in high school could date a girl without trying to have sex. Bob wanted to ask him if his daughter Betty went with boys like that when she was at Provo High, but he never did.

Spears's face was pale, as if he were always sick. He always showered in the washroom and changed his clothes at six o'clock.

"The little lady doesn't like me to come home dirty, kid. Have to do what the little lady wants, isn't that right, Mel?"

"Sure. That's the way it is."

Spears always called Mrs. Spears the little lady when she wasn't there. Spears kept a bottle of whisky in the washroom; and if he was drinking, he would sometimes stand around after his shower drying off and talking to Mel about his old girlfriends. Mel drank too. He always laughed at Spears's stories, as if that was part of his job. Bob kept busy sweeping the floor and cleaning the washbasin and toilet.

Spears never took more than a drink or two from the bottle, and he always ate mints afterwards to freshen his breath. He would wink at Bob when he did that. Spears sometimes had Bob come to his house to wash windows and do other things for Mrs. Spears. Mrs. Spears would give him a nice lunch. Spears didn't smoke in the house. He called Mrs. Spears "sweetheart" and "honey," and she called him "love." Spears kept a nice yard; he grew flowers, especially roses. He spent a lot of time taking care of his roses. Bob didn't like Spears to raise flowers and roses. It didn't seem right for him to be like Jim's dad and want to do that.

The war ended and Jack came home. He told Bob he ought to enlist when he graduated from high school so he could get the G.I. bill and go to college, and that he'd be drafted anyway.

"You need to get away from Utah and see what the world's like, Bob."

Bob talked to Jack about Spears, but Jack told him to live with it. It wasn't the end of the world.

When Bob told Spears he was going to enlist, Spears said he'd enjoy the army.

“Wish I’d joined when I was your age, kid. Lots of women around those army camps, if you know where to look.”

During the three years Bob worked for Spears, he often thought about Jim and his family. When he’d eaten supper at Jim’s, he’d knelt with them around the table to pray and later read scriptures. In the winter evenings in that warm house, Bob had played Rook and board games with Jim and his family, eaten cookies, cake, and fresh-baked bread with butter and jam, and chocolate pie with whipped cream, and drunk tall glasses of cold milk, and he had always felt welcome.

In basic training at Fort Bragg, Bob had a memory of the trust and love in the Wilsons’ house, his friendship with Jim, and the example of Jim’s dad and mom to help him. He knew a good family was possible. He’d planned to go to Idaho to visit Jim but never did. They wrote a few times and then lost touch, but Bob still remembered the Wilsons.

After basic training Bob had a short delay en route before he was shipped out to Germany. He went by to see Spears, but the shop was closed for the Christmas vacation. He didn’t go to the house.

Bob was stationed in Frankfurt in the army of occupation the winter after World War II ended. He was a clerk/typist in the provost marshal’s section.

Their cities mostly destroyed, the black market the only viable economy, the Germans were starving and freezing and filled with cynicism and despair. Children begged for food on the streets. Available for a bar of soap or a pack of cigarettes, German women crowded the compound gate or walked along the high fence at night in the deep snow calling to the G.I.s to come out. All the men in Bob’s section had German girlfriends except him and a G. I. named Simmons. Standing at the barracks window at night watching the men go out to the German women, Bob thought of Spears and his stories, and he wasn’t surprised.

Bob went to the section parties. He enjoyed sitting and talking to the men in his section and their German girlfriends, playing pinochle, and watching the couples dance to the loud German music. Even though they smoked, got drunk, and slept together, the G. I.s and their girlfriends seemed like ordinary people as far as Bob could tell. They reminded him of Spears. The German girlfriends told him about the Russians and how they raped all the German girls and women they could find. Bob knew that the German woman who cleaned up the provost marshal’s offices had lost her husband and three sons in the war. She had fled from the

East Zone when the Russians came. Her husband had owned a bicycle factory.

“Es gibt kein Gott mehr,” she would mutter to herself and shake her head as she walked down the hall carrying her mop bucket.

Sergeant Cassill spoke German, and Bob asked him what Frau Heneken said. “She said that there isn’t a God anymore.”

Hundreds of thousands of people had died in the great American and British bombing raids on the German cities, the firestorms moving faster than a family with children could run. A million German prisoners of war were starving or freezing to death in Russia. The square miles of rubble and bombed-out buildings in Frankfurt helped make all these stories true for Bob.

At the section parties, the German girlfriends told him he should have a nice German girlfriend. “The war is over. You are too religious.”

Bob always smiled when one of the women told him that. There was no point in trying to tell them that keeping the commandments and knowing the Church was true made him feel safe and good.

In August 1947 Bob was discharged from the army at Camp Kilmer. The day after he got home, he drove his mother’s car in the late evening down to the river to go for a swim, but the hole was gone. The Army Corps of Engineers had gutted the river on a flood-control project the previous spring. Standing on a high rock dike, Bob watched the dark, moving, channeled water. He thought about the night Jim’s dad swam with them.

Bob’s mom had written him in her last letter before he left Germany that Spears had died of a heart attack. She’d gone to the funeral because Mr. Spears had been so good to him. Mrs. Spears remembered Bob when his mom introduced herself and said to have him come by to visit. Bob’s mom reminded him of this. He went the second day he was home.

“Oh, it’s so nice of you to come,” Mrs. Spears said. She had him sit down in the front room. “Mr. Spears thought the world of you. He had several boys work for him through the years, and he said you were the best of the lot. He said you worked hard and you learned very quickly.”

“Thank you.”

“My husband was a good man, a fine man. He was a good provider. He kept the lawns and yard so nice and had such beautiful flowers. People used to stop just to admire his roses. You know yourself how he used to have you come over to wash my windows to make my life a little easier.”

Mrs. Spears stood up from the sofa and took a silver-framed wedding photograph of her and Spears from the top of the piano. She polished the glass with the hem of her blue apron.

"Of course, Mr. Spears smoked, and he drank a little. I know that. But then we all have our faults and failings. Betty and I miss him so much. He always talked to me about you boys that worked for him at the shop. He liked to teach boys and help them get a start in life. Boys going out into this terrible old world need all the help they can get, don't they?"

Mrs. Spears handed the wedding photograph to Bob. Spears was dressed in a dark suit, white shirt, and tie. He looked young and handsome. He wore a white flower in his lapel. He was smiling. Bob handed the photograph back to Mrs. Spears.

"Yes, ma'am, I guess they do."

"You're certainly a fine-looking young man. The army must have been a good experience for you at your age, now the war's over."

"Yes, ma'am."

When Bob left, Mrs. Spears told him to be sure and come by again, and he said he would. Standing by his mom's car, Bob turned to look back at Spears's house. Spears had planted roses along the front of the house and up both sides of the path to the front porch. A father holding a little boy by the hand and a mother pushing a baby buggy stopped on the sidewalk to look at the roses. The father held his son up to touch a rose. In the early evening light, the red, white, and pink roses were very beautiful.