

Flower Talk – *Lolita Chakrabarti*

Rose Garden was nothing particularly special to look at, she had a plain face, a big smile and flat feet but she was extraordinarily tall.

She was six foot three and she had stood above everyone else from the age of twelve.

She didn't like it much but she managed her height as best she could.

She would hear the same punch-lines about her height and her name, again and again, from a multitude of different people, and she would always try to smile.

That was her charm, she was an unplucked flower and the most fragrant in the garden.

Her father had worked in fruit and veg back in Kingston, Jamaica.

When he'd come to England on his own, he had slowly worked his way up the Blooming Fruit Company in Birmingham and with each pay rise he brought a new member of his family over.

First his wife, then each of his three daughters, Hyacinth, Bluebell and then Rose.

Rose had been sixteen when she first arrived in England.

By the time the girls got married, their parents had headed back to their homeland to a sunny retirement in Sav-La-Mar, where they bought a three-bed bungalow with plenty of space for Mr Garden's chickens and Mrs Garden's china figurines.

Rose became a teacher of English in a secondary girl's school in Birmingham.

She loved English, the scope of the language, the way it could make you feel, the sense of living so many lives through books.

She would teach with great passion about all the heart-stopping romances in literature – Anthony and Cleopatra, Miss Bennet and Mr D'Arcy, Heathcliff and Cathy. And whenever she taught, her heart would flutter a little and her pulse would jump a beat.

She hadn't yet had romance in her life but she was ever hopeful, ever watchful for Mr Right.

But by the time she was forty-eight years old, he still hadn't materialised and Rose stopped looking and just enjoyed the romance in her books.

One Friday in winter, Rose's good friend and fellow flower, Lily, asked her if she wanted to go dancing.

Lily was a short woman in her fifties who had a naughty sense of humour and a great zest for life. Rose was tired from a long week at work but decided that a quick two-step would brighten up her weekend and lift her cold spirits. So she said yes.

She met Lily in their usual coffee shop and the two women walked to the church hall where 'Two Step and Tea' had been held for the last five years.

As they entered the hall, they saw all the usual crowds and they greeted everyone warmly.

Ralph, a sprightly mechanic from Walsall, asked Lily for the first dance, as he always did.

Rose was just fastening the buttons on her dance shoes and wondering how low she would have to stoop when asked to dance when an unfamiliar voice came out of the blue. 'I wondered if I might have the greatest of pleasures?'

She looked up. A very kindly, extremely tall man in his fifties was looking down at her.

She felt a bit awkward as she stood up next to him.

To her great surprise and delight she realised that even standing at her full height, with her dance heels on, he was still a good two inches taller than her.

Now this had never happened to Rose before, it was a strange feeling. She felt almost petite.

He stood waiting for something and she suddenly realised that she hadn't replied to his question.

'Why I would love to, thank you, yes,' she said, surprised but extremely pleased.

They danced the first dance, a cheeky, flirtatious little foxtrot. 'You lead beautifully,' said Rose, 'I

don't think I've seen you here before.' She could see that he was very well dressed and gentle but firm in the way he held her.

'No,' he answered. 'I used to go to classes in Nottingham with my wife.....'

'Oh,' said Rose with a disappointed nod.

Married, they were always married. It was too late for her, she thought, the good ones had all gone.

'I've just moved into the area,' he said, 'and you?'

'Lived here all my life,' she answered, glumly, 'Lily and I come when we can.'

'Good,' he said, 'That'll be something to look forward to then.'

What did he mean by that, she thought? Not very appropriate behaviour for a married man she considered.

She looked at him wistfully and realised that she would find it impossible to dance with this man knowing that he was married.

She had never met anyone quite like this, who'd made her feel so comfortable with herself.

But she thought, never mind, I've managed alone all this time. I know where I am on my own.

After another dance, Rose reluctantly suggested a cup of tea. 'Lovely,' he said and followed her across the hall to the urn in the corner.

They didn't dance again because Mrs Morris, a short woman with a stoop and a jealous streak, asked him to dance and then Rose didn't really see him again all evening.

Lily teased Rose all week. 'Found your Mr D'Arcy at last have we?' she joked.

'Don't be ridiculous!' said Rose, flushing crimson. 'He's not my type.'

'If you say so,' mocked Lily and dug her elbow into her ribs with an infectious snort.

Rose kept a neutral face but inside she felt her pretence at disinterest exhausting.

The next few weeks Lily went dancing without Rose. Rose kept finding excuses, 'I'm washing my hair, I'm cleaning my flat, I'm marking some books, I'm watching TV,' and soon Lily stopped asking.

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End of term arrived and with it was parents' evening for year eight.

Rose sat at her desk in her classroom and waited for parents to find her.

At the end of the evening, Miss Price, the headmistress bought a young girl in to meet Rose.

'Jewel, this is Miss Garden. She will be your English teacher from next term.'

Miss Price looked at Rose and said, 'I have to go and see one of the parents, I'll be back in a moment'.

Miss Price left the room and Rose was left with Jewel. 'You're new here?' asked Rose kindly.

'Yeah,' said Jewel.

'Are your parents here?' asked Rose.

‘My parents just split up. My Mum lives with her boyfriend in Nottingham. It’s just me and my Dad,’ said Jewel.

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ said Rose, ‘about your parents I mean.’

‘Me too,’ said Jewel sullenly.

Just then a head popped round the corner. ‘Ah there you are Jewel, I’ve been looking all over for you.’ Jewel shrugged and got up to join the man, her dad. As Rose looked up to say hello she suddenly realised that she was staring at the same, tall man from the tea dance.

‘Hello!’ he said warmly. ‘I looked for you at the dance hall but Lily said you were terribly busy.’

‘Yes,’ Rose said, flustered.

‘How are you?’ he asked awkwardly.

‘Fine...fine...yes...just fine,’ she managed.

‘Are you able to go to the dance this week or are you still very busy?’

‘No.....no.....no, I’m free this week. Very free.’

‘Oh, fantastic,’ he beamed. ‘I’ll see you there then.’ They were about to leave when he turned around and said, ‘I don’t even know your name.’

‘Rose,’ she blushed, ‘Rose Garden.’

He and Jewel laughed.

‘I know it’s a silly name,’ she muttered with embarrassment.

‘No, you don’t understand. I’m Michael but my friends call me Red.’ She looked at him blankly.

‘Nice to meet you Rose, I’m Red, Red Carnation.’

She looked at this gloriously tall, handsome, warm man and her eyes sparkled as she burst into a fit of girlish giggles.