

Affinity for Roses

Amy Koenig

Blaze climbs the splintered fence. Wisteria and Dusty Millers sulk in the shadow of the Tree of Heaven. Leaves create a jungle above Sterling Silver petals. You hovered above Blue Moon Climbers and I stood in front of Jeepers Creepers. In the tips of my three-year-old fingers was the Spell Binder—my pick for that week. With my right hand, I examine the petals of Velvet Touch.

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It's winter and the roses have all been pruned, Spell Binders cut to stumps, like your leg. That's how I remember it. Pruned, cutting away the dead and the dying, removing what was no longer going to bloom. You said it still hurt. I remember you reaching down and rubbing thin air.

"Do the roses feel the same way?" I ask.

You laughed at me, in the same mellow way you spoke.

"I don't know, maybe someday we'll find out."

I still don't know the answer to this question, not for sure anyway. Research is inconclusive.

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I remember how your red suspenders matched my socks and together they mimicked the Gypsy Rose. The hem of my jeans rolled up—I was always too short.

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Diffusion, blood-flow, creatine, potassium, calcium, all equaled confusion. Words I didn't know, couldn't understand, but still remember.

One I learned: dialysis.

Dialysis meant: hard days, the smile in your eyes was gone, the deep calm baritone laugh didn't greet me at the door. It meant that the rock tumbler didn't run, and you didn't play your harmonica. Yet, I still got my rose. "No matter what," you said.

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We are in the heart of the Amazon; the sweat dripping from your forehead is from the humid heat, the hard, white, sterile floor becomes a river. "Don't step off now, or the piranhas will eat you," your voice just above a whisper. The dull buzz of the machine beside the bed is butterfly wings. The next day, I bring you a small, stuffed monkey. No one denied us our illusions.

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I reach down and touch the now crackled concrete. The Spellbinders have been ripped from the tender, moist ground, and the first blades of spring grass have begun to replace them. I can't remember death through the rose-colored glasses of childhood. But I remember the way the pungent, sweet scent of Crimson Blush lingered on my hands.