

Whispering Grass

By Karen Costello-McFeat

By 8am, Emily Rose was already kneeling next to the flower beds. Clad in her workwear of faded, denim dungarees with her unruly hair held in check by a spotted bandana, she looked like a land-girl who had matured by a few decades. She was yanking loose the cleavers that threatened to colonise the entire garden. The chief suspect for their presence was sitting next to her panting. No walk was complete without her collie, Petra, returning with a garland of the weed.

Emily rocked back onto her heels and grabbed her mug bearing the legend World's Best Teacher. She took a mouthful of tea and grimaced. It was cold.

'And what's this?' she asked the dog while pointing to a slender, pink flower tucked between some salvias. 'Another of your imports?'

Emily reached to pull it loose, then changed her mind. It was a pretty little thing and did no harm. Her mother had created a glorious cottage garden and when she died, Emily wanted to honour her work while bringing it up-to-date. She added fruit canes and edible plants to the beds, took the insecticides to the dump and let some wild flowers and grasses mingle with the more traditional favourites.

Throughout her life, the garden had been her companion and keeper of her secrets. When a love affair failed, she would tell the plants. When her parents became ill and she eventually became as housebound as they, she would escape outside to whisper about her frustration and solitude. Though she sometimes viewed her own life as effectively at an end, the garden always offered proof that things revived. New life was seldom more than a season away.

'You know,' she said looking at the grass-heads silvered by sunlight, 'I don't think they would let me into the Chelsea flower show.'

The grasses nodded.

'But don't tell the trees!' she added laughing.

Her parents, old even when she was young, used to love the whimsical song. They'd put the record on the turn-table and dance to it, singing in wobbly, off-key voices and she would laugh and squeeze between their bodies to join in and be close to them.

'Rose? Is that you?'

Emily stretched and stood up to meet the gaze of her neighbour peering over the wall.

He was a nice chap, a few years older than her, widowed and newly retired. They had only passed a few words since his arrival a fortnight ago, since he was always going somewhere.

She hoped that he wasn't planning on doing any gardening, as he was attired in a neatly pressed pink button-down shirt, his thin blond hair freshly brushed and trimmed.

'How *are* you Henry,' she asked in a way that invited an honest reply.

'Oh, fine, fine,' he answered, but looked away.

Not fine then, thought Emily.

'Fancy a cup of tea? Mine is stone cold and I'm gasping.'

'If you're not busy. I don't want to be a bother or anything.'

Emily saw his loneliness and sadness. After all, they mirrored her own.

Fifteen minutes later, they were sitting at the tiny bistro table centred in the small square of brick paving that had been conceded to non-plant life.

'Lovely garden,' he said, admiring the profusion of flowers, the Turkish Delight scent of old roses, the background bass of insect life. 'What a gem.'

'Yes, I inherited it from my parents.'

He looked a bit embarrassed. 'I'm sorry for your loss, Rose. I heard you looked after your father for some time. That must have been hard.'

'Yes,' she said simply. 'It was.'

'My wife ...' he trailed off, then added, 'I looked after her.'

Emily put down her mug and reached out her hand and patted his. Here was someone who understood, who had experienced the hardships and joys of tending to the dying. 'My condolences. I know it's not enough. She must have been young whereas my dad was very old. I...'

'We don't really have the words for dying, or suffering, do we?'

'No,' Emily sighed. 'I don't think we do. That's why I tell my secrets to the plants. They seem to understand.'

'So that's who you were talking to. I'd assumed you were on the phone.' His face broke into a smile. 'I've never met a plant whisperer before. You are clearly very good.' He swept an arm across the colour-filled tangle of vegetation.

'Actually, Rose, that was why I wanted to talk to you.'

'It's Emily, actually. Rose is my last name. I get embarrassed and mumble.'

Henry blushed, his skin tone now matching his shirt. 'Oh!'

'Don't apologise. I just hate saying Miss, it seems so... well, such a failure ... and you had introduced yourself so politely that I fell into the old formality.'

'Miss Emily Rose. What a beautiful name. And don't be ashamed of being a miss. Anyone can marry if they're not fussy.'

'Thank you,' Emily said quietly. If only the rest of the world were so kind. It wasn't that she *was* fussy, she hadn't had a chance. While her friends were getting married, she was rushing home for the beginnings of what was to be a long run of medical emergencies. Considering

how well those relationships had worked out, she no longer felt so sad at her single state, but she always felt the lack of children.

'So, what brings you to me?' she asked resuming her habitual mask of brightness.

Rather than answering directly, Henry began to twiddle with his spoon. 'I just wondered if, well, if you could help an old man out.'

Emily stiffened. No, she would not be his nurse, his cleaning lady or his companion. Who did this man think he was? She felt her anger rising and Petra, sensing the change, looked up at her inquisitively. She held her breath waiting for the end of this scarce seedling friendship.

'My daughter, she's very ill. Same as her mother.'

Emily's anger deflated as suddenly as a burst tyre, replacing itself with shame.

'She has two children and her husband Ben, who is brilliant by the way, can't see how to take care of her and the children during the long summer vacation. I was wondering, then if, if...' Embarrassment at his helplessness and fear that she would say no prevented him from finishing the sentence.

'Yes,' Emily blurted. 'Of course, I'll help. I'd love to.'

Henry sat back. 'Well, that was easier than I thought!'

Scarcely able to contain her pleasure, Emily continued, 'I was a teacher, you know. (He did know, the post mistress had informed him.) And I love kids. I had to retire way too early and after everything and then the pandemic, I haven't found the energy to go back.'

The prospect of doing something useful, with children again but gently, on her home ground, brought a flush of energy.

'We'll need a project,' she continued. 'Six weeks is a long time to fill and they will be stressed about their mum.'

'They'll see her at the weekends. They're only about an hour away. Perhaps,' he said, 'you might help me make my garden a little sanctuary like this. Joanna, my daughter, is always going on about getting rid of lawns and wild gardens and forest gardening – whatever that is. Nothing would make her happier than knowing her children were helping her old dad create their own nature reserve.'

'You're not old,' Emily laughed. 'And when we've finished, she can come here to convalesce. I've read loads of articles on the healing power of gardens.'

She patted his arm again and rose adding, 'I'm going to get a pad and pens.'

When she returned with a fresh pot of tea, she said, 'Tell me about the children.'

So, the morning turned to afternoon as they plotted and planned. There was much to do, starting with getting rid of the bare lawn and preparing soil, perhaps building raised beds. There would have to be a small pond too and butterfly and bee friendly plants. If they started sowing in pots now, some would be perfect for the summer.

They continued until Petra made it clear that her afternoon walk was overdue. Letting Henry out, Emily gave him a tentative hug.

'It will all be okay,' she said. 'We have to believe it will be.'

To which, Henry gave her a wry smile and a nod in reply.

That evening, as Emily went to say good-night to her garden, her eye caught the grasses bowing and whispering to each other.

'You told the trees, didn't you?'

To which, they simply nodded in response.