

The Red Flower

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Chapter 1.

The girl awoke, barefoot and alone. She opened her eyes to a light such as she had never seen, under a sky so blue as to be almost purple. She had no idea where she was, or how she came to be there, and there was nothing in all that vast and featureless plain upon which she stood to give her a clue. As far as she could see, in any direction, the earth lay clothed in a coat of deep emerald green which stretched away to the far curved horizon as if she were adrift in a sea of grass, and the sun stood at high noon, so there was not even a shadow to give her the slightest indication of where she might be.

The grass was short trimmed and as neat as a crochet lawn, as if somebody cared for it, and it seemed friendly and comforting in its tidiness, but its great emptiness was lonely and a little scary. Although she was not cold, the sun was strangely without heat, and seemed too big for the sky, and instead of being yellow it glowed with the rich orange of sunset and it did not hurt her eyes to gaze upon it. She decided she must be dreaming.

Since she had just woken up, it was obviously one of those dreams where you dream that you are dreaming so she lay down on the soft grass and waited to wake up from the dream of dreaming, so that she could really wake up. When nothing happened after a while, she stood up and looked around again. She appeared to be in the middle of nowhere although there was no way to tell if it really was the middle. She thought she should start walking. It would be better than just sitting there. But which way?

She had an idea. She would wait for the sun to start falling from its zenith. Her long hair was held in place by a sterling silver pin with its head artfully crafted into the shape of a rose, and this she removed and stuck into the ground, and there it shone like a tiny lodestone. She would wait until the small slender of shadow began to creep away towards the east, and she would go in that direction so that the sun would be behind her all the way, and she would not walk in circles.

But nothing happened. She looked up. The sun was not moving. It was just getting darker. It was now like a big shiny ruby hanging in the sky. She began to feel a little uneasy. It was turning into a rather disconcerting and unpleasant dream. She thought it would make her feel better to start walking instead of just standing there waiting for something to happen.

She closed her eyes and crossed her fingers and turned around three times in a circle. She stopped and opened her eyes again, and started to walk in the direction in which she was looking. She walked for a long time but there was no way for her to tell how far she had walked. She looked back to see if her feet had left marks in the grass, but they had not. It was only then that she realized that she was not wearing shoes.

“How strange,” she said.

She hoped that the sound of her own voice might reassure her, but it didn't. Her voice sounded very small in all that space, and her words flew away from her like small frightened birds. She started to walk faster. It made her feel slightly better. She increased her pace again and it made her feel better still. She started to run, and that felt much better. She began to run as fast as she could, racing across the grass in long strides with her heart pounding and her breath coming in great gasps. She ran until she was out of breath and had to stop. She bent over panting, with her hands on her knees. When she got her breath back, she straightened up and looked around.

“Well, at least I'm getting nowhere fast,” she said.

She giggled at her joke. Her giggles turned to chortles and her chortles to laughter and her laughter built up until it became hysterical and she couldn't stop, and the tears began to roll down her face and her sides hurt and she collapsed on the grass. She was breathless with mirth but every time she tried to control herself the phrase *'I'm getting nowhere fast'* popped into her mind and it set her off all over again.

And then she noticed. It was brighter. The sun had turned back to orange again. Well then, everything was alright. All she had to do was think of something funny every time the sun started to get darker, and sooner or later, she would wake up from this silly dream. And until she did, she might as well enjoy it. She set off again, skipping. Her bare feet felt nice on the cool grass. She looked down at the way her white gown flapped around her bare legs as she skipped. It really was a quite hideous gown. Entirely unlike anything she would ever wear for real. Plain and shapeless and way too big. Good job it was only a dream.

When she got tired of skipping she started to amble. She was beginning to get fed up now. The dream was getting boring. What kind of a dream was it that didn't have anything to look at, and didn't change, and the scenery just stayed the same all the time? She decided to sing a song to cheer herself up, but she was surprised to find that she couldn't remember

any. And the sun started to get darker again. It was the colour of a ripe plum. She knew what to do about that.

“I’m getting nowhere fast,” she said.

But this time it wasn’t funny. She looked up at the darkening sun and tried to think of something else that was funny. But she couldn’t. She tried to remember something that had made her laugh before, but no pictures would come into her mind. She began to get alarmed. What if her dream was turning into a nightmare?

Maybe if she started running again, that would work. She set off, slowly at first, jogging along waiting for something funny to occur to her, but as she ran the apprehension began to grow in her that she was actually running away from something. She looked around, but there was nothing. She carried on, trotting a bit faster, but the feeling that she was being followed came back, stronger than before, and this time she did not dare turn around. She began to run faster and as she did so her apprehension turned to actual fear and she started to run as fast as she could, suddenly panicked as if something terrible pursued her across all that dreadful emptiness.

She ran until she was exhausted and her legs became weak and wobbly. She stumbled and fell. She put her hands out to protect herself and rolled forward. She couldn’t help seeing what was behind her. Nothing. There was nothing at all.

She suddenly felt silly, and a little angry.

“This is decidedly the most ridiculous dream I’ve ever had,” she said.

She stood up and started walking again, staring straight ahead, with her hands wrapped tight around her. She didn’t know for how long she walked before she realized that she was hungry and tired. And cold. This made her even more cross. You’re not supposed to feel cold and tired and hungry in dreams.

It grew darker. The sun was now the colour of an aubergine, and the distances were closing in. She began to get really frightened. She wanted to wake up and be warm and safe, and home. Maybe if she thought about home it would dispel the ugly hex and release her from this horrid sleep. She closed her eyes but was distressed to discover that she could not remember where home was, or even anything about it. She started to cry. She stopped walking and stood there with her little shoulders heaving, and great sobs moved her and her tears dripped onto the darkening grass.

And then she saw it. She blinked the tears from her eyes and stared. She took a step forward. It was there. There was no doubt about it. In the distance. It was small and far away, but it was there. On all that dark and lonely plain, in all that green emptiness. Something. Something red.

She began to run towards it, quickening her pace as it got closer and closer. It was marvellous. Just to have a direction to go in was marvellous. She was positively sprinting now, galloping loose limbed and free as a young gazelle. She couldn't tell what it was, or how big it was, but it was definitely getting closer. It was wonderful. Just to have a sense of perspective was wonderful. She came upon it so fast she almost squashed it.

It was a flower. A small red perfect flower. She knelt down and examined it closely. It was unlike any flower she had ever seen before. It had eight petals, precisely symmetrical and fluted, and its stamen and stem were a lustrous gold. It was the most shinningly beautiful thing she had ever seen. Exquisite and mysterious. With a circle of light around it, warm and comforting like a tiny fire.

And it spoke to her. It spoke to her of hope and life. Infinitely fragile and all alone in all that vastness, with neither leaf nor thorn to protect it, miraculous in its solitary and isolated loveliness with no one there to see it except herself, without any reason to be there, just as there was no reason for her to be there. But there it was.

And suddenly she wasn't tired anymore. Or cold or hungry. And she wasn't scared. She knew now that everything was going to be okay. The sun was still getting darker, and the blackness was closing in, but it didn't matter anymore. She had her flower.

She lay down next to it, relaxed and comfortable. Close enough to feel it's warmth but far enough away to be sure not to roll on it in her sleep. She allowed herself to succumb to the cozy drowsiness. She would sleep, and wake up and the dream would be over. The last thing she thought before she drifted away was that she hoped she would still be able to remember the flower when she woke up.

The clouds that had burgeoned all day at last fulfilled their promise or their threat and rain fell straight and heavy and huge droplets spattered the road. The deluge came abruptly and with force as with the opening of a faucet and the people hastened back to their cars and there were many imprecations and much laughter and ribaldry as they slammed the doors and wound up the windows in haste.

Inside a limousine a young woman brushed the water from her white dress and anxiously examined the hem to see if had been stained. Beside her, her friend assumed a look of conciliatory concern, while desperately suppressing the urge to giggle. The young woman looked at her. Their eyes met. They both erupted into gales of laughter. The young man in the driver's seat turned around.

"Well I'm glad someone thinks it's funny," he said.

"What do you want me to do, cry?" the young woman said.

She leaned back into the plush seat and placed the back of her hand against her forehead with her fingers delicately splayed. She twisted her features into a tragic expression and spoke again in high pitched stage voice.

"Ooooooh no. Alas. Woe is me. Rain. It's a bad omen. My dress is ruined. The gods have peed on my wedding. My hopes, my dreams, my bright future, all soaked, waaaaaaaah!"

The man shook his head as the two girls in the back collapsed again into paroxysms of laughter and hugged each other.

There came a tapping at the window on the front passenger side. The two young women stopped laughing and looked up. There was a shadow against the rain washed glass. An elderly man in a top hat and a grey bespoke suit wound down the window and a clergyman appeared, wrestling with a recalcitrant umbrella. His face was wrinkled up against the rain. He looked younger than he was and his solemn expression looked out of place. Water dripped from his chin as he spoke, and his forehead crinkled. He looked like a wet puppy. The two girls went off again.

"We'll have to go ahead," the clergyman said, in a tone that suggested he was not finding the situation quite as amusing as the two women in the back, "We can give it another five minutes, but that's all."

"Will it stop?" the driver said.

The clergymen glanced at the women in the back, and then looked at the young man.

"I'm a priest, pal, not a fucking prophet," he said, marching off.

He could hear the howls from the back seat as he strode away over the wet flag stones.

The footprint stood for an instant, a small gorge created as the man raised his bare foot before the brimming brown water cascaded over its sharply defined edges and flooded it. The process was repeated again and again as the man trudged through the muddy

mangroves, and upon each freshly filled foot shaped lake the morning sun glistened leaving the man's trail behind him in a sequence of ruddy pools like a necklace on a brown throat.

Although the sun was barely clear of the horizon, the heat was already oppressive and in the closeness of the mangroves the humidity cloaked the man as heavy and dense as a pelisse and the sweat ran freely down his lined and weathered neck and across his narrow muscular back. He was naked to the waist and only a twisted cloth of olive drab protected his nether parts. A rope was knotted tight around his midriff and a kukri was thrust through it at the base of his spine, with the blade angled away from his hip. The hardwood handle was intricately carved into the shape of a serpent, and bold bright garnets were its eyes. A red bandana was wrapped around his forehead. The man chewed betel, and as he pushed out of the swamp and onto the firmer embankment where the elephant grass grew, he spat at regular intervals and a line of red gobs of sputum marked his progress along the trail like the spoor of a wounded beast.

The trail began to rise up from the estuary, and the trees that punctuated the grass increased in number until they became a forest and into its cooling penumbra the man stepped and followed the narrowing sandy track until it emerged at a clearing from where he could look down into the shallow caldera of a long dormant and weather eroded crater in which there flourished a red sea of poppies, a carmine lagoon wherein the red heads of the flowers waved from shore to shore in the slightest of breezes like the exultant congregation of some strange sect at worship. A precipitous trail angled down into the basin, zigzagging and cross tracking itself, and in places it was completely abraded by rain and wind and huge dark stones were fallen and rolled into the crater and here must the traveler tread with care for fear of being himself thus deposited into the red gorge below.

At the lip of the gorge a solitary poppy grew, as refugee from the masses below or as abandoned seedling captured by the updraft and set alone to stand sentinel over its peers. The man sat down beside it and took from the folds at his waist a small bag fashioned from pressed bark in which were contained a covey of misshapen cheroots and a transparent purple plastic lighter. He jammed a cheroot into the corner of his mouth and lit it. The smoke at first ascended but was then taken by a small zephyr and swirled down into the canyon as if animate and bound to some purpose, like a will o' the wisp summoned from a lantern and sent to do the bidding of a warlock.

The sun breached the lip of the crater and painted the dark and sweating face of the man

a deep crimson, making of his wind grooved and weather engraved face the carved oaken figurehead at the prow of a ship. The cicadas and frogs fired melodic salvos from the undergrowth and the dank humid ponds there concealed and the lone poppy was illuminated as the rubrication inscribed upon some ancient Celtic manuscript to ward off the wrath of the Danes, and the man looked down upon its brightness and smiled.

The horse is skeletal but still it gallops tirelessly across the unending plain. Astride it sits an equally emaciated figure, dressed in black rags. The horse has hollow bones woven into its mane, and they voice a shrill and unremitting discordant whistle in the wind of its passing like a wailing of banshees or the anguished cries of souls in pain. At the horse's side a hyena lopes, and close behind a tongue lolling jackal and a huge baleful black hound with blazing eyes. The horse's slashing hooves gouge great divots from the earth and behind it the grass withers and dies and the sunlight is extinguished to darkness in its wake and a dust cloud rolls and billows, back into the immeasurable distance beyond.

The rider wears an expression of grim and vindictive malice and contained within it is eagerness and blood lust for it is the face of a pitiless and relentless hunter on the chase. The rider's face is gaunt and haggard and the teeth are black, and one eye is missing and sewn closed with dry sinews by a rude and careless tailor, and the other veined and yellow eye is glazed and fixed at some point in infinity. In his hand he bears a sjambok and with this he flails the horse and he rowels its flanks with spurs fashioned from the teeth of crocodiles and thus onward they drive across the plain with their harsh following shadows devouring the world behind them.