

# The Scent of Roses

Everything was different now – only the flowers were left story by Dinah Jefferies

Eleanor heaved open the tall sash windows in the living room. It was summer and the scent of roses was nauseating. Luke had loved those roses, yet even when they became an obsession, she had said nothing. On summer evenings, just as the light was fading, he would be out there, picking off the greenfly. It calmed him, he said. Would things have been different if they'd been able to talk? In the kitchen she grabbed a chocolate-chip muffin, stuffing it into her mouth to try and make the emptiness go away. She heard her youngest son, Daniel, banging about in the hall.

"Danny?" she called out, then opened the door and watched him as he stood, tennis racket in hand, his jaw set rigid, his fair hair uncombed. "It was behind Dad's fishing gear." She gulped. "Darling, there isn't time. We talked about this."

"You talked." He stared at her, eyes wide with unshed tears, then slammed the door behind him.

She sighed. At only 13, his love for his father had been total. As her daughter, Lucy, switched on the speakers upstairs, loud music drifted down. Bad enough that she had painted her nails fluorescent green, but now to play Dad's favourite song... Eleanor swallowed the lump in her throat and marched up the stairs, but on the landing she paused. Lucy loved her father, too. This was her way of coping. You couldn't blame a 15 year old for wanting life to go back to the way it had been.

At the top of the house, in a guest room with no painful

associations, Eleanor sat at the tiny dressing table, dragging a brush through her dark tangles. She made up her face, then dressed in a black skirt, a cream top and pearl earrings. She picked heels so high that she'd have no option but to focus her mind on walking.

From the open window she gazed down at the street. People seemed to be moving heavily, and something about the ripe end-of-summer smell echoed her sadness. She heard a tap on the door and spun round as her eldest son, Joey, pushed it open. Just a few weeks away from starting his second year at university, he'd come back specially from his summer job.

"You OK, Ma?"

She nodded.

"Where's Dan?"

She shook her head.

"Daniel's not coming."

"He's angry. You know how badly he took Dad leaving. You've still got me and Lucy."

There was a short silence.

"She was playing Dad's song," said Eleanor.

"She doesn't mean anything."

Eleanor shook her head. "You haven't been here, darling. She blames me."

"Hardly fair on you."

Has any of it been fair, Eleanor thought.

It had started more than a year ago, at his publisher's July garden party. She had wanted to stop breathing when she saw Luke with Charlotte, the fair-haired editorial assistant. She should have said something then, but instead she buried the jealousy and the pain. Only her work as a children's illustrator saved her, and when the story of the rosebud children took off, she had less time to brood.

Downstairs again, she picked up one of Luke's first books. "For my one and only, Eleanor," the dedication read. But she hadn't been his one and only, had she? At the sound of the doorbell she called Joey and Lucy before slipping on her black silk jacket.


On the day Luke had left them, two envelopes arrived in the post. One addressed in a feminine hand, the other stamped with his publisher's logo. Luke pocketed them unopened, picked up his case and left the family home.

Two days later, the police turned up with his belongings, including the contents of the two envelopes. One was a letter from Charlotte, telling him it had been a mistake, the other was from his publisher, informing him that they weren't renewing his contract.

Luke had been found alone in a hotel room. There was no note but the post-mortem had left no doubt.

Eleanor held the front door open for her children as she watched the third black car draw up with Luke's white-faced parents inside. Joey wrapped his arm firmly around her waist as they walked down the path with Lucy on the other side, but at the sight of Daniel waiting behind the hedge, Eleanor's chest tightened.

"Sorry, Mum," he whispered as he shuffled up, red-eyed and still in his tennis clothes. "Can I still come like this?"

She nodded and, blinking away tears, squeezed his hand. No one spoke as they climbed into the car, averting their eyes from the coffin. How would she ever explain to Luke's three children why they had not been enough? She took a deep breath, then rolled down the window to remove the artificial scent of roses from the car. 

Dinah's debut novel *The Separation* (Penguin) costs £7.49 from the Bookshop – see page 81. © DINAH JEFFERIES 2014

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