

ROSE by Beverley Wightman

Daniel is there. He's always there, he never leaves me. He's good like that. He doesn't say much, but he's just there. That's good enough for me. Someone else is speaking. I don't know who she is.

'Rose? Rose? Would – you – like – a – cup – of – tea?' She's kind of spelling it out, as though I'm an idiot. I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out, so I nod my head. Of course I'd like a cup of tea. When do I refuse a cup of tea? Daniel knows that. Where is Daniel? Daniel? DANIEL? Where ARE you Daniel?

There are hands on my shoulders, pushing me back into the chair, someone stroking my arm, my hair, saying 'shhhhhh'.

'Just relax Rose, everything's fine, we're just bringing you your cup of tea.'

Cup of tea? I didn't ask for a cup of tea. I look up and see the lady in blue. She's always dressed in blue, perhaps it's her favourite colour. She's got brown hair and kind eyes. And a badge, she always wears a badge. It says something but I don't know what. She pulls a table across my chair.

'Here you go Rose, here's your tea. Now drink it up while it's nice and hot.'

I look at her. She's got a friendly face, but I don't know who she is. I sip the tea, it's nice and hot. Daniel knows I like my tea hot.

I wake up to the sound of music. It's a piano. I know that one, it's Fur Elise by Beethoven. I can play that. Perhaps someone recorded me playing. It makes me feel warm. And then the next one, Mozart I think, one of his piano sonatas. I've played this one too, but it's a while ago. I'll have to get my music out and play it through again. Now it's Schubert, Rosamunde, I love this one. So pretty. Poor Schubert, he was only 31 when he died, but he wrote all that lovely music, so many songs. And Mozart wasn't much older, at 35. So much talent wasted by an early death, but he wrote hundreds of pieces in his short life. The Magic Flute, mmmm, gorgeous. Love that Queen of the Night aria. If I was a singer I would love to sing that. But I enjoy playing his piano sonatas. I'll ask Daniel to get my music out. He loves to hear me play, says it relaxes him. Daniel? Where are you Daniel? Ooh Schumann, that's the Kinderszenen, lovely. Think I'll just listen for a while, Daniel won't mind. He won't mind if I play later.

I open my eyes and the music has stopped. There's someone standing in front of me. I look up, but I'm not sure who it is. She's not wearing blue.

'Hello mum,' she says. She's smiling. 'It's Jenny,' she says, helpfully. Ah yes, Jenny, I remember Jenny. Running around in the garden with the dog, hiding amongst the sheets on the washing line. Shouting for a drink and a biscuit. Tearing around the house on the hobbyhorse. Playing doctors and nurses with her teddies. And helpful Jenny, folding the washing for me, spreading the butter on the sandwiches (and half the table) when we had guests. Collecting the plates and the empty cups after dinner. I miss that Jenny. I wonder where she went.

'How are you, mum?' the woman asks. I smile. She makes me feel happy. I'm fine now.

'I've brought you some daffodils, for Easter. They're your favourite.' I look at the bright yellow, perky flowers, standing to attention. Some are still in bud. They'll last a long time. Best get them in a vase quickly.

'I'll go and get a vase, ok? Won't be a moment.'

I hope she comes back. I look at the flowers, lying on their sides on the bookcase, not perky anymore, and I feel sad. Like a shadow of their former selves. Where once there was radiant splendour, there is now only green stalks.

'Here you go mum, I found a pretty vase,' she says, as she comes back into the room. She goes to the sink and fills it with water. Is she thirsty? Does she want a drink and a biscuit? She places the vase on top of the bookcase and puts the flowers inside it. They're perky again, trumpeting sunshine around the room. That's better.

'How's that?' she asks, organising them, 'is that ok?' I nod. I think I'm smiling. I hope so, because I'm feeling happy.

'I brought you a magazine, mum. Shall I read us a story from it?'

I'm sitting on Jenny's bed, book in hand, as she lies there in her Minnie mouse pyjamas, hair in plaits, skin pink and glowing from her bath. The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. She loves that one. She wants me to keep reading the bit where Lucy finds the wardrobe and goes through it. Jenny likes Lucy the best. We both love that bit. I keep reading until her little eyes droop, and her weary young body gives in to sleep. And then I gaze at my beautiful girl. How I love her.

'Did you like that one mum?' the woman is saying. I'm not sure. 'Shall I read another one?' I don't want another one, I want the music. I shake my head. I can smell cooking. The blue lady comes in.

'Nearly lunch time, Rose, shall we get you ready?' I'm hungry. The dinner smells nice.

'I'll get off then mum, ok? I'll pop in tomorrow. Enjoy your lunch.' She kisses my hair. I hope my hair smells nice. When did I wash it? I can't remember. It doesn't feel dirty, can't be too long ago.

The blue lady is holding my arm, walking me along a corridor. Then we come to a dinner hall, there are lots of others. She sits me down, at a table.

'It's chicken today, Rose,' she says. And there's Miriam, the head girl, the snooty one, and that naughty boy, Thomas. He has to stand outside the Headmaster's office half the time. Don't know why he can't behave. And Jane is sitting next to me, she's my best friend. Except she talks too much. Gets me into trouble sometimes. I'm one of the servers, but I'm waiting for the tray with the dinner on. When it's a roast dinner, I like saying to the others, 'do you want stuffing?' and then Jane and I collapse into giggles. I suppose that's naughty too, but there's naughty and there's naughty. I'm never naughty in class, and I wouldn't dare be rude to the teachers like Thomas is. I look down and my dinner plate is on the table in front of me, full of dinner. Someone else must have done the serving today. It smells nice. There's no stuffing today, but there are roast potatoes. I like a nice roast potato. I wonder if it's rice pudding afterwards? Daniel always asks for the crispy bits around the edges, but we all like those, so I share them out between him and Jenny. There's never any left, but rice puddings are easy to make, so I don't mind. Jenny likes semolina and strawberry jam. Daniel prefers raspberry jam, but Jenny doesn't like the seeds. She says they get in her teeth. So I always buy strawberry jam. Daniel doesn't mind. He's good like that.

The television is blaring at us. It's a stupid game show. I hate game shows. So does Daniel. We enjoy a good crime drama, or a classical concert on the BBC. I don't know why we're watching a game show, why doesn't he turn it over? And it's so loud, I'm not deaf. He

knows that. Why is the volume so loud? I put my hands over my ears and screw my eyes tightly shut, and the sounds go away. And Daniel is holding me, pulling me to him, smiling and rubbing his face into my hair.

'You're wearing that perfume again,' he says, with a twinkle in his eye. I giggle. He makes me feel girly, giddy. I know what he's after, and I'm happy. Jenny is out at Brownies, so it's fine. He means the world to me.

I'm looking out of the window at the cars outside. They are glistening in the streetlights; it must be raining. I wonder who owns all those cars? We have a Vauxhall Viva. It's alright, but the heater doesn't work too well, and Daniel has to go to the garage to get it fixed. It was fine in the summer, but now it's getting cooler, I told him that I was cold. So Daniel promised me he'd get it fixed. He's good like that.

A commotion; voices; running feet; flashing lights outside my window. But it's all darkness, I cannot see anything. What is happening? It must be Jenny, Jenny must be shouting me. Maybe she's had a bad dream, or maybe she's feeling poorly. I must go to her. I can't find the light; there is usually one on my bedside table. I have to go to Jenny. I get up and go to the door. There are a lot of people running about; lots of blue ladies and stretchers and men in dark uniforms. It must be bad, but why are they here? I will sort Jenny out, they shouldn't be here. I start walking; it's a long corridor, and then I see it; into Jenny's room, there are doctors and nurses and they are punching Jenny's chest!

'No, no no!' I hear myself shout. But someone grabs me. It's not Daniel.

'Rose, Rose, listen to me, it's not your daughter, it's Doris, ok? She's not very well and the doctors are trying to make her better, ok?' My face is wet, there are tears. It's not Jenny. But who is Doris? And what is she doing in my house?

'Let's get you back to your room, shall we?' The blue lady holds tightly onto my arm. She steers me firmly back down the corridor. She puts me back in bed, and suddenly the music is on. I love the music. It's Beethoven again, symphony number 5. I'm in the audience at the Albert Hall, with Daniel sitting next to me. I wondered where he was. He must have nipped out to the toilet. The orchestra are fantastic, the London Philharmonic. We both like them. The room goes dark again. I close my eyes and listen.

Jenny is here. She's grown up. I don't remember her growing up, but I recognise her today. She is my Jenny. I hold out my arms and she hugs me. There are tears rolling down her cheeks; my face is wet too.

'Mum, I've missed you so much,' she says.

'But I haven't been away sweetheart,' I answer. She gets a tissue out and wipes her eyes.

'The children sent you some cards they made,' she continues. She gives me hand-drawn cards from Emma and David.

'They're lovely Jenny,' I tell her. 'Please pass on my thanks to the children, it's been a while since I saw them.'

We chatter on and on, until Jenny has to leave.

'I love you very much, mum,' she exclaims. I smile. I love her very much too.

When I open my eyes, Daniel is there. Right there. He never leaves me. He's good like that.