

## The Cypress and the Rose

From the Papers of Rosmarin

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Fragment of a correspondence between Sun Dew and Rosmarin in which Rosmarin is discussing the mysterious nexus between love and metaphysics, a nexus, she feels, that has shaped her life:

*Today I hear the call of country in the same way I once used to hear the call of romantic love. It seems to my ears to be the same call. The longing that I once had to be held in the arms of a beloved is the longing that I now feel to be out alone in country. Not any country, but that country, the country in which you and I met, and which always feels only half tangible, as if the appearances it presents are a gently billowing veil and the challenge, the invitation, is to find the secret of stepping right through that veil into the unknowable which lights those appearances from the other side.....Is the essence of desire to be alone in the absolute presence of the world, if not as the only person under the entire dome of sky....then at least as the only person, one feels, to whom the song, at that moment, is addressed? Is that how one encounters reality? Is that how one falls in love?*

Sun Dew delays replying, and sends instead a story she says she heard once, long, long ago in a bandits' cave in the mountains of southern China, though it had travelled there from Thessaly. The story is called the Cypress and the Rose.

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Once upon a time two little girls were born on the same day in a small village in the eastern mountains. The first little girl was named Rosa, after the wine-dark blooms that clustered around the doorway of her parent's cottage. The second child was born to the wife of a poor tutor. This tutor offered rudimentary instruction to the village children in a tiny schoolhouse that stood to the rear of a rustic temple in the heart of the hamlet. The tutor named his daughter after the ancient trees that framed the pathway to the temple: Cypress. "One day she will stand as

tall as these,” he said when his wife brought the new baby to the schoolhouse door.

Rosa’s family was a large and lively one, and she was, and remained, the youngest child. She clambered from knee to knee, and everyone petted her and admired her dark curls and the ever-ready mischief of her smile. When she was tiny, she rode her father’s wide shoulders through the town, to a chorus of friendly greetings. “How’s our sweet Rosa today?” everyone cried gaily, and Rosa reached out chubby little hands to them, and quickly learnt to call their names. So proud was her father of his lovable youngest that, although he was not a wealthy man, being a vintner by trade, he engaged the tutor to introduce Rosa to arts unknown to the other village children. It was to literature that Rosa was most keenly drawn, particularly poetry. As she grew into young womanhood, her loveliness was enhanced by the graceful verses that sprang to her lips in her warmest moments, verses enshrined in her capacious memory and summoned by her ready mind. Suffused with her sense of the poetic in this way, her warm feelings became compelling, entrancing, to everyone within the child’s circle.

Rosa never spoke ill of anyone and was loved by all, especially the young men of the locality. All of them dreamed of winning her hand, but strangers, young men from the other side of the mountain, had begun to arrive in the village, drawn by tales of a princess arising, a young woman of modest origins but exceptional charm, quick-witted and kind and surpassingly beautiful.

Just beyond the village, in a stone barn-house set among ancient greywethers, the tutor’s daughter was also growing. She was an only child and as her mother had died before she was weaned she lived quietly in a house that did not ring with laughter. Her father, old before his time, maintained an habitual silence, though he often cast sad eyes at Cypress. His daughter knew not how to solace this aloof man who was her only guardian. But the tutor did instruct his daughter. He was, despite his lowly station, a learned man, and after the evening meal, he would read to Cypress from the philosophers, scriptures, and classic poets. He introduced her to arcane matters of logic and mathematics, and pointed out the constellations. Through this instruction, which was all that the poor man had to give, father and daughter found some communion. For the rest, Cypress took herself off to the mountain. She spent her childhood on its wide flanks, exploring its hidden clefts and gullies, losing herself in its vast prospects. She knew the trees, the herbs and wildflowers, the insects, and in her father’s books she looked up their names. To all the birds and animals of the mountain she was a familiar and approachable figure; throughout the changing houses of the

year they allowed her to walk amongst them and observe them in the midst of their domestic affairs. Cypress ran with the wind; in the summers she slept alone under the stars in the company of owls and highland sheep—and greywethers, who marched, sometimes in single file, sometimes in formation, right up to the summit of the mountain. If her father's books taught her names and classifications, the greywethers were her true instructors, manifesting to her aspects of mountain spirit unknown to her father and the village folk. For Cypress, the greywethers were her true parents, her true family, and they watched over her powerfully, so that she was never afraid under the great sky.

So Cypress grew, straight and tall, as her father had predicted, strong in body and deep n mind. And she too was beautiful, her hair fair and long, her face gentle and pensive. And if there was a sparkle, a dancing shine, on Rosa, there was an indefinable aura about Cypress, so that when she walked in the village on her daily rounds, people drew back ever so slightly, and greeted her with reserve, though politely, as if saying to themselves, "and what have we here?". The young men were intrigued with the grave girl and, in conversation with her, were drawn into little-known terrain within themselves. From a distance they watched her, covertly, with just the faintest readiness to mock, though there was something in the girl that kept this tendency perpetually in check. Never did they approach her familiarly however, or compete for the favour of her heart.

It happened that, when both girls were sixteen, a young nobleman, lured by Rosa's reputation, arrived in the village and, after a brief courtship, carried Rosa off to a distant city. There they were married with all due pomp and splendour at the court of the King, and Rosa was introduced to a sumptuous and sophisticated way of life beyond anything she had till then imagined. Her natural warm-heartedness and joy of life soon won her many friends and new admirers however, and her husband marvelled to himself at the precious thing that he had found.

Years, many years passed, and Rosa's beauty did not wane. Her girlish warmth turned to ardour, and in the course of time she became adept in the arts of love. With her infatuated husband's consent, she practised these arts widely, so that voluptuousness came to emanate from her every gesture, her lips, her hips, the lifting of her arms, her teasing smile. She steeped herself too in the lore and literature of love, and added many new verses to her store, thereby increasing the refinement of her charms. Men worshiped her, worshiped her breasts, her thighs, the practised, serpentine movements of her eager body, the frank admissions in her eyes. It was not too long before the King himself was at her feet, entreating her to share his bed. "Be mine," he moaned, and

she was, in deed at least, for she remained faithful in name to her hapless spouse.

In the midst of such delectable conquest, Rosa had little cause or occasion for reflection. Accustomed to occupying first place in the hearts of men, she did not question this, or see it as anything but her birthright. If women now turned away from her, self-protectively, she recognized in this nothing but her own ascendancy, and privately rejoiced in it. Her natural warmth, the early source of her charm, had gradually given way to an inner hardness of heart, a will to command every man, devour everything in her path. Rosa was indeed a queen, and the proud sensuality she displayed with ever greater flagrancy hid an increasingly flinty appetite for power.

As Rosa was drawn, over the years, to the centre of things, finally taking her destined place as the King's mistress, Cypress moved towards the world's edge. In her early wanderings on the far side of her mountain, when she was still living in her father's house, she had met a boy from a Hunting Lodge that was an outpost of the same distant city to which Rosa had decamped. The boy had settled in the Lodge temporarily in order to bring to final fruition a lengthy poem that had been shaping itself in him for several years. He had been enchanted to meet Cypress by chance one day in a sunlit stand of greywethers, and the two of them had immediately fallen into conversation. Unlike the boys of the village, this boy was already acquainted with the terrain into which Cypress' conversation drew him. It was the very part of himself that he had come to the mountain to discover. So with alacrity he took the opportunity to join Cypress in her rambles, and the two were soon inseparable.

Cypress' beauty now lit up the valleys, and her heart was astonished and fearful at this piercing new happiness that it had never known. She led the young man into many of the secret places of her mountain and her heart, though there were also many to which, for reasons obscure even to herself, she did not take him. They lay in the shelter of the greywethers, and the young man loved her, after a fashion, and she accepted his love unquestioningly, as a sacrament and a pledge, as part of the sacred order into which she was already so deeply inducted. But at the end of the summer he left. He had promised to return, but he never did, and sent no word. Cypress had no way of computing this defection, but she did understand, when finally the grief ebbed and she was reconciled again to her solitude, that a great gulf separated the world of the greywethers from the world of men. And the child—for she was still a child—put her weeping aside, and admitted to herself that, for better or worse, she belonged to the greywethers and not to

men. She left her mountain then, and for years she roamed the wider highlands, taking work for short periods in villages, then moving on again, seeking out the deepest recesses, the uttermost pinnacles, the places in which no woman or man had ever set foot and where the doors to the mountains' inner sanctums could yet be discovered.

After years of roaming the peaks and valleys, Cypress, still straight and tall, but weathered now, her face more unfathomable than ever, built a tiny hermitage for herself on a mountain ledge looking eastwards over the plain at the foot of the mountain range. This spot was far from her native village, but only a few hours' walk from a hamlet in a neighbouring valley. She would visit the hamlet from time to time, exchanging herbs and honey from the mountain for the few items she could not do without. At first the people of the village mistrusted and somewhat feared the solitary stranger. But she was courteous with them and they supplied her needs and in time ceased to find her occasional appearances and departures remarkable. Meanwhile Cypress watched the sun flush the peaks with its first rays each day and she climbed to a higher place to watch the last light die at dusk. When the moon rose she felt its emotion all around her and her solitude was relieved. She had her needs to attend to and a legion of mountain beings to salute each day. Though she asked no questions, metaphysical answers tugged at her as she sat at her door and observed the curve of the far horizon and the turning of the great earth.

In time people approached her on the streets of the hamlet or climbed up to her eyrie, seeking counsel on personal matters. Unencumbered by interests of her own, she found it easy to see into the hearts of others and offer clear-eyed advice. Gradually, very gradually, word of her wisdom spread from one village to another, until eventually people were trekking from distant valleys to seek her out. How glad she was to be able at last to furnish her fellows with something they appeared to value. Even when people started consulting her on more complex community matters, it cost her little effort to deliver wise counsel. The irony of guiding others to a happiness that she herself had been categorically denied however did not escape her. But the sun and the moon and the great turning earth filled her days, burst her heart and exulted her senses, and she seldom regretted her deprivations now.

Many more years passed. Rosa was still the mistress of the King, but he too now consented to her forays into other beds, other fields of conquest. She was still, miraculously, lovely, love itself perhaps being the best preserver of its own charms. There was nothing in any man's heart that she could not unmask, with the torch of her desire, and gratify, giving herself up in the process to the pleasures of

abandonment. It sometimes seemed to her as if a secret pact existed between herself and the entire male sex, as if she alone held the key to the secret that men keep from women. It was as if she was, accordingly, the exclusive object of their collective desire. Other women envied her, and although she neither sought nor found true friends amongst them, they too were entranced by her voluptuousness and awed by her power. She seduced their spouses and lovers as if by right, captivating their imaginations even if declining their actual bodies, and the women scarcely demurred. Her reign was unchallenged.

But then news reached Rosa of a hermit in the far-off mountains of her birth. A man of her acquaintance, a magistrate, was taking a journey to consult this anchorite about a crisis that had arisen in his professional life. Rosa thought little of it until a stray remark betrayed to her that the hermit was a woman. A woman! she thought. What business did a man from Rosa's court have to be journeying so far to consult a *woman*? But the little stab of doubt was soon forgotten and her usual good-humoured complacency restored. Not a year passed however before another member of the court was rumoured to be preparing for the same journey. This time it was a famous artist of the realm, a man with sexual and other fires of his own who had, when she thought about it, been less than overly susceptible to her charms. In the same instant it struck her, with the force of revelation, that there had in fact been many such men, men with fires of their own who had evaded capture. She had glossed this over in the past, fully occupied with the desire of so many others, but suddenly she saw it clearly. The King of course was not one of these shirkers, but the man who was now preparing to travel to the mountains, a man of whom she had always been somewhat in awe, definitely was. It chilled her, and leached her beauty, to think of it.

In the years that followed, a small but steady stream of men and women left the city to seek out Cypress in her mountain fastness. She was glad to receive them, and it was always, as in the beginning, a simple matter for her to divine the truth of their affairs and furnish appropriate advice. When the seekers returned to the city, they never spoke to Rosa about their experience, yet tales of this woman of wisdom, who lived a solitary existence in the wild without spouse or children, let alone lovers, came frequently to Rosa's ears. Even before she became apprised of the identity of the hermit, Rosa felt strangely piqued, discomforted by the very existence of such a figure. What was it that this woman possessed that she, Rosa, queen of men, could not supply? She sought out the errant artist of the realm and unleashed the full force of her allure on him, bedding him that very night, but to her consternation he set out again before another month had passed. Back to the mountains.

‘What on earth is her appeal?’ she asked the King. By now she knew that the hermit was Cypress, the strange girl who had haunted the edges of her childhood. What could that sad, if admittedly dignified, even beautiful, outsider offer men and women of the calibre that were now repairing to the lonely hermitage? What were the lacks, the gaps, the emptinesses, in those men and women that she, Rosa, the overflowing, the plenitudinous, could not fill? “Why worry?” yawned the King, pulling her toward him. “You can have any man in the kingdom.” And he added, after a pause, “and any that won’t be had I will personally behead.” Rosa slipped into his embrace but was not reassured. She had always assumed that the desire with which men reached for her was an ultimate affair: a desire greater than which none could be conceived. That was why she had felt herself to be the queen of their souls. But now she was witnessing men rising from her bed to seek out, not another woman like herself—that was something she could understand, the inevitability of being overtaken by younger rivals—but a woman who offered something else entirely. Not that she even offered it, in the sense of inviting people to partake of it. It mattered nothing to her, apparently, whether people came to her or not. “What does she say to them?” asked Rosa, disentangling herself from a particularly convoluted clinch. “She transmits her wisdom, apparently. They say she speaks in verse,” the King said, twirling a finger in Rosa’s curls. “Not the verse of others, memorized,” he added, “but spontaneous utterances, to which the other sometimes finds they can reply in kind.”

“I must go to her,” Rosa murmured, and behind her closed eyes the world, amenable for so long, was spinning. A thousand embraces, uncountable naked nights and delectable moments, a lifetime of languid triumphs, suddenly seemed hollow.

Far away in the mountains, seated under a moon-drenched sky, Cypress also sighed. Still, after all these years and all the visits of illustrious seekers, her solitude weighed on her. There were moments still when she would trade it all, the sun, the moon, the great earth turning, for a pair of arms encircling her, cradling her. Now was one such moment. Hermit-hood could be tedious. Solitude could indeed be lonely. Cypress knew that the glory would return, that her heart would soar again with the morning sun and stain the heavens red at dusk. But for the moment her life stretched behind her like a long crevasse, its darkness stale and unrelieved, filled with the endless echoes of that old weeping, the weeping for the boy who left. “There is nothing to do,” she sighed again, “but to endure.”

Now it happened that a black and white striped serpent who lived in a deep pool at the foot of Cypress’ mountain was riled by her sighs. He

uncoiled his great bulk and silently slithered up through clefts and subterranean cracks and grooves till he came to the rocky defile where Cypress was seated, staring at the stars. At the entrance to the defile, the serpent reared, higher than a man, and fixed the startled Cypress with the fireworks of his eyes. "Dance," he hissed. "Dance?" she whispered back. "Dance," he repeated. To set the time for her, he started to sway, very slightly at first. She followed his lead, and swayed in time with him. As his movements became more sinuous, hers loosened too. Although terrified, she held his gaze, in which tiny lightnings were forking and blazing. "Dance," he hissed. She lifted her arms and began to turn in the narrow space, bending this way and that to the rhythm he was setting. The bed robes in which she had been wrapped fell away and her nakedness opened like a fan, lustrous in the moonlight. Faster the serpent swayed. "Dance," he hissed again. And Cypress danced. Her fear abated and she danced, lithe and alluring, at the serpent's command. He moved closer to her, his head darting back and forth, and Cypress met him, fitting her curves to his. She felt the huge glide of his belly up her spine then his return via her dancing legs and arms. She made not a sound but closed her eyes and continued to dance. So closely indeed did the marble dancer match her undulations to those of the black and white serpent, there would have been nothing at all that a passerby would have seen that night amongst the windblown moonshadows of the narrow defile.....

In her later years Rosa finally settled down with her patient spouse. The King took other mistresses, and she enjoyed only the occasional amorous escapade. She accepted her sexual eclipse by younger women with good grace, but she was always piqued by stories about Cypress. "What can people possibly want with that dry stick, that bony old maid?" she thought to herself, though her tongue, still trained to tact, was silent. But want something people did, and many of them joined Cypress there in her retreat, and the hermitage was gradually extended, chamber by chamber, until it was a cluster of dwellings hewn from the rock and spread over several mountain ledges. There was laughter and singing now in those rock-dwellings, and the rock-dwellers hid treasures amongst the boulders for the sun to find and dropped gold-wrapped poems into deep shafts for the delight of mountain sprites. On festive nights they performed a favorite dance of theirs, of the moon woman and the milky way. And there were other stories and songs. A crystal shrine was installed at a certain deep pool at the mountain's base.

A gossamer thread of influence now emanated from the erstwhile hermitage and joined it to the city, and the mountains started to figure in cityfolk's dreams. A subtle axis was established between city and the

upland wilds, and the inner life of the city was somehow intangibly transformed. Even Rosa felt it. Every night she saw her native village in her dreams. Return was unthinkable after the life that she had led, the empire of hearts over which she had reigned. But she extracted a promise from her husband that he would transport her body to the village cemetery upon her death.

And Rosa died. On the same day, Cypress, gathering nettles on the mountainside with a band of her fellow rock-dwellers, wandered into a circle of greywethers and vanished. While Rosa's husband supervised the bearing of his wife's body up from the plain, Cypress' companions searched for her across the range. They returned grieved and empty-handed to the hermitage on the very day that Rosa's funeral party arrived at the two women's birthplace. Rosa was buried in her father's vineyard, and around the grave the villagers established a formal rose garden in memory of their famous daughter. In time however, Rosa's admirers and those who remembered her, and even the village itself, passed away, leaving only a mound covered with wild briar rose on the side of the mountain. Eventually a cypress tree established itself on the mound. That cypress in the briar patch can still be seen on the mountainside today.

At the other end of the range, Cypress too had soon been forgotten, but the rock-dwellers multiplied. They took up residence in other mountains and rocks, and on the flatlands as well, in groves and forests or close to springs, rivers, and swamps. Sometimes they lived alone. Usually they settled as small, sometimes larger, bands of dwellers. Their work was singing and dancing, discovering the stories through which they could converse with the land. Gradually, pilgrims from the city began to visit these encampments, and although the inmost stories were not vouchsafed to them, they absorbed the spirit of the encounter. This spirit found its way into the inner dream life of the city, and from that time forth, a new civilization began to be born.

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