

## Rosie and the Valley of Roses, Bulgaria

Rosie pulled the petals off the rose on her family's kitchen table and made a little stack of them. She'd heard the lecture before and would probably hear it another 100 times before she went to college.

Her mother stood over the stove, stirring a big pot of stew. "Rositsa, we need you to help gather the roses, and in the factory. This will be your business someday. Why don't you care about it? Why don't you want to help your father and me?"

She hated it when her mother used her full name. Whenever she heard it, some sort of criticism or extra duties would follow. She never heard "Rositsa, what a wonderful essay you wrote!" When she did help out with the family business, she was never told "Rositsa, you are an exemplary daughter, my pride and joy." But then, she never did more than she was asked to do or showed one gram of any enthusiasm for the family business.

For a mere moment, she looked out the window, coming up with ways to break the news to her mother. When she turned back, her mother had set her spoon down and crossed her arms. "When I was your age, I loved helping my mother. It made her so happy, and that made me happy."

Guilt, that's what Rosie felt. It would only increase when she explained why she couldn't help out. Her mother may have loved helping at her parent's farm, but Rosie never felt that way. What she loved doing was reading books and writing stories. Now that she had a chance to enter an essay contest, that was all she could think about.

She plucked the petals off another rose on the kitchen table. It was definitely the right time to be harvesting the flowers. But her essay was due at 6 that evening. She'd finished it a couple days earlier, but then had some great, new ideas she wanted to add. Well, she thought they were great. It would take a little time to work those out. Time that she didn't have.

"When you were born, Rositsa, I looked at you, wrapped in a little pink blanket and said, 'Here is my little rosebud.' I knew when you grew up, it would be as wonderful as a rose opening up."

Oh no, not *the* story. Next would come the part about her grandmother buying a little blanket with roses on it. Yes, she was destined in every way to be the heir to the rose oil factory that her parents had started after the official end of communism.



She was named for the national flower of Bulgaria, and her fate was sealed. But how can anyone know what a baby is meant to be? That was such an outdated idea. Modern people didn't think that way. People living in nearby Plovdiv surely didn't think that way.

"Could I please, Mama, work from 5 until 11, have a 2-hour break to work on something, then work from 1 until 5?" She scattered her pile of rose petals.

"What do you need a 2-hour break for? School is out for the summer. What could you possibly need to do? What is so very important that you cannot help your family when we need you to help the most?" Her mother resumed stirring the stew and shook her head.

"It's a special project. I have to finish it today."

Her mother shook her head again, and pulled the spoon from the pot. She picked up a container and scooped out some flour, and added yeast she'd prepared. "You should not have made any plans, Rositsa. The business comes first, especially this time of year." Her mother shook her head a few more times as she mixed the flour and yeast. "It's already 4:45 in the morning. You have just a few minutes to explain."

What could Rosie say? She was determined to go to college, loved reading about history, the stars and planets, and about people, especially famous Bulgarians. After she got a degree in journalism, she would write about famous Bulgarian writers, freedom fighters, musicians, dancers, scientists, saints, scholars and architects. The essay was another step in reaching that dream.

But her mother always answered her dreams with “We can’t spare you for all those years of college. I’m sorry honey, but we’re hardly making it as it is.”

“Then I’ll get scholarships and work while I go to school. After I graduate, I’ll give you the money to hire someone to work here. I have to go to college; I just have to go.” Her standard answer never changed.

And her mother always responded with “We need your help, not someone who will make it just a job. There’s no commitment with such a person.”

A couple months earlier, Rosie stopped bringing up the topic. She did housework and planted the garden. She had helped gather the flowers, pick off the petals, and other jobs in the processing center where the petals were used to make rose oil. The rest of the year she helped pack and ship the rose oil. But her heart wasn’t in it. All the time she vacuumed or swept or pruned plants or weeded, she was thinking about the latest book she was reading or something she was writing.

The day before, she talked with her best friend Katya while they walked to the store to buy groceries. Rosie told her about the contest. When she described what she’d written, Katya smiled and nodded with enthusiasm.

“Why can’t my parents be as interested in my writing as you are? Don’t they care that I have perfect grades? It’s hard to dream when your family doesn’t think your dreams are any good.”

“But Rosie, all your teachers think you are smart and talented. They know what it takes to be a success. Your parents are focused on their business. That is the world they understand. Enter that contest and keep writing. Someday your parents will understand.”

When she spoke with Katya, she felt strong and courageous. She scooped up the rose petals and threw them into the trash can. She was already fifteen and couldn’t wait for “someday.”

Rosie trudged out of the house, head down, and almost tripped over the flower bed just outside the door. Petunias, so pretty, and no need to harvest them for selling. They were just there to enjoy.



On to the field. The sun lit up the sky in red and orange. The mountains changed from huge dark, cold rocks to tree-covered, inviting places. Birds sang out as loudly as a human choir. A horse-drawn cart dashed down a nearby road. That scene captured the Bulgaria she wanted to write about, the country she wanted to share with the world.

A moment later, Rosie tripped on a rock and fell face-down onto damp dirt. She brushed the dirt off her pants. No one else was in the field. Good, not the time to have an audience.

All that morning, Rosie plucked the roses off bushes and filled her basket. When the sun was not quite overhead, she set her basket down. What would her mother say if she quit working for a few hours? She could say she had a headache. No, her mother wouldn't buy that. Rosie tugged at another rose and threw it in the path. It wasn't fair.

A tap on her shoulder made her jump.

"Rosie, what's wrong, dear girl?" It was Romyana, one of her mother's friends. Oh, how embarrassing.

"I'm okay, really."

"Did a thorn poke your finger?" Romyana fished in her pocket and pulled out a little square of gauze. "I always bring these along when I have a day among the spikes."

"No, I didn't poke my finger. I'm just, just, oh I don't know."

"You are a teenaged girl with better things to do than work in a field." Romyana stroked Rosie's cheek with the back of a few of her fingers. "It's so good

you can help your family. They worked so hard to get this business going. Those early days were so hard. Then they had you and you were so little, born a month too soon, and right at the start of the season.”

“That’s true, it was my birthday last week.”

Rumyana picked up Rosie’s basket and smoothed back a stray black wave of hair off Rosie’s cheek. “But your mother stayed with you. She wouldn’t trust you to anyone. That’s when I started helping in the fields.”

Rosie took the basket from her mother’s friend. Rumyana arched her back and rubbed it a few times. Rosie fetched the rose she’d thrown, flicked off the dirt and returned to flower picking.

The two talked a little longer and when they stopped at noon, walked together to the house. The story of her parents’ early days with the rose oil plant and her first months of life had ruined any criticism she’d been nursing. Why couldn’t she be more grateful? She went back to the fields at 12:30.

That evening, she proof-read her essay. She’d run out of time to make any changes. At five to six she hit “Send.” Shortly after that, her mother knocked on her door, walked in and sat on her bed.

“Rositsa, you kept your word today.”

Wow, her mother just called her by her full name and complimented her. What a breakthrough. Maybe her mother saw she was trying. She squeezed out a quick smile.

“Can I ask what you wanted to work on during the lunch break?”

“An essay I wrote for a contest.”

Her mother smiled then stood and kissed the top of her head. “I hope you win, honey.”

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A few weeks later, Rosie found out she didn’t win the writing contest. She didn’t tell anyone, even her friend Katya, but one afternoon, her mother asked why she was so sad. She said she was fine, but her mother drew her into a hug and said she knew when her girl was sad, or tired, or happy, or stressed.

“It’s the essay contest. I didn’t win. So, I might as well stop all my dreaming. Maybe I’m not smart enough to go to college.”

“Can I read your story?”

“It’s not a story, it’s an essay.” Rosie’s mother smiled, a kind, loving smile. Maybe she was starting to change her thoughts about Rosie going to college.

Rosie went to her room and grabbed her laptop. Fortunately, she hadn’t deleted her essay. When her mother began to read, Rosie returned to her bedroom. If she was with her, she’d probably interrupt every minute and ask “What do you think? What do you *really* think about it?”

Ten minutes later, Rosie’s mother brought her computer to her. After she set the computer on her desk, her mother sat on her bed and grasped Rosie’s hand. “You wrote about how resilient the Bulgarian people are, then you turn around and give up on college. Are you not also a Bulgarian? Then you have that same spirit, right? You shouldn’t give up.”

“But my essay didn’t win. I didn’t even get second or third place.”

“That isn’t the only thing that matters. You write like a newspaper writer or writer of books. It is very easy to understand. I think that is pretty good for a girl who hasn’t even finished high school. You will learn and practice. Then you will win contests and become another famous Bulgarian.”

“Not if I don’t go to college.” Rosie stood and sat next to her mother on her bed. Was her mother changing her mind?

“Oh, I think you will. You have two more years to get ready. More important, your father and I will have two years to get used to the idea. Perhaps we’ll save a couple leva here, a couple there.”

“If I go to college, I’ll have summer off and I can help then.”

“That’s when we need help the most.”

“I’ll help, I promise.”

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Rosie went to college and so did her friend Katya. During her sophomore year, she entered another writing contest. She wrote a story about her family's rose oil business, how the teachings of communism had destroyed their incentive, and all the ways they overcame hard times. She won that contest.

Not long after that, Rosie went to church with her friend Katya. It was the first time Rosie had ever gone to church. During the sermon, a missionary from America talked about what God did to save all people. He also described God's love for all people. Even though he hadn't been in Bulgaria very long, he had read about some famous Bulgarians who had stayed true to their Christian beliefs during the time the Ottoman Empire ruled in Bulgaria.

That evening, after she turned her light off to go to sleep, Rosie thought about her great grandmother. She had lived in Bulgaria before the Communists came to power. The older woman had gone to church, and had her own Bible. Even though it was against the law, she had told her children and grandchildren about Jesus. She had taught them how to pray, too, but told them they had to pray only when they were alone. They had strict instructions to never talk about Jesus with their friends or even their other relatives. If the government workers found out they were believers, they would be punished in many ways, maybe even put into a concentration camp. Why was believing in Jesus such a terrible thing? Many Bulgarian Christians suffered under the Ottoman rule in Bulgaria and under Communism.

Rosie turned her bedside light back on and picked up the Bible she'd gotten at the church. She looked up a section recommended by the missionary. It talked about how Jesus hadn't sinned but was nailed to a cross. As He hung on the cross, He forgave the people who had put Him there. He was hardly a rebel. Instead, He meant what He talked about, followed His own advice. The Communists must have wanted to be the god of the Bulgarians. They must have known Christianity would keep them from being controlled by the government.

Her great grandmother knew the truth and now Rosie did too. Faith in Jesus was the one thing missing from the country for too long. She'd have to write about that too someday. And someday could not come soon enough.