

A Rose is a Rose

by Goldie Jones

(from Candlewyck)

Father had just finished his latest journal entry. He laid aside his pen and rubbed his eyes. The hour was late, and he had been writing most of the evening. The one flickering candle made long shadows on the wall, and Father decided that since it was long past his eightieth birthday, his suffering from insomnia was a trait of persons his age. However, tonight he felt fatigued and had decided to go to bed, when he heard a knock on his chamber door.

"Who is it?"

The answer came from one of the sentinels. "It is I, Harvey," spoke the voice at the other side of the door. "May I come in, please?"

Father sighed. "Yes, of course." He made his way very slowly to the door and opened it. "What can I do for you, Harvey?"

The sentinel seemed breathless. "I'm sorry to bother you at this late hour, Father, but there is someone here to see you."

Father seemed bewildered. "At this hour of the night? Who, pray tell, would be calling?" Father always worried when someone other than the tunnel folk or Helpers invaded his private kingdom.

"I don't know. It is someone I have never seen before. It is an elderly woman who says she must see you, now."

Father scratched his head, trying to figure out who his mysterious caller was. "Well, it must be urgent for her to come at this time. Show her in."

"Yes, Father. Right away." And soon the sentinel disappeared down the circuitous tunnel path.

Father hastened to straighten his desk, perturbed that he would have to delay his slumber, but nevertheless curious as to who this elderly woman might be, and what her purpose was in seeing him. After what seemed a long time, there came another soft knock on his chamber door. He went to greet his visitor.

A very old woman entered the chamber. She was quite wrinkled and walked with a cane, her gnarled fingers clutching it tightly. Her hair was white and unkempt, and her thin shawl barely kept away the night chill, Father thought. But however wizened and frail she seemed, she had an unmistakable twinkle in her eye, and a very mysterious smile. She gazed at Father for a full minute before she finally spoke.

"Hello, Jacob. Perhaps you don't know me at all, but I have played a very important part in your life." There was a lilt to her voice, and it sounded as though she were asking a question, as well as uttering a statement.

Father was practically speechless. "I'm sorry, but I don't know you at all, or at least I don't remember you if I did. Who are you, and what brings you here at this ungodly hour?"

"I apologize for the lateness of the hour, but I have been traveling for quite a while, searching for you ever since I found out you were still alive. My name is Rose Calvert, and I'm certain the name means nothing to you, but yours means everything to me."

Father was more puzzled than ever. Who was this woman, and why was she so interested in him? And even more to the point, how did she find him? But before he could even ask these questions, the woman went onto explain.

"I may be old, but I'm still of sound mind, and I have a very curious mind." The twinkle in Rose Calvert's eyes was replaced by a momentary expression of sadness. "In my old age, I have perhaps discovered more things about myself than most people do in a lifetime. I recently relived one of the happiest moments of my life, and also one of the most tragic. But that's another story. I have also been searching for years for you, and I have done extensive research thanks to some friends in the medical profession and in the public library. I have read some of your works in medical journals, and I must say, I am most impressed." The smile and the twinkle returned.

But Father was not amused. "That still does explain who you are, and what your business is here, and how you happen to know where to find me. I demand an explanation."

"Well," Rose Calvert sighed. "I guess I will have to start at the beginning. But first, could I trouble you for a cup of tea? And do you mind if I sit down? My old legs won't carry me much further."

"Of course," Father said. "I have completely forgotten my manners. You'll have to excuse me, as I am not very hospitable this time of night. I shall summon William and have him bring you some tea, and in the meantime, sit over here. This is the most comfortable chair in my chamber. And I believe I will join you in the tea. Something tells me this is going to be a long night."

"I will try to be as brief as possible," Rose stated, as she settled in with her cup of tea. Her hand shook as she lifted the cup to her lips, but she managed to get a good sip before setting it down, without spilling a single drop. "It all happened many, many years ago when I was just a girl of seventeen. I boarded the ill-fated luxury liner, Titanic. Surely you have heard of that famous ship that sank back in 1912."

"Yes. Yes, indeed. There were very few survivors, I understand. And you were one of them?"

Rose smiled and nodded. "I don't know why the Lord spared me, but there must have been some noble purpose. At the time, I was heading to the United States and was engaged to marry a man I didn't love. My mother had arranged it, because my fiance was very wealthy, and my father had died, leaving us penniless. She wanted to keep up with the image and the lifestyle. Status was very important to her, but it meant nothing to me. I hated it ... the parties and the teas, and the manners and the deception, and that horrendous corset that was so tight on me I could barely breathe." Rose paused to take another sip of tea.

"I understand," Father remarked. "But what has this all to do with me?"

"I'm getting to that, if you will just be patient. Please grant me the courtesy to let me finish my story."

"Proceed," Father said. "I'm sorry I interrupted." This Rose Calvert had more intestinal fortitude than anyone Father had ever encountered. She certainly spoke her mind and didn't appear to be the least bit intimidated by the stately patriarch to whom everyone in the tunnels paid homage. Rose did not seem impressed by his status, but evidently had some kind of tie with him and he was impatient to find out about it.

"Very well," Rose said in her lilting voice. "I wanted desperately to escape the trappings of that life, and to be free. And on board, I happened to meet a young man, Jack Dawson. He saved my life when one night in desperation I considered ending my life by jumping overboard. He prevented this from happening, and at first everyone thought he was attacking me. But I finally convinced my fiance and our servant that I had been rescued when I accidentally slipped while leaning over the ship rail to

look at the rudders. To reward Jack, my fiance, Cal, invited him to have dinner with us the following evening. I'm sure there was nothing noble in the invitation. He really wanted to humiliate Jack because he was a steerage passenger, and not in our class. But I was secretly delighted, as I was immediately fond of this young man, although I didn't want him to know it at the time. Anyway, we saw each other the next day, and I learned he was a starving artist. He painted a picture of me in the nude, you know, and this was one of the things unearthed when they found the ruins of the Titanic. Well, to make a long story short, Jack and I ended up making love that fateful night before the ship hit the iceberg. We were one of the very few that went down with the ship, but thanks to Jack, he helped me to survive. The water was freezing and I thought that was the end of both of us, but we managed to find a piece of furniture in the water. And I got on it and floated, while Jack stayed nearby in the water, hanging onto it. I remember his last words; '*You must promise me, Rose, that you'll never give up no matter what happens*'. And I promised him I never would. He predicted that I would die, an old lady warm in my bed, but not on that night, not then. Oh, how prophetic were his words. He froze to death in the icy Atlantic, while I dozed off. When I awoke, I discovered that the rescue boat had arrived for us, but Jack was gone. It was the most devastating moment of my life. But then I remembered the promise I had made to him, so I managed to attract the rescue ship and I was saved."

"That was certainly an incredible story, Ms. Calvert." Father was amazed at the woman's recollection, but still couldn't understand what connection it had to him.

"Oh, you can call me Rose - or perhaps you may wish to call me mother."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm your mother, Jacob. You see, I found out after I was safely on another ship going to the United States, that my fiance had also been saved, but I hid from him in the steerage area of the other ship, devoid of my fancy garments and wrapped in an old plaid blanket. He never found me. After I arrived in the United States, I had nowhere to go, no one to turn to. I stayed for a short time at the YWCA, which offered temporary housing to the refugees of the Titanic. Shortly afterward, I got a job as a clerk in a book store. That's when I met my future husband, George Calvert. But by then, I was already six months pregnant with you. George was married at the time to another woman, so he couldn't marry me until he got a divorce. I knew you were Jack's child, as I had been with no one else. But I had no way to take care of you and continue working. It broke my heart, but I had to give you up to an orphanage. You were later adopted by a nice family, as I recall. I never got you out of my mind."

Father knew he had been adopted by the Wells family, but he never was curious about his biological parents, especially after he became a doctor and founded the tunnel community. He figured the Wells family were his family, the only one he had ever known, and why search for parents who obviously didn't care about him, or so he thought.

"This is most incredible," Father said, when at last he could speak. "You really expect me to believe that you're my mother? What proof do I have that your statements are correct?"

"You'll have to take my word for it, I'm afraid. I just wanted to see you once before I die. I am one 101 years old, and I know I can't go on much longer. But now that I have seen you, I can die happy." Tears formed in the old woman's eyes, and one escaped, running down her wrinkled cheek. She dabbed at it with a napkin. "I understand you have a son, a most unusual son. I'd love to meet him if you wouldn't mind."

"His name is Vincent. And yes, I think we can arrange a meeting. But I must warn you, Vincent is not an ordinary son. He's ---"

"Yes, I know all about him. How you found him abandoned on the property of St. Vincent's Hospital, and how he has the strange characteristics of a beast and a human combined. And this place that you've created - this underground community that is kept secret ... Oh, you don't have to worry. Your secret will die with me. I won't breathe a word of it - ever... Not ever."

"Tell me," Father asked, almost as if an afterthought. "How did you know where to find me?"

Rose smiled. "A friend. A doctor. I believe his name is Peter."

"Ah yes, Peter. My old friend and colleague. How do you know him?"

"Oh, I get around," Rose replied.

And Father agreed. "Yes, you certainly do." While Father marveled at the sincerity of this woman, he still didn't quite believe her story, or at least was totally unprepared for it. He knew in his heart that he should embrace this person who called herself his mother, but she was in reality a stranger to him, albeit a very convincing one. Perhaps Vincent would be able to see through her, as he had an uncanny ability to judge character. If Vincent felt she was authentic, then, and only would Father accept this Rose Calvert as his biological mother.

"Well, it is very late," Father commented. "And you must be very tired. Why don't I find a vacant chamber for you to spend the night, and tomorrow I will introduce you to my son, Vincent."

"That will be fine," Rose said, yawning. "It is late and I am most exhausted. But let me tell you that this has been one of the most memorable events of my life I say one of them, as I have had more than my share, I fear." The twinkle was back in those tired eyes.

"Very well. Sleep well, Ms. Cal - er, Rose - I mean - mother." It was difficult for Father to say the word, and he felt very strange about it. But nevertheless, decided he would humor the old girl, make her happy. "I'll call Mary and she will set you up in a chamber and make you comfortable. I'll see you in the morning."

"Lord willing. You never can tell at my age if I'll ever see another morning. But let's hope."

Father awoke early the following morning. His first thoughts were of the wizened old woman who claimed to be his mother, and who paid him a visit late last night. He thought of the lilt in her voice and the sparkle in her eyes, and the way she looked right through him, as though he were made of glass. Then his thoughts turned to Vincent. What would his son's reaction be to Rose Calvert, and what would she think of at. His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at his chamber door.

"Are you awake, Father?" It was Vincent, who was also an early riser. Father could hardly wait to tell Vincent of his strange visitor, but apparently Vincent had already met her, as he was most excited when he entered the chamber. "Father, I have met Rose Calvert. What an amazing woman she is. She kept us laughing all through breakfast. Mouse, Jamie, William and Mary - all were enchanted by her sense of humor and wit. Is it really true, Father? Is she your real mother?"

Father paused, somewhat disappointed that Vincent had met Rose before any introductions from him were forthcoming. "I really can't say for sure. Her story sounds plausible to a point, but how would I ever know for sure? The Wells family are the only parents I have ever known, and I feel it would do dishonor to their memories if someone else claimed me, so to speak. Even if Rose Calvert is my mother, she certainly waited a long enough time to present herself. Now she comes to me at her age of 101 years old and announces out of the blue that I am her son. Am I to believe such a story?"

Vincent paced around the chamber, deep in thought. "I don't know, Father. But even if she isn't who she claims to be, what harm would it do to play along with it? She's quite elderly and perhaps will not live too much longer. If it makes her happy to say she's your mother, so be it."

Vincent always had a way of making the seemingly impossible seem plausible. "Well," Father said, "I suppose you're right. Where is Rose now?"

"I think she's getting ready to leave. At least she said she was going to get her things together and catch an early train to Syracuse. That's where she lives with her granddaughter."

Father seemed disappointed. "But she just arrived. Why does she feel she must leave so soon?"

We've barely had a chance to get acquainted."

At that moment, there was another knock on Father's chamber door. And Rose Calvert opened it slowly and peered in, that indomitable smile lighting up her face. "Oh, I hope I'm not interrupting anything," she said. "I just wanted to say goodbye and thank you for your hospitality. I'll be leaving soon."

"But you just got here," Father protested. "Why not stay a day or two longer, at least so we can get to know one another better."

Rose smiled. "Well, now, that's very kind of you indeed. But I must be getting back home. My granddaughter will be worried. She usually accompanies me on my forays, but this time she had to work, and I know she'll be chewing her nails until I arrive home safely. I do hope you will come and visit us sometime. I'll give you my address before I leave."

"I will make it a point to do that," Father said, extending his hand in a farewell gesture. But Rose would not allow such formality. She came up close to Father and hugged him mightily, and then did the same to Vincent.

"You know something, Rose," Vincent said. "I feel a very special kinship with you. I would like to think that somewhere in heaven your Jack and my Catherine know one another and are looking down upon us this very moment."

"That is a lovely thought, and a comforting one too." Rose sighed, and had a faraway look in her eyes. "I'm so happy to have finally found you, and I wish I could stay longer. But I do want to give you this before I leave." And Rose handed Father a large manila envelope.

"What's this?" Father asked.

"Don't open it until after I'm gone. It's just a little remembrance of me, and something I think will convince you that I am your real mother."

"I never really doubted it for a second," Father lied, and graciously accepted the proffered envelope. "It was a real pleasure meeting you, Mother. I only wish we had known each other sooner."

Rose looked at him wistfully. "So do I. I haven't much time left, but at least we did get to meet. Well, I suppose I'd better get to the station. One of your Helpers has graciously offered me a ride." Rose hugged Father once again, and then she was gone. Father felt a great emptiness within him, and Vincent, sensing his discomfort, came and put his arm around Father.

"Aren't you going to open the envelope, Father?" Vincent asked.

"Oh yes, the envelope. I had almost forgotten." Nervously, Father tore open the flap, and removed the contents from within. "Oh, my lord in heaven," he exclaimed.

Vincent came rushing to his side. "What is it, Father?"

For a moment Father found it hard to speak. He handed Vincent the document he had removed from the envelope. It was a charcoal drawing of a beautiful nude woman reclining on a couch.

Vincent looked puzzled. "Who is this picture of?"

"That's Rose," Father told him. "A picture of her when she was seventeen years old, drawn by the artist with whom she fell in love The artist, purportedly, was my father." And then Father told Vincent the story that Rose had recounted to him.

"That's incredible," Vincent remarked. "To think this beautiful young woman could be that very old, and very wrinkled visitor who charmed us with her presence. I can't help thinking how Kristopher Gentian would have a field day with this. He was and is an artist too, you know."

"Indeed."

"But what's that other piece of paper in there?"

Father stared at the other document for a long time. His face was expressionless, but Vincent noticed a tear escaping from the corner of Father's eye. He quickly ran to his side and was compelled to see what had produced tears. He stared at it, and then he and Father exchanged looks and soon both had tears in their eyes.

"Well," Vincent said at last. "I guess this proves she really is your mother."

"Yes," Father said, wiping his eyes. Carefully he laid the picture and the other document aside and said to Vincent, "Let's go to the kitchen. I sure could use a cup of tea. I'm shaking inside."

Vincent took his arm. "I understand." And both silently made their way to the kitchen, leaving behind on the table, the picture of young Rose, and a birth certificate bearing the name of Jacob Dawson, weighing eight pounds and ten ounces, the son of Rose and Jack Dawson (*deceased*) dated January 9, 1913, exactly nine months and several days following the sinking of the Titanic.

END