

THE ROSE

by Joyce Clarke

The sleek black limousine crawled along, caught up in the rush hour traffic of New York, on a pleasant sunlit evening. Elliot Burch was sitting in the back, alone, examining some new contracts he had managed to get signed up during the belated business meeting. He smiled to himself, satisfied with what he had accomplished that afternoon.

The traffic had ground to a momentary halt and Elliot was glad he did not have to suffer the stresses of negotiating a way through it all.

They were moving again and he glanced out of the side window. His heart suddenly lurched in his mouth. Was this some kind of delusion of madness? Her ghost come to tease him? No, she looked real enough, walking along in the opposite direction.

His mouth went dry as he spoke her name. "Catherine," and the lump in his throat refused to budge.

He lowered his window and shouted above the noise of the traffic.

"Catherine!"

She did not hear him.

"Pull over, pull over - let me out of this damn car!"

Elliot was now frantic and all his driver could do was stop. As Elliot leapt out onto the road, the air was filled with screeching brakes, car horns blaring and offensive language from all sides. He ignored them all, as he dodged the traffic and sprinted along the sidewalk.

He saw her up ahead, at the traffic lights, crossing the road amid a crowd of people, but by the time he reached the junction, the traffic was against him. He stood and watched her walk into a small coffee bar, on the corner.

Elliot hesitated as he entered the swing doors. He had a full side view of her and everything about her was Catherine - except her face, which was somehow different. She would certainly have gone unrecognized except to anyone who knew her - and yes - loved her, the way Elliot - if he was honest - still did.

It did not make any sense at all. He had attended her funeral, some six months before and yet here she was - he was sure.

He stood at the side of her table, pulses racing, butterflies tearing around in his stomach. Quietly, so as not to alarm her, he spoke her name.

"Catherine?"

She did not acknowledge him. He tried again, louder.

"Catherine?"

She looked up and he gazed into Catherine's eyes, though he could see that the spirit of Catherine was absent.

Elliot beamed. "Hello, Cathy," his voice was warm, like a caress.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

It was Catherine's voice. He was not totally confident and motioned to the opposite seat.

"May I sit for a moment?"

She hesitated, before saying, "Yes, if you like."

He was staring at her because this was no delusion of madness, this was the woman he had loved; become her friend; would do anything for. He would stake his life on it. He thought of Vincent and their son, alone, Below and he had difficulty suppressing his excitement.

"I'm sorry, I know I'm staring at you, but you remind me of a lady I care very much about."

Catherine's eyes met his.

"I don't understand," said Catherine's voice.

Elliot cleared his throat.

"My name is Elliot Burch - does that mean anything to you?"

"No, I'm sorry." And she shook her head, looking blankly at him. Then, as if suddenly realizing something, she said, "I'm sorry, my name is Sara Walker."

Elliot was not in the least bit swayed by this and pressed on - but gently.

"All right... Sara... Can you remember what you were doing six months ago?"

She looked at him, with Catherine's strangely vacant eyes - and then he saw the fear.

"Sara, it's all right," and he touched her hand in reassurance. "You don't have to be afraid of me. I mean you no harm - and you look as if you could use a friend."

She looked down at her now, cold up of coffee, then as she looked back up at him, he saw tears in her eyes.

"I can remember nothing of my life before five weeks ago. I have been in a private nursing home - somewhere - I'm not sure where. They told me my name is Sara Walker and all my papers confirm this but, really, I could be anyone. I don't know." She looked at Elliot, a lost soul.

"Have you anywhere to stay?"

"I'm taking the evening flight to Los Angeles. I've been told that my job and my apartment is there - someone will meet me. I was having a look around New York before my flight - I suppose to see if anything would jog my memory, but it didn't."

She looked totally bereft, as tears spilled down her face and Elliot thought to himself. *'Cathy, my love, you were looking in the wrong place.'*

He passed her his handkerchief and gave her time to compose herself.

"Listen, Sara. I think your instincts tell you that I only want to help you - you can trust me."

"Yes, somehow, I know that - which is strange, as we have only just met."

Elliot took a deep breath, sent up a silent prayer and quietly asked the question he had wanted to ask since he sat down. But he still felt a kind of fear, as he spoke the words.

"Sara, does the name *'Vincent'* mean anything to you?"

He watched her closely.

Her heart flipped so strongly that her hand flew to her chest. A warm, comforting glow spread throughout her body, reaching her face and her eyes - but just as quickly disappeared.

Elliot had seen what he wanted to see. Her bewildered face stared across at him. She spoke.

"The man's name you just mentioned – Vincent - I feel that he could be someone special in my life, my reaction to his name was so strong, but only for an instant. Oh, I wish I could remember!"

Elliot smiled triumphantly. "You will remember, Catherine, you will," and he patted her hand.

Vincent and Father were sitting across the chessboard, both deep in concentration. Jacob was gurgling away happily, in his cot at the side of them.

Vincent suddenly started in his chair, his hand clutching at his chest. In a deep rush of breath, he silently mouthed one word.

'Catherine!'

All the emotions and passions that had been so denied, came tumbling back upon him and it seemed to Vincent that instead of diminishing with time, their strength had grown a hundredfold. He ached for her, with a deep yearning, wanting ache and he moaned softly to himself, as fresh tears sprang to his eyes.

Father looked up from his chessboard. "Vincent, what's the matter?" Concern showed on his face.

"Don't worry, Father. Someone walked over my grave."

"Catherine?"

"Yes - I felt her - just for a moment - and it was so real."

"It can happen like that, Vincent. Even years later - the spirit of someone you loved, can reach out and touch you; practically lay you out, with its strength. Try and look upon it as a comfort."

Vincent nodded tearfully. He reached over to his son and cuddled him close to his face.

Elliot made Catherine comfortable in his office. He spent so much time there, it had evolved into a comfortable home-from-home, although it did have a very masculine feel about it.

Catherine was happy for the moment, with a glass of wine. Elliot was at the word processor, and typed out a message for Father, which would reach him via a series of trusted Helpers.

Elliot had become very much a part of the community Below and his help was invaluable to them. He'd had a concealed entrance into the tunnels, constructed in the basement of his office block and a locked, sound-proofed room was incorporated into this concealed entrance. It was here, that Elliot had arranged to meet Father that night.

Elliot purposefully did not discuss with Catherine the life that she had forgotten, mainly because it was so bizarre, it would probably alarm her. He assured her that the man who was coming to see her, loved her like his own daughter. He refrained from mentioning Vincent's name again, in case she asked questions he would not know how to answer and if he tried, might frighten her.

The strange thing was, Cathy hardly said anything at all - conversation of any kind was difficult. She went through the motions, but there was nothing of Catherine's spirit, in her at all.

Under normal circumstances, he would have taken her out for a meal, but if he was honest, he was afraid of her disappearing in a cloud of smoke, so he prepared a simple meal for them in his office kitchen.

Elliot waited for Father in the tunnel, leaving Catherine in the room behind the tunnel entrance. He wanted to explain the situation to him, before they met. What he was not prepared for, was that Vincent had come along with him.

Elliot explained what had happened as best he could, and they were both understandably, totally stunned. Vincent slumped against the wall in shock.

"Catherine?" he said, incredulously.

"Yes, but not the Catherine we know. Her face has been altered somewhat and it's as if her spirit has died and left only her shell."

"But you recognized her?"

"The alterations to her face, mean she can pass amongst acquaintances as a stranger, but to you and I, Father, Peter and a few of her friends, she is recognizable. What we have to try to do, is unlock her mind."

"Yes - and before she can see me," Vincent sighed with frustration.

Father spoke up. "The mind is more complex than any computer. What we need here, is a key, a key to unlock her memory."

Vincent's hand went to the small leather pouch, permanently hung around his neck. He took it off and handed it to Elliot.

"What is this, Vincent?"

"It's a porcelain rose. Catherine gave it to me on our first anniversary. It symbolizes the love we share. Maybe it holds the power to unlock her memory."

Vincent looked down at his feet and then up again at Elliot, his blue eyes clear and bright. He took a deep breath.

"This evening, just after five o'clock, Catherine's spirit reached out and touched me. I felt her nearness - just for a moment, but as strongly as I ever did."

Elliot nodded and smiled. The last microscopic seed of doubt had been cast out.

Catherine was sitting quietly, in her own little world. She looked up at Father without a glimmer of recognition. As he approached her in his strange tunnel clothes, she seemed to cower, like a small, frightened animal and Father was shocked by the change in her, but understood now, what Elliot meant about her being recognizable to those who loved her.

When he had lowered himself into a chair near Catherine and put his stick on the floor, he reached out to her and, taking her hands firmly in his said, "Oh, my dear, you don't have to be afraid of me. I love you like my own daughter - we adopted each other a long time ago." Tears sprang into his eyes and his bottom lip trembled with emotion.

It was with great difficulty, through tears, smiles and emotion, that Father told her, "We thought you were dead, we never even dared to dream....," and his voice faded away.

Catherine had now relaxed, her fears disappeared and were replaced by tears. Elliot looked on with a lump in his throat.

Father gathered himself together and smiled warmly at her.

"Now, Catherine, I am going to give you something that might just unlock the door of your memory. Would you like to try?"

Catherine swallowed, never taking her eyes from his face.

"Yes, I would like to try."

"Good girl."

Elliot handed the pouch to him, by the string, and Father lowered it into Cathy's hands.

In the tunnel, Vincent waited, hardly daring to breathe.

Cathy explored the soft leather pouch with her fingers, as if it was something infinitely precious. She could feel her heart beating strongly within her and that same warm glow, she had experienced earlier, was spreading throughout her body, almost taking her breath away. She did not attempt to look inside the pouch - as if she knew what was inside.

The beginnings of a smile played around Vincent's mouth....

She lifted the pouch to her face and oblivious to Elliot and Father, she buried her nose and mouth into the soft leather, seeming to breathe in the scent of Vincent. Small animal-like sounds were coming from deep within her and suddenly she looked up, and her eyes, though brimming over with tears, were alive and full of the spirit of Catherine!

Her whole face was radiant as she looked from Father to Elliot.

"I remember! I remember! Vincent is here! I can feel him!"

She was on her feet as the tunnel door burst open and she was in his arms trying to burrow herself deeper and deeper into his embrace, trying to draw all the male Vincent smell of him into her lungs.

"Vincent, Vincent, I was lost ... lost. I couldn't remember you ... I couldn't remember you!"

An incredulous Vincent, with his hands buried in her hair, feasting his eyes on her face, purred with emotion.

"It's all right, my love, you're safe now, I'm here and we'll never be parted again - I promise you."

She was amazed at the softness and warmth of his mouth, and the now remembered velvet soft feel of his face on her cheek. She made little mewling sounds of comfort deep in her throat, as she clung to him.

Elliot turned to Father. Both had silly grins on their faces and lumps in their throats as big as golf balls. He coughed.

"I don't know about you, but I could do with a very large, stiff drink."

"What an excellent idea, Elliot. I'll leave my top clothes down here, then I won't look so strange should anyone see me."

As Elliot helped him off with his warm cloak, he affectionately squeezed the older man's shoulders.

"I'll walk back with you, later on."

"Thank you, Elliot, I'll enjoy that."

They took one last look at Catherine and Vincent who were lost in a world of their own, then went out into the basement, locking the door behind them. Elliot chuckled to himself and shook his head slightly.

'You've gone and done it again, haven't you? Catherine Chandler? You bring out the very best in me and I still end up going home alone.' He smiled. *'But I kind of like it....'*

END