***Rachel had a garde*n**

 *A short story by Veronica Heley*

**The day before . . .**

Rachel answered the doorbell to meet with a torrent of abuse.

‘You evil-minded old woman! How dare you!’ It was Bonnie, her next door neighbour, backed up by her sneering teenage son, the one who liked to dump his rubbish in Rachel’s garden.

Bonnie was spitting mad. ‘You knew we’d applied to concrete over the

front garden so’s to get our electric car off the road—’

 ‘Yes, but—’

‘So you complained to the Council, and now they’ve refused us permission. They let everyone do it in the past but now they say we have to keep our front gardens to prevent flooding and encourage wild life! Electric cars are our future and you are a selfish, evil woman, standing in the way of progress!’

Rachel stammered, ‘Well, I do think gardens should be kept for plants but I didn’t object to—’

Bonnie almost spat. ‘Liar! If you were a true Christian, you’d give your house and garden over to refugees instead of waylaying people in the street and forcing unwanted bunches of flowers on them.’

Rachel tried to justify herself. ‘People like to be given flowers, and I do grow vegetables in the back garden.’

Bonnie went all virtuous. ‘Haven’t you heard, we’re supposed to let our gardens “rewild”?’

 ‘“Rewilding” sounds marvellous,’ said Rachel, who was in her eighties and no longer followed fashion. ‘A patch of wild flowers is a joy to the eye for six weeks, but for the rest of the year it’s a mess.’

 Bonnie wasn’t having that. ‘What do you know about it? That so-called mess is harbouring insects, bees, pollinators of all sorts. Without them, the planet will die!’

Rachel tried again. ‘Not everything in the wild is good for you. Bindweed strangles everything in sight and some plants are poisonous. My flowers attract birds, bees and insects of all types throughout the year. In fact, my water barrels are steaming with gnats just now which I am sure is very good news for the birds, but leaves me reaching for the anti-histamine.’

‘You should be glad to suffer for . . .’ Bonnie’s voice trailed away. She couldn’t quite bring herself to say that being bitten was a small price to pay for saving the planet. She said, ‘You’ll be sorry for this!’ and stormed off. Her grinning son made a rude gesture to Rachel and followed his mother inside.

Rachel felt stunned. Was it really unchristian of her to want to continue living in a house with a garden? Ought she to downsize to a tiny flat? And was she really annoying passers-by if she offered them flowers from her garden?

Shouldn’t a Christian appreciate flowers? How could Bonnie look at flowers and not see God’s hand at work? How many different varieties of roses were there? Only God could have thought up so many variations on a theme.

Someone called out to her. It was a neighbour from the next road. ‘Oh, there you are, Rachel. I’m on my way to see Barbara and I wondered if you’ve found those old bible reading notes she wanted. And might I take her some more of your roses? Not being able to get out and about nowadays, she appreciates the flowers even more than the bible reading notes . . .though I’m not supposed to tell the minister that.’

Rachel fetched the bible reading notes and cut a bunch of roses for Barbara who, poor woman, had had a nasty tummy upset and hadn’t left her flat for a fortnight. It made Rachel feel less raw to hear that at least one person appreciated being given some flowers.

She wondered if she really had been pestering passersby. How embarrassing! She must be more careful in future.

Only, as she was filling up the bird feeders, an elderly neighbour stopped to ask Rachel the name of the clematis she’d put in by the front door that spring. He updated her on what the doctor had said about his blood pressure, and asked if she could spare him a rose for his button-hole as he was meeting an old friend for lunch; wink, wink!

Rachel remembered with a smile that he’d always been a bit of a flirt even before his wife died. It was all right to chat to him, wasn’t it? He’d wanted to share his news, and it wasn’t Rachel who’d initiated the conversation.

The water in the pond at the back was getting low. She attended to that and the water in the bird bath. The blackbirds did love to drink and to play there. The variegated ivy at the bottom of the garden were alive with the rustlings of this year’s batch of sparrows.

She picked some salad stuffs for her lunch and rang Fred, who did odd jobs for her. A branch of her double white lilac had died, and he’d promised to take it off for her. Rachel’s own father had died young, and an old friend of the family had given her a root of the lilac from his garden when he gave her away in marriage. Ah me. Happy days.

The phone call took some time as Fred wanted to tell Rachel how his wife was doing. Yes, it was cancer but the treatment seemed to be working. He had no one else to talk to, poor man, as his parents were in a residential home and couldn’t be bothered with other people’s troubles.

What next? Ah, it was refuse collection day on the morrow. Rachel started to drag the garden waste bags out onto the pavement when a young man took them off her. ‘Let me do that!’ Although his fringe was now down over his eyes, she recognised him as Frank, the grandson of one of her oldest friends. He was down from university for the holidays, and full of this local girl he’d just met. He said he really liked her, but she was refusing to take him seriously.

Rachel tentatively offered him flowers to give to the girl, and to her surprise he accepted. She put them in a large plastic bag for him because he didn’t want to be seen carrying flowers in the street. He went off, whistling as merrily as her blackbirds.

Then it was time for lunch and a short rest before the most important part of the day. She had to be in her front garden when the children came home from school.

The first one drifted along in her mother’s wake, tired and despondent, dragging her feet. The mother looked at the garden and slowed down. She seemed to be carrying a load of worry. Another child ill, perhaps?

The child looked and registered . . . nothing.

Rachel said, ‘Would you like a flower?’

The child blinked and came to attention.

‘What’s your favourite colour?’

‘Purple.’

Yes, of course it was. A cosmos was in full flower. Rachel snipped and handed the flower over.

‘Say “thank you”,’ said the mother, her load of worry easing. Almost, she managed a smile.

‘Mm,’ said the child, examining the flower petal by petal.

The mother said, ‘Thank you. We’re in Mayfield House.’

Social housing. Yes, of course. No access to a garden. Rachel cut a bunch of flowers and gave them to the woman, who smiled, really smiled, and passed on.

Other children came past. Other mothers. None of them stopped or even hesitated when they went by, but nearly all smiled and ducked their head at Rachel. They had no need of a flower being picked for them today.

Then a mother with a buggy containing two fractious toddlers came by, followed by a small boy who was kicking an empty can along. Three children, triple trouble.

Rachel said, ‘Would you like a flower?’

The mother looked as if Rachel had bitten her. And then stopped to look, really look at the garden. ‘We’d a garden like this once.’

The boy chirped up. ‘Dad lost his job and now we’re in a shitty flat and everything’s horrible.’

‘Yes, I see,’ said Rachel, who did indeed see. She cut two of the Albertine roses for the twins, a handful of runner beans and a pink rose for the mother. The boy pointed to a white rose on a small bush that was struggling.

Rachel hesitated. It was the first time that bush had flowered. It had been given her in memory of a baby who had only lived for six weeks. The mother was still grieving, and probably always would be. Rachel had been nurturing that rose for weeks, and had looked forward to putting the first flower in a vase on her mantelpiece. Only, the boy had asked for it.

So, she cut the rose and gave it to him. The boy thanked her with his eyes, and they went on their way.

Rachel eased her back. It was tiring, this standing for so long. But it had been a good day apart from the altercation with her neighbour. Tomorrow she’d dead-head the roses.

**The day after . . .**

Rachel made herself a mug of tea and opened the front door to collect the newspaper.

She lost her balance and fell. She ended up half sitting and half lying on the doorstep. The mug broke, spilling its contents on the doorstep.

Her front garden had been wrecked. Every single plant had been trampled down or smashed to pieces. Some roses, just coming into bloom, had been torn from their stems and thrown into a heap.

The little white rose, given in memory of the baby that died, had been pulled up and thrown out into the road where a car had run over it.

The white lilac, her lovely white lilac, had been chopped down and its boughs lay in a heap on the lawn.

Rachel told herself to breathe deeply. In and out. The doctor’s warnings slid in and out of her mind. Stroke. Heart attack. There was a buzzing in her ears. Was she going to die there and then?

Someone cried out in distress. It wasn’t her voice, was it? No. her heart was going bang, bang, but she hadn’t spoken.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of her long-dead husband smiling as he came in from the back garden with a freshly picked tomato in his hand . . . and on the breeze she heard echoes of the voices of their three children at play on the back lawn. They’d all grown up in this house before going out into the world. They were good kids, keeping in touch every now and then to tell her what they’d been doing.

Someone knelt beside her, asking if she were all right. Who was it? Rachel couldn’t make out. A child’s voice cried out, shrill and persistent. ‘Oh, look at the poor flowers!’

Was she all right? No, she wasn’t all right. But she wasn’t dead, either. It was just that she didn’t want to open her eyes and see again . . . what she had seen. The destruction.

Another woman’s voice called from the road, ‘Is she all right? Shall I call an ambulance?’

Rachel made the effort to shake her head. She did NOT want to go to hospital. So tiring, hospitals. She cleared her throat. ‘I’ll be all right in a moment.’ Or, that’s what she meant to say, but her voice didn’t seem to be working.

The child’s voice, ‘She’s crying, Mum. Mum, I feel like crying, too.’

The woman supporting her said, ‘Rachel? You know me, don’t you? What’s my name?’

Rachel made an enormous effort. ‘Dot. You’re Dot.’ Rachel knew Dot because she worked part time in the café nearby.

‘Good. Now, who did this?’

Rachel guessed who it must have been. Bonnie, the angry woman from next door, or possibly her awkward teenage son? Ought Rachel to name them? She had no proof.

She struggled to sit upright. Her heartbeat had steadied. She’d always had a strong heart. Both sides of her body seemed to be working, so she hadn’t had a stroke, either.

A second woman had joined Dot. ‘She ought to be checked over at the hospital.’

‘No need,’ said Rachel. ‘Shock.’ Her voice seemed to work this time.

‘Can you show me both your hands? And look at my finger? Right. That’s fine. I can’t believe what’s happened. I look at your garden every time I pass, and think how pretty it is.’

The child said, ‘She gave me a pink flower last week and I put it in an egg cup and it lasted two whole days. I liked that flower.’

Rachel attempted a smile. The child was distressed and must be reassured. ‘Plants recover, my dear.’

She thought, *But people don’t always.*

The second woman said, ‘Dot, you look after her and I’ll take your kids to school with mine, right?’ She departed with the children in tow.

Dot helped Rachel to stand and get to a chair in the hall. She made Rachel a sugary mug of tea and said, bracingly, that at least the back garden was untouched. What a picture it was, too.

Dot had left the front door open. A man hallooed from the street. ‘What’s happened? Who’s done this? Is it a break-in? Is the old dear OK?’

Dot went out to deal with him. Shocked noises. Another mother taking a child to school joined them. More exclamations. A child burst into tears. There was a whole lot of upset going on in the street.

Rachel made herself sip her tea. Too milky for her taste, but what did that matter? When her husband had died she’d moved into the back bedroom and still slept there. She hadn’t heard anything in the night. If she phoned the police to report the vandalism, what could they do about it? She had no proof it was her neighbour who’d wrecked her garden.

Dot returned, saying she had to get to work, but would try to get back early that afternoon to help Rachel clear up. Was there anyone whom Rachel could come to sit with her? What about her family?

‘I’ll ring them later. They live too far away to help.’

‘Promise me you will ring them?’

Rachel said, ‘There are some roses which have been cut off and left on the ground. Would you like to gather them up and take them with you? It’s a shame to waste them.’ At least, she thought she said that, but Dot didn’t seem to hear. Or perhaps she did.

Dot said, ‘I’ll phone my friend who works in the bakery and ask if she’ll drop round later. She’ll be so shocked. Everyone round here knows your garden and says how lovely it is.’

Rachel wanted Dot to go away so that she could take in what had happened. *Her roses, the little white rose, the white lilac . . . so many memories . . .*

Dot left, leaving the door on the latch so that neighbours could get into the house in the case of an emergency.

The phone rang. Rachel let it go to voicemail and moved to the settee in the back room. She could hear the caller saying how distressed she was at the news and what could she do to help? Rachel didn’t bother to reply.

She prayed a little. *‘Dear Lord, I’m broken. This is the end.’* An old carol came into her head.

 *King Jesus has a garden . . .*

Time passed. She slept.

Dot returned. No, not Dot. Someone else. Made her some tea and toast, made her eat and drink. Fussed around. Said everyone was very worried about Rachel. Said her husband was using his lunch hour to try to put the front garden to rights.

Rachel slept again. She woke to hear someone else come in at the front door. It was a girl Rachel hadn’t seen before. ‘I’m Julie, Frank’s friend, you know? You sent me some flowers yesterday. I saw what happened on the local Facebook page. I was so shocked. Frank’s out front, bagging up the bits and he’s going to get you some annuals to fill in the gaps, only he doesn’t know what you’d like. I said Pansies-with-faces. Is that right?’

Rachel didn’t know what she thought, except that nothing could replace what she’d lost.

A man she knew a little appeared. He lived in the next road. He’d brought his dog, a cockapoo, with him, which he tied to the table leg while he sat with her to drink a cuppa. He said it was all on their local news page on Facebook, and everyone was really worried about her.

She wasn’t worried about herself. She would have liked to have drifted off and Gone Beyond, but it appeared it wasn’t going to happen.

She could feel the silence from next door. If she challenged Bonnie about the damage, would she pretend it was nothing to do with her or her teenage son? Probably.

Julie returned, saying some people had brought some plants to replace those which had been ruined, and where would Rachel like to put them? Frank was doing his best, poor lad, but he was no professional.

Rachel forced herself to get up and see. The garden looked so bare with no flowers in it. And the lilac tree was just a stump.

A tray of pansies had been left on the doorstep, and two pots of zinnias.

Also a deep red rose in a pot, in full flower. And some tagetes. Rachel had never liked tagetes, thinking them too brash for words. Too orange. Too obvious. She seemed to remember they were good for deterring whitefly. Or was it blackfly?

The man with the cockapoo was scratching his head. ‘Where do you want them, eh?’

Rachel couldn’t think straight. She said, ‘Anywhere would be good.’

Julie and the man with the cockapoo conferred with Frank, Julie’s boy-friend, and somehow the plants were puddled in and looked just fine. Not the same as before. But colourful.

Julie stood over Rachel and made sure she rang her family. Rachel knew they’d all come clacking round asking questions and wanting to be helpful and she couldn’t cope, she really couldn’t. So she told them she was just fine. And knew they’d not believe it and would be on the next train down. So tiring . . . she’d have to make up their beds and get some food in. But it was nice to think they wanted to come.

**A week later . . .**

A For Sale board went up outside Bonnie’s house. Rachel hadn’t said anything but Bonnie’s son had given herself away, saying how pleased he was that someone had given that old witch her comeuppance. Word had got around. Everyone hoped a new young family would move in and appreciate having a garden.

 Rachel recovered, sort of. There’d been a constant procession of people dropping by to see if she was managing all right. Her family had driven her nuts, fussing around until she felt strong enough to tell them off good and proper.

 The stump of the lilac had thrown out some green shoots. The red rose she’d been given, was thriving. Someone had mown the back lawn and bought her some fat balls for the birds. The place where the tiny white rose had been, had been covered with orange tagetes.

 One of these days she’d buy another white rose to replace the one she’d lost.

 She looked at the clock. It was 3.15pm of a school day and time for her to be in the front garden, ready with her scissors to cut a flower for someone who needed it.

 She couldn’t be a missionary or counsel the bereaved. She couldn’t preach or baptise. But she had her own ministry of listening, of loving and giving.

*King Jesus has a garden, full of divers flowers,*

*Where I go culling posies gay, all times and hours.*

A*h, Jesu Lord, my heal and weal, my bliss complete,*

*Make thou my heart thy garden plot, fair, trim and neat.*

Veronica Heley’s latest book is False Name, from Severn House.

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