

A ROSE FOR AVERY
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“Merle Avery Ellison, lemme finish! Sometimes, I open my mouth, and you shake your head like y’already know what I’m ‘bout t’say.” Merle rose slowly, cracked his knuckles, and stepped onto the porch for a smoke. Haley followed him. “It’s time we got rid o’ the car,” she continued, “‘cause you won’t fix it, and seein’ it there, well, pains me to no end.”

“Haley,” he began, plucking a wad of tobacco from a dirty canvas pouch, “I know I ain’t touched it, but it’s all I...”

Tobacco fell across the toe of his boot. Haley bit her lip. Merle had drifted again. She wiped her hands on her apron and carefully lowered him to her lap.

“Shhh,” Haley whispered, rocking him gently, “Momma’s here.”

Her gaze shifted slowly from Merle’s damp forehead to the roses along the stair. Their long stems and delicate petals revealed every breath and breeze in the valley. Haley’s brow furrowed as she recalled Merle’s mother, Lettie, and her first visit to the farm.

Before a smile had formed on Haley’s lips, Lettie was out of the car, marching towards her rose beds. She stopped abruptly at lawn’s end, and without a word, began lifting and dropping her gaze, like a general inspecting troops.

“Once roses go wild,” Lettie declared, “y’might as well burn’m to the ground.”

“These ain’t wild,” Haley retorted, “why, I take care of’m like they was—”

“Shame, really—they’d be so pretty if they was looked after proper.”

Lettie’s stare pierced through her. Haley’s grip tightened on her pruning shears till they bit sharply into her palm. She stood transfixed as Lettie appraised each and every blossom, shaking her head in disgust. Blood now streamed down Haley’s elbow, falling like gravy onto the soil below.

After surveying the entire garden, her gaze fell once more upon Haley. Lettie’s expression suggested transgressions so immense the earth should devour her for it. Overwhelmed, she looked to her knight for support, certain he’d defend her heart, but Sir Merle of Kenton took his mother’s hand, mounted the stairs, and disappeared into the house without a word. Betrayal overcame her.

“It’s a conspiracy,” Haley cried, “a no-good conspiracy of the heart.” She tried to wipe away her tears, but the grit on her apron tore at her eyelids. It was too much to bear.

Just then a breeze arrived, almost playfully, as if to share a dance. It leaped and twirled, swooped and swirled before finally enveloping her on the stair. Her arms fell limp, as she arched her back, closed her eyes, and basked in its delightful embrace. It fled as quickly as it arrived, but

somehow managed to restore her spirit.

In quiet defiance, she pledged never again to tend to her roses, come what may. Never again would she prune or spray or feed them—she'd let nature take its course. The mere thought of her rebellion provided such relief that, after the bleeding subsided, she caught herself trying to smile as she headed inside to start supper.

Merle began to stir. He usually awoke in a fit, and Haley was bracing for it. He leaped up, muttering something about the cow, and clumsily stomped off towards the barn.

Haley never mentioned the spells to Merle—his pride wouldn't bear it. Besides, Doc Bigley had come for supper one night when Merle had drifted. After checking him over, Doc declared his condition was likely brought on by grief. It was treatable with therapy, but the moment Doc stated it, they both knew Merle wouldn't see it through. So, there on the porch, they agreed never again to speak of it.

Merle's unraveling began in the Spring of '51. Their only child, Avery, had just won a basketball scholarship to State, and Merle was beaming. No one in his family had even stood on a college campus, let alone attended one, so Merle's excitement was boundless. However, in his zeal to share the news, he became a hazard to himself and the community. While driving into town, if he spotted someone he knew, he'd cross into their lane, stop, and leap out of his truck, grinning and gabbing like a man possessed.

Once in town, Merle found his stride. His days were carried out with a spy's precision. He'd slip into Jensen's Barber at nine sharp for his complimentary shave, then scan the place for opportunities. Those familiar with Merle's tactics winced, feigned sleep, or hid behind newspapers. Inevitably, he'd discover a few unsuspecting souls to seize upon. It seems nothing made Merle happier than recounting his good fortune to others.

Turns out, sharing such important news created quite an appetite. So each day, precisely at noon, Merle made his way Sassy's Grill, eager to receive any congratulatory grub or ale he could summon. Once he'd had his fill, or worn out his welcome, he'd make one final stop at Earl's Tavern, where the whiskey could barely keep pace with the lies. Merle went on like this for a week straight—drunk and well-fed, with a face as smooth as a baby's behind.

Avery, too, found time to celebrate. A week after the news, he hopped in a car with Zach, Kenton High's gap-toothed center, and headed to Raleigh for a night of beer and revelry. For Avery, his mission was twofold: to celebrate his scholarship, and to be there for Zach, the only Kenton starter not picked up for college ball.

"So what are your plans for summer?" asked Avery.

"Gonna work at my pop's garage. 'Sides, I'm sick o' school, man. I need a break."

"A break—from what? I never once saw you bring a book home." Zach tries to act hurt, but moments later, broke out laughing.

"Okay, you got me. Truth be told, I ain't ready for college—gotta figure a few things out

first.”

Avery could read between the lines, but was a good enough friend to drop it. Besides, this trip was about them: their friendship, graduating from Kenton, and winning the State Championship. So he punched Zach in the shoulder, turned on the radio, then smiled as he sat back to absorb the ever-changing landscape whizzing by.

When they rolled into Raleigh, there were State students everywhere: hanging out of cars, piled into trucks, even dancing on the street. Without a doubt, they liked what they saw.

Soon, they were parked in an alley across from their goal, the Home Team Tavern. The boys tucked in their shirts, re-combed their hair, and crossed the street with the ungainly confidence of teenagers trying to look older.

Zach thought they had an angle: Cale, the tavern’s owner, was friends with his father, and had even attended a few Kenton games over the years. So, there was a chance, albeit slight, that he’d let them in. However, as they mounted the creaky stairs leading up to the entrance, both boys wavered.

Avery began to feel ill—he couldn’t stop thinking the cops might raid the place and he’d lose his scholarship. Several times, the boys glanced at each other, silently hoping the other would lose his nerve. But eventually, they ran out of steps—and chances to turn back—so Zach swallowed hard and opened the door.

A mountain of a doorman awaited them, perched on a stool. He immediately began shaking his head. But just as he stood to show them out, Cale shouted from across the bar.

“Let ‘em through! I know those boys.” The doorman glared at them but reluctantly stepped aside.

When they reached the bar, Zach tried to speak, but Cale silenced him with his finger, then reached out to shake Avery’s hand.

“What, kid, you think we don’t read the papers? Got a full ride to State, huh? Well, I’ll be! ‘Fore long, you’ll be hittin’ treys up at Reynolds Coliseum!”

“I hope so, sir.”

“Cut the formalities, kid—name’s Cale.” Avery smiled.

“Okay ... um ... Cale.”

Cale then turned to Zach, still stinging from his affront.

“How ‘bout you, Zach? What’s the news? You waitin’ on an out-of-state offer, or what?” Zach looked away.

“No, Cale, I’m—uh—takin’ a year off to work at my pop’s garage. Need a little time, is all.”

“Year off, huh?” Cale looked intently at Zach, as if he knew a secret. Zach shifted uneasily on his stool.

“Yeah, that’s what I told myself twenty-some years ago, and look at me now.” Zach withered under Cale’s hard gaze until Avery finally chimed in.

“Heard you used to be quite a ballplayer yourself, Cale—even made it to the Finals.” Cale stood up, regained himself, and draped a bar-towel across his shoulder.

“Yeah, we had a real good run at it. Didn’t win out like you boys, but we gave ‘em quite a scare.”

“What year was that, Cale?” Zach asked. Cale didn’t respond. Dredging up old failings just wasn’t on his agenda. Instead, he turned around, grabbed a hammer from behind the bar and struck an empty ice bucket to get everyone’s attention.

“Listen up, folks. We got us a couple celebrities in the house. These boys here, Avery and Zach, played for Kenton this year, and somehow got past Greenfield and Apex to win the State Championship. So, let’s hear it for ‘em.”

The tavern exploded with applause. Men clambered over one another for a handshake—a few ladies even wanted their pictures taken together. Cale was thrilled to give the boys a moment in the spotlight. He’d been tough on Zach, and wanted to make things right. Besides, it was good for business, as beer and whiskey poured forth from every cask and keg in the place.

Evening eventually gave rise to morning, and after all the beers and shots, after all the lies and stories, the boys returned to Zach’s ’47 Ford, well on their way to making history of another sort. Just ten miles from home, where Route 4 makes an inexplicable S-turn before heading into Kenton, that ’47 Ford simply went straight. It veered off the road and leaped a drainage ditch, before stopping cold between two live oaks. The boys, lost in slumber, were hurtled violently through the windshield, landing in a thicket several yards away.

Nearly an hour passed before a local farmer, heading out to his fields, spotted the car in the trees. He searched for survivors, but, finding none, ran to the nearest farmhouse and called the sheriff.

“Sheriff, Tom Fulton here. I know it’s early, but they’s been an accident. Huh? Route 4, past the curve. Yessir—afraid it’s worse’n that. They’s two young fellas layin’ in a thicket a ways from the car—and neither one’s movin’. Okay, Sheriff, will do. See ya soon.”

Sheriff Boone arrived on-scene within minutes. He followed Mr. Fulton past the wreckage to where the bodies lay. They were face-down, broken and bent like marionettes hurled from a giant stage. He checked them both for a pulse, then shook his head.

“Gimme a hand here, Tom.”

The two men struggled to extract the tall, lanky boys from the dense brush. “Oh no, it’s Zach Sims!” the Sheriff exclaimed, as they turned over the first body. “Oh Jesus, not Avery Ellison!” he shouted, after revealing the second. Sheriff Boone teared up, then walked away into the darkness. Mr. Fulton, not knowing what to do, removed his hat and stared at the ground till he returned.

“Okay, Tom, you’ve done enough,” the Sheriff said, before blowing into his handkerchief.

“Sheriff, are you sure I can’t—”

“No, Tom, I got this.”

“Yessir. Well, send their folks my condolences.”

“I will, Tom, and uh, thanks for your help.” Mr. Fulton nodded, donned his hat, then scabbled up the hill to his still-idling tractor.

It took hours to process the accident scene. There were photos to take, and evidence to tag before the morbid business of removing the deceased and site cleanup. Through it all, Sheriff Boone remained on-scene, not merely out of duty, but also to delay the task he dreaded most— notifying the families. But now, that moment was upon him, and as he turned off the highway towards the Ellison farm, he caught himself muttering a long-forgotten childhood prayer.

Haley Ellison came out just as he pulled up. She’d seen him from the kitchen window, but her smile quickly faded when she saw the Sheriff’s face.

“Mornin’, Sheriff. Everything alright?”

“No, Haley—I wish it was. Listen, is Merle around?”

“Why, I think he’s out in the barn, sawin’ wood.”

“Well, I need to talk to you both, if that’s okay. I’ll go find him and we’ll meet back on the porch.”

“Alright, Sheriff. Got a nice peach pie and fresh-made coffee.”

“That’d be fine, Haley, just ... fine.” The Sheriff’s tone was unsettling.

“Wonder if Zach’s in trouble again,” Haley mused, as she began setting the table. Haley and Merle had become Zach’s guardians a few years earlier, while his father was in jail, and ever since, Sheriff Boone would come to them whenever Zach lost his way.

Merle was in the barn, just as Haley guessed. He shut down his saw as soon as the Sheriff approached.

“Mornin’, Sheriff. What brings y’out here?” The Sheriff’s gaze dropped away.

“Merle, there’s somethin’ I gotta tell you and the missus.”

“Oh that’s all right, Sheriff—you can just tell me. What’s on your mind?”

“No, Merle, I really need to talk to you together.”

Merle sensed something in the Sheriff’s voice.

“This ain’t about Avery, is it? Our boy’s okay, ain’t he?” The Sheriff didn’t answer. Merle’s heart began to race.

“Let’s go up to the house and talk,” the Sheriff replied. But when he turned around to leave, Merle was blocking his path.

“Sheriff, what’s the trouble? Is Avery alright?”

The Sheriff’s jaw clenched as he stepped around him. Merle quickly followed.

“Sheriff, I just need to know if he’s okay—can you tell me that much?” The Sheriff walked on in silence. Merle’s voice cracked.

“If Avery’s in trouble, Sheriff, I need to know.” Just then, the screen door slammed behind

Haley, who was precariously balancing a pie, a coffee pot, and three mugs in her arms. Merle became frantic.

“Where’s our boy, Sheriff? For God’s sake, tell me somethin’!”

Haley’s eyes met the Sheriff’s, and when he looked away, she knew. There was a scream, followed by a crash. By the time the men arrived, Haley lay unconscious in a pool of coffee and shattered glass.

As they struggled to lift her onto a chaise, the Sheriff broke the news.

“Merle, uh ... there was an accident. Out on Highway 4, you know, near the S-turn. Zach’s Ford struck some trees and the boys, well ... they was killed. Must’ve fallen asleep.” Merle turned away, then back, not knowing what to do next. Finally, he collapsed into a chair next to Haley, and began stroking her hair.

“I’m sorry, Merle. Avery was loved by everyone who—”

“—Okay, Sheriff. You’ve done your job. Now please, just leave us be.”

“Alright, Merle, but if you need anything, don’t hesitate to—”

“Sheriff ... please!” Merle motioned towards the squad car. The Sheriff nodded, replaced his hat, and stepped slowly off the porch. Moments later, as he pulled away, he adjusted his mirror and saw Merle on all fours, sobbing uncontrollably.

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Haley awoke on the porch, disoriented and perspiring through her clothes. Hoping it was just a dream, she drew back the covers and sat up slowly, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. But the glass shards and coffee stain beneath the table yanked her back to reality. Frantic, she ran off the porch and into the yard. Grief bore down on her so quickly, she could scarcely breathe. Eventually, it drove her into the rose beds, where she desperately grabbed the first stem she could reach.

Gripped by hysteria, she bent the stem in great arcs, back and forth, driving its thorns ever deeper into her flesh. Blood spattered across the rich earth and painted the stairs like droplets from a sprinkler. But Haley was beyond all pain—she would have that rose. Finally, mercifully, its woody stem surrendered. Pulling it to her breast, she raced up the hill behind the barn until, mad out of breath, she fell to her knees in the orchard.

The still air offered no relief. Haley struggled to her feet, moving from tree to tree till she found it: the peach she and Merle had planted eighteen years before, when Avery was just a few days old.

Haley tucked her now-throbbing hand in her blouse and sat wearily before the stately tree. She leaned her head against its cool, smooth bark. And there, exhausted, Haley Mae Ellison surrendered again to sleep.

Just before daybreak, as first light crept across the dewy meadows surrounding their farm, Bertie, her orange tabby, sidled up to Haley, and began licking her cheek. She awoke in a start

that sent the cat scampering. The sweltering heat had long since departed, replaced by a damp cold that made her shudder as she sat up to stretch. When her eyes finally focused, she was met with the most glorious sunrise she'd ever seen. For the first time since Avery's death, she cried with the dreadful anguish known only to grieving mothers. She heaved and quaked so violently, she feared it might tear her asunder. But eventually, the shuddering subsided, and her tears dried in long stains upon her cheeks.

The sun's rays had made their way up to the peach's regal crown, when suddenly, she felt his presence there beside her and knew in her heart that Avery was safe. As she struggled to regain her feet, she knew, too, that many more difficult days lay ahead, but at least now she had a place—a sanctuary—where she could return, and grieve, and draw upon his spirit for the courage to simply go on living.