

Wild Roses

by KATHERINE GOVIER

LUCY GRAY'S AUNT HAD BEEN AN ARTIST. Ruth Bentham was her name and she first painted the wild roses and the coulees of southern Alberta, where she had moved in 1937 as a young bride. She then graduated to interiors with a little narrative—letters on tables, hats on chairs, shawls hastily thrown over lampshades. The objects, which caught her attention, became lurid: they did not look like still lives. Quite the opposite! They looked as if they were possessed. In the words of a critic her work was “infused with a fearsome volupte.” It was more likely she was going mad.

She had laboured in near obscurity, and such attention as she had found had been negative. In Ruth's day, the overheatedness in her images and her colours gave offense. She put too much into her paintings, people said. Strangely, however, today, some fifty years after her death, Lucy's aunt had a modest following; she was a local feminist heroine. Sometimes people even showed up, carrying guidebooks, at Ruth Bentham's grave, which was on the side of a hill off Tenth Street, in NorthWest Calgary. Although Lucy grew up within a mile of that grave, she had never visited it.

Lucy Gray had three children, a busy husband, and a house, not to mention a job as a part-time teacher of children with learning differences, and an increasing responsibility as caretaker of aging parents. She was grateful to get through the day, let alone create a work of art. This she said to herself while marching moodily up the grassy prairie hill beside Confederation Park. In her right hand she bore a nosegay of flowers, more appropriate to be thrust in a doorway by a shy suitor than to be placed on a grave.

Lucy had flown in from Vancouver to help her parents move into a condominium. Earlier that morning, she had sat at the breakfast table waiting for her parents to appear. When they did they looked unhappy. Her father's eyes were blood-rimmed and her mother fussed with her food. Feeling helpless, Lucy decided to let them oversee the carpet installation by themselves.

“I thought I'd go and visit your sister's grave,” she said. Her mother's face livened, and the downward twist around her lips lifted for a moment.

“Oh!” she said. “I'd like to do that with you.” Then she looked at her husband. His mouth was half-open in protest already. She quickly backed down. “But there will be other days.”

Lucy had always meant to do this, over the years, but had been put off because her mother was always going. What on earth did she get out of staring at some rectangle of ground which had swallowed her dead sister's body, that was what Lucy used to say. A child's cruelty, a child's jealousy. But now she was curious.

LONG AGO BUT NOT FAR FROM HERE, IN A clapboard prairie house on a long street which sloped upward toward West Hill (the prairie couldn't be seen, only felt, the grass meeting wind in its huge, impartial coming and going) an envelope pokes its triangular corner through the slot in the door. Inside this house are burgundy rugs and heavy forest-green curtains, doilies, antimacassars, African violets and the dark wood trim which needs oiling and dusting every few days. A window overlooks the dry enclosure of a garden where a mountain ash stands. A French lilac raises its lonely midnight torches.

Inside this house, Ruth Bentham sees the letter fall and freezes in her steps. This is in the forties. She has responsibilities. She is a wife and an older sister to the newly emigrated Marjorie. She makes Yorkshire pudding and ham with scalloped potatoes on Sunday nights. She used to go out on horseback on painting excursions down toward Fish Creek and Priddis. But now she stays in. She is lonely in this house. Ruth's husband Nigel is tired of Ruth's unhappiness, which has been bred elsewhere. It is only cured by painting trips with cowboys and these are not appropriate

for a pregnant woman.

The envelope falls through the slot in the door and Ruth's cat jumps off the needlepoint chair. Ruth picks up the letter and sees that it is addressed, in a ladylike hand, to Mrs. Nigel Bentham.

It is her name. She still thrills to it, to being called after the tall, laughing man with the beautiful suits and the lacquered hair. Still feels flattered by the association, by the appropriation even, although he's been a disappointment, good to look at but not to depend on, and she has been forced to depend on him. He looks a bit like Fred Astaire. He will look more like Fred Astaire, as he grows older and the hair shrinks back from his creased forehead and lean, cheerful face. With his knife-edged pants and his vaselined patent shoes he will look as nimble as if he could dance over the tabletop and down the wall. Nigel will drive the wrong way down one-way streets all his life without getting caught. But in the end, having left his chaos behind him, he will be buried in the cold earth alone, well-meaning and bewildered. Like the rest of us.

Before Ruth opens the letter she has time to look around the room which, despite all, she has loved. She takes in her watercolour of the wild roses, and two sombre little reproductions in browns of that English boy and girl you see everywhere. She has time as she unfolds the single page to note that the purple violet leaps unbidden out of the fuzzy leaves and a red scarf over the chairback is glowing in a sinister way. She reads:

Dear Mrs. Bentham,

Be advised that your husband is not faithful to your marriage. He has been seen often in the company of a woman in his golf club. If you think about it you'll know who. He does not play golf as you think, on Thursdays and Sundays. He goes off with her to her apartment on Fourth Street. I am tired of these prairie tight lips where everyone knows and no one says. Don't hide your head in the sand! I feel I must tell you. It is only right and proper that you should know. Go and look! You'll see his car.

Signed. A friend.

This much of the story Lucy had been told. She had always been afraid to ask what happened next. Did Ruth "go see"? Was the "friend" shocked at that harm done? How long was it between when she found out and when she did it? And the final question. Who found Ruth? Somebody must have found her. Not Nigel, of course, because he came home late, if at all. It would have been Ruth's little sister, little Marjorie, only seventeen and recently come out from Scotland to find a husband. Still, little Marjorie survived. She went on to marry and to have the children Ruth wanted.

Lucy had trouble finding the grave. It was winter and a light cover of dry snow obscured many of the inscriptions.

But she was persistent and finally she stood before the grave, an unassuming granite stone somewhat on an angle. A sob rose up her throat and she wanted to cry out Ruth's name. She was so angry that she did not feel the cold. It might have been half an hour before she saw the two figures. Lucy's feet and fingers were numb, her ears frozen too. Two women approached, behatted, sixty-ish matrons, the type who make Lucy want to say "fuck" ten times over straight into their faces. On those faces were expressions of self-congratulation. They moved across the hillside, not deviating from their course.

Sidehill Gougies, thought Lucy. That's what they were. On Crescent Hill, across Center Street, where Lucy grew up, everyone knew about Sidehill Gougies but no one had seen them. They were the bogeymen the kids invented, who always loped the same way across the hill and hence had one leg longer than the other.

Once they arrived, the Gougies virtually shouldered Lucy aside. One of them stepped forward and began to swipe at the monument with her glove, dusting the snow off it. The other actually got down on her knees and attempted to scoop the snow away from the base.

Lucy gave a little gasp of outrage. But, suddenly conscious of the baggy khaki pants which she donned this morning in anticipation of crawling around on the floor of her parents' condo, of her ski jacket and half-laced kodiak boots,



also of the ridiculous nosegay, gone stiff in her hand, she allowed herself to be displaced at the graveside. One of the women spoke first.

“Did you know this is Ruth Bentham’s grave!” she said, over her shoulder.

“And look at the shape it’s in,” added the other, lifting her head from digging. “It’s absolutely disgraceful.”

“Not looked after! Ruth Bentham’s grave!” repeated the first.

Finally Lucy found her voice. “I know it is,” she retorted.

“Ruth Bentham is my aunt. Who the hell are you?”

“She received an anonymous letter...” The story of her aunt always ended there. Marjorie would close her lips, avert her face. Ruth died soon after. She had been ill, an invalid. Marjorie’s voice would fade over the details. After an unspecified amount of time had passed Marjorie herself had married Nigel. Yes, really, and the children were born. Marjorie too was lonely: her whole family aside from Ruth had stayed in Scotland. Lucy was the eldest. Marjorie confided in her. One day she used the word suicide. “My sister committed suicide.”

Eventually, everyone knew. Some critic dug it up, some historian reading death certificates. The fact Ruth Bentham had killed herself was part of the mythology, part of what brought out the art lovers.

“You’re nosey parkers,” Lucy said to the women. “That’s what you are.”

THERE ON THE SNOW-DUSTED HILLSIDE Lucy remembered the summer she was fourteen. In her shorts and halter-top, free, wearing no underwear because she is young and brazen. She is turning cartwheels in the yard. Her father is out of town. This morning her mother received a phone call. Lucy did not know then, but now she can imagine what was said. The caller was anonymous of course. Someone had seen. Someone knew. The woman from across the street was with Nigel. Incredible but true. Going on for months. Go and ask your husband if you want. You could catch them red-handed if you went to see.

Marjorie ran to the bathroom. Lucy heard sobs and did not know what to do. Later her mother came out and telephoned the airlines to book a ticket to Winnipeg. But she did not have money to pay for it. She did not have credit cards, in those days. So she cancelled it. Then she ran into the den and stayed there an hour. She emerged with an envelope in her hand. It was addressed to her husband at his hotel in Winnipeg. Take this letter and mail it. Right now before I change my mind. Lucy trots across the median, waits for the traffic to pass, runs across the wide asphalt road toward the mailbox. Lucy practises her grand jetes along the grass bank to the red mailbox. Pushes aside the metal gate over the slot and drops the letter down into the darkness.

There is a moment of terror when it is gone. Of the irrevocable. Has she misunderstood? Her mother seemed very certain but Lucy knows her too well. She knows about the fear her mother lives with, the shakes and the tears and the regular screwing up of courage required even to go shopping. She peers into the slot. She can see nothing, after the brilliance of daylight. What did the letter say?

Dear husband of mine...You are in trouble big-time. You’ve given me grief once too often and I’m hereby telling you to shove off, love Marjorie!

Wrong. Her mother would never write such a letter. Why? Not just because it is the fifties and women don’t leave their husbands and go out to work, not in Calgary. No. It is because Marjorie is Ruth Bentham’s little sister.

The letter is truly gone. Into what? A pile of other envelopes, or does it lie alone? Lucy checks the schedule printed on the drawer. Mail will be picked up at 9 a.m., at 1 p.m. and at 5 p.m.

Heading home she stops on the grass and does more cartwheels. She spent the entire last summer learning how to do them. Her mother can do them too. That is the good thing about Marjorie. She is like a sister, in many ways. Lucy waits until, across the street, she can see the post truck. The mailman gets out. He’s cute, with a mustache and sideburns; he’s a snappy dresser in his summer short pants. With his key, his great sack, he opens the hatch. He fits the sack over the opening, and then tips the internal drawer so that the contents slide together, unremarked, into the sack. He hitches the sack over his shoulder, and heaves it into the back of the truck. Bang. The metal door of the truck closes.

At home Lucy faces an apparition.

“The letter. Where is it?”

“I mailed it.”

“Is it gone? Oh no.”

“The truck came.”

Marjorie is rigid and staring. “Oh no. I changed my mind. You can’t get it back?”

“No.”

Her face crumples. Ruth Bentham’s little sister.

Lucy wails. “But you told me to.”

“Well if you’re the family you ought to be ashamed of yourself!” cried one of the Sidehill Gougies/nosey parkers. She had clambered off her knees and was dusting her hands angrily on the sides of her thighs.

“I beg your pardon!” cried Lucy. “What right do you have to come here and—disturb—disturb!—my aunt’s grave.”

“Your aunt, if she is your aunt, is a public figure. And this grave is neglected,” charged the other.

“It is not!” She held out her flowers. “Look. I’ve come to visit.”

“Well how do we know you’re not a crank?” said one woman. The other cast her a warning glance, and spoke gently, as if to conciliate. It only made it clear she knew she was dealing with a nutbar.

“Not only that. It’s hard to find. We had to ask twice. It should be more—prominent. And the epitaph, well, it doesn’t say anything.”

Lucy’s heart was pounding. Her cheeks were in flames. She was enraged. The art critics were hard enough on old Ruth. Now the grave critics were onto the rest of them.

“I’m sure her husband and sister felt it was appropriate at the time,” said Lucy with heavy irony. The epitaph read “Sorely Missed.”

The two women stared at her balefully. Lucy would never fully understand why she did what she did next. Was it the stress of moving her parents into the condo that set her off?

“Get out! This is private property,” shouted Lucy.

“It is not!” said the more belligerent of the two. “It’s a public cemetery.”

But nonetheless she backed off where she had been standing which, Lucy calculated, was right on her aunt’s former gut.

“It is too private! This is the Bentham plot!” cried Lucy, getting shrill.

“There is a space right here for my mother and my father and my sisters and me.”

Suddenly Lucy found herself crying with rage. She even stepped forward and, quickly switching the nosegay to her left hand, pushed the shoulder of the tardier of the women as they hustled away, clucking and spitting with disapproval, pulling their fur collars up around their necks. When they were gone she leaned against the gravestone and ran her fingers through her hair. It was cold and she wished she had a fur hat like those awful women.

out of the box, pain suffuses the little room. Like a fog, it slides up mirrors, dampens the beige monogrammed towels, burrows into the hole at the core of the pink conch shell. The pain is seeking exit, or seeking refuge, but in the mirror-walled powder room there is nowhere to hide. The whole place becomes, to Lucy, a tomb. The animal’s fur is like part of an Egyptian mummy. The glass perfume bottles are offerings to the dead.

She touches the fox stole. The fur is soft as if still alive. Lucy is older now than she was when she mailed the letter for her mother. Around that time she began to do something her parents called “rebel.” Her mother has dealt with it simply by refusing to acknowledge that it was happening.

Hence, although Lucy doesn’t actually help her mother any more, she still watches her get ready for parties.

The fox winds around Marjorie’s bare shoulders, pliant and faintly dangerous. Lucy’s job is to say how it should be draped, where the nose should be, and the claws. She reaches down over her mother’s shoulders and lifts the little fox face, catching the gleam from its glass eyes, letting the smooth black curved claws drag across her mother’s collarbone.

She puts the nose facing down, into her cleavage, then the nose tucked up tight into the wraparound tail at her neck. Marjorie is complacent, staring into the mirror. As she stares, and as the fox inevitably, despite itself, settles on her clavicle, she seems to grow. Her back straightens. Her shoulders broaden. Her face takes on its distinct, mischievous character. Regarding herself in the mirror, she begins to smile.

Is it just because Lucy is paying attention to her? Or does she feel that her sister has come back to love her? The strip of hide with fur gives her the strength to get through one more evening. She will go out to a party with Nigel, who paces, elegant, in the hallway.

“Tuck the claws out of the way,” Marjorie says. “We don’t want them rattling.”

“I think it’s creepy the way fur hangs around long after the animals who grow it are gone,” says Lucy aggressively.



IN THE FIFTIES THERE WAS A FOX STOLE. It was basically a dead animal which lived in a long thin pink box. It had ears, eyes, a nose and claws that dangled. The box lay in the bathroom drawer. It had belonged to Ruth. From time to time, Marjorie took it out and wove it around her neck.

In the powder room off the front hall, they both face the mirror, Lucy behind and above her mother. Marjorie pulls the fox-box out of the drawer. As soon as the fox is

Her mother sprays on perfume. “I can’t stand that scent,” Lucy says. And she ducks away from their joint image in the mirror.

ALONE AGAIN, LUCY LAID HER NOSEGAY at the base of the crooked stone and smoothed over the snow that the intruders dug up. She leaned against the tombstone, her forehead on the cold stone. Marjorie was so frail now, so frail that one hundred fox stoles could not restore the lustre of that mirrored image. Lucy could not ask. Perhaps the question was meant for Aunt Ruth anyway. The question was no longer how did you do it—the oven? The knife? (I don’t think so) Something dramatic and public like the train station? (Not your style)? Drugs? (Impossible to get in those days.) The question was not even, are you sorry now? Do you miss being alive? Did you imagine how much you would hurt your little sister and even, yes, her daughter? That was obvious.

The real question she had for her aunt was this: Why did you not write a letter? And if you did, would you have told your sister to avoid the man who would do the same thing to her, a man who would let her down? Or would you have had her marry him? Surely it was Ruth’s duty to say something. It is you, Aunt Ruth Bentham, who is negligent. Negligent, she said to herself.

THE LETTER LUCY DROPPED THROUGH THE mailbox slot would never be discussed. When Nigel came home from his business trip to Winnipeg, detained only one day in the hotel room by the ardent neighbour woman who soon left her husband and moved to Toledo, he brought a present for his wife. It was a white negligee, long, to the floor, with a heavy lace gown that went over it. Marjorie did not seem overly impressed, but Nigel swayed Lucy’s heart to his side, with that romantic gesture. From then on, she was her Dad’s girl. She went on trips with him; she played golf with him. He never liked any of her boyfriends. Lucy took a long time to settle down. Her younger sisters married first. Each of them received a beautiful white negligee on the night before they left home. But when Lucy’s wedding night came, she was disappointed. There was nothing.

For a long time Lucy believed her father forgot her negligee because she was not a virgin. Her father knew what that “rebellion” was about, he had seen through her lies about the ski trips and sleepovers with girlfriends. Oh yes, he could spot a lie when he heard one, tell a liar when he

saw one. It took one to know one, right?

And it was true, that she had lost her innocence. It had happened before her trysts with boys. She had lost it mailing the letter. She had lost it hearing about Ruth Bentham. Out of love she had become entangled. She hated that but she couldn’t blame anyone. The safest person to hate was Ruth Bentham. That was why she had never been to the grave before.



Sitting in the snow, Lucy pounded the stone. What did Ruth have to say? Wild roses turning to hats, scarves, tables with opened letters—voluptuous and tragic, seductive and deadly, objects screaming out their wordless message. Don’t do as I did! Do as I did! It was the same

message she’d given her sister, and her sister had given her daughter.

LUCY STOOD WITH HER PARENTS at the check-in line at the Calgary airport, ready to go back to Vancouver. The rug was installed, and the furniture set on it, and they were happy, for the moment. She and her parents hugged and kissed, laughed and wiped their eyes, gathering a few stares. It was always so hard to leave; they cried at airports, a family trait. It was the sign of a good visit. Lucy was, when she thought about it, a little embarrassed about screaming at the visiting art enthusiasts, but not very. She liked the grave to be neglected. Ruth Bentham had earned her eccentricities. So had they all.

“I heard the strangest thing,” said her mother. “When I was at the art gallery a woman came in talking about Ruth’s grave. She said it’s in a shocking state. They’re going to get up a subscription to have it improved. They want a plaque.”

“What would it say?” said Lucy. But just then they announced the gate number for Lucy’s flight, and Marjorie didn’t hear her.

“This woman had been out there to show it to a friend, and apparently ran into some woman pretending to be a relative. She claims this woman physically attacked her. Told her to get out. She asked if it was you.”

Lucy smiled slowly. She opened her mouth to confess. But her mother was still talking. Her eyes were bright and smiling.

“I got quite huffy. I told her it was impossible. We all know you would never say anything like that.” ■

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Illustration: BIANKA ODRZYCZYZ