

ROSE PETAL MESSAGE

You left me a message in rose petals on the kitchen work surface. It was there when I came home from school after athletics practice. The petals were tiny and delicately coloured. Wild rose petals on the dull black surface. You didn't do texts. I don't think you even had a mobile. I knew it must have been you. You were the only person I'd told about the key which we always left through the cat-flap.

The lines were all wavy, kind of dancing. They must have taken ages to do. Some lines sounded like they were taken from a poem. You were like that in school, always quoting mysteriously and the teachers never knew how to take you. I wanted to go back to the beginning and read it over and over till I knew it by heart. I would do that later, I thought. I whispered the last line aloud.

Meet me down by the river. You know where I mean. Six o'clock.

You had picked your time perfectly. It was the middle of June, long, lovely evenings that year. I was so happy. And I was so scared. I still dreamt of swimming, long swims in deep water but I never went out of my depth any more.

I didn't even think of leaving a note for Dad. He nearly always worked late now.

I wore my jeans and that green top that you'd once said you'd liked. Then I stripped them off and dressed again, this time with my swimming stuff underneath. I picked up my backpack, put in a towel, a bottle of water and my notebook, just in case there was anything I specially wanted to remember, anything that wouldn't burn in my memory forever.

I reached the thin gap between the trees where there was a path, if you knew where to find it. I'd thought it was my secret. Then, one afternoon when we were

ROSE PETAL MESSAGE

swimming in the shallow place where every one went on hot days, I discovered you went there too. It was what dad called ‘the billionaire fishing strip’; no one was supposed to go there who didn’t have a licence from the most exclusive fishing club in the world and there was plenty of barbed wire to keep anyone else out.

We compared notes on how we’d discovered the path. I told you how I loved diving and powering through the water. I didn’t tell you that I’d never dared to swim there. That the last time I’d swum out of my depth had been the day I nearly drowned when I was staying by the sea with Mum, just a week before she left for good. I’d got cramp and panicked and kept going under. I shouted but Mum didn’t hear and if there hadn’t been a lifeguard on the beach I guess that would have been it.

I followed the hidden path through the brambles, climbed over the fallen branch, and out onto the river bank. I placed two twigs pointing back so that I would know where to make for, in case I had to get away in a hurry if the fishermen came.

I couldn’t see any sign of you yet. The long bank with its thick, river-green grass, was empty. There was only a heron a little way upstream. The river poured and foamed through the weir, then twisted and plaited itself in shining brown cords of deep water. A narrow, netted two plank bridge had been made for the fishermen to cross the river, with a rail on the downstream side. I love watching the water here. Usually I sit on the bridge and dangle my legs and dream till the rush of the water washes everything out of my head and I just listen.

Today I didn’t want to risk being seen. I waited in the green gloom under the trees. I thought of the rose petals dancing their message. I thought about you; how

ROSE PETAL MESSAGE

sometimes, you would be in school, sometimes, you'd be gone for weeks with your dad. No one could pin you down. You didn't care what you said to the teachers. You weren't exactly rude. It was as if you could say whatever came into your head.

What if you didn't come? What if you asked me to swim? I would be powerless in that swift current.

Gold and immortal not to be controlled.....

Behind me, twigs crackled. You climbed over the fallen branch and stood beside me, smiling.

'I knew you'd be here,' you said. You pointed to the bridge and the middle of the river. 'The best swimming place I ever found.'

You stretched out a hand. 'Come on.' Your fingers closed round mine, cool and firm. 'You do want to swim?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I want to swim.'

You gave me a long sideways look as we walked to the crossing place. 'Me first,' you said. 'Show off my crawl. Have you got your swimming stuff on underneath too?'

I nodded. You peeled off your shorts and tee shirt and stepped onto the bridge.

I had often wondered how I would manage to dive with that railing in the way, if I ever dared to dive again. You winked at me. 'I wonder if you do it the same way?'

ROSE PETAL MESSAGE

You took hold of the railing with both hands, ducked your body underneath, so your head and chest projected over the water, then, one at a time, you unclamped your hands, so they gripped the other side of the railing. Now, you were streamlined, ready to arrow into the deep.

The river coiled and uncoiled, the current seizing a stick, tossing it, swallowing it.

River body serpent soul.....

The muscles in your arms tensed. You were gone.

The river broken like a tent....

There you were, slipping into a strong crawl, face down, head up, face down, head up. Just where the river bent right towards the marsh, you broke your stroke and struck out sideways from the current, making, slow and easy, for the left bank

I ran down the river path and watched you swim until you could touch the chalky gravelly bottom with your hands and you grinned up at me.

The river runs off your face like a song

We walked back along the bank together. Your head was like a seal's, sleek, shining hair, your eyes glittered. You put a wet hand on my shoulder.

ROSE PETAL MESSAGE

‘You’ve either got very good shoulder muscles,’ you said, ‘or else you’re tense as a tightrope.’

The water hissed and streamed itself through the weir behind us. I didn’t speak. I couldn’t. It was my turn now. I’d never wanted to do anything more. I’d never been so scared. If I didn’t do it now, I might never swim – swim like a fish in deep water – ever again. If I didn’t do it, I wouldn’t be the person you wrote the rose petal message for.

‘You can do it.’

I got into position, just like you, but awkward. The river was rope unravelling beneath me, looping and twisting and waiting to tangle me. I stared down hypnotised. I looked up, fixed my eyes on the church spire, a mile away. My neck hurt.

‘Keep your head low,’ you said. Had you guessed by now that I’d never done it before?

‘Now.’ Your hand touched the place where my shoulder blades almost closed.

The river was a cold dark clamp, grabbing me, pressing on my eyelids, surging around me. How could I break the skin of it?

And then there I was, riding the current, slipping into my own familiar crawl, finding my rhythm, just the water and me.

I was travelling fast. Already I had passed the trees, the bank opening out towards the marsh. I could go on for ever.

‘Swim left! Now!’

Just another few strokes, then... The bend skimmed by, a swish of long weeds catching at my feet, the current tugging me further, the panic surging, my limbs

ROSE PETAL MESSAGE

freezing up, water closing over me. I broke the surface again, sucked in air, floundering, thrashing about as if I was a useless swimmer.

‘You can still do it. Make for the right bank instead. Now!’

How could I? An iron arm of water was pressing me down, dragging me into the deep dark. It was river claiming me, singing in my ears, sweeping me away.

Sullen, untamed, intractable.....

‘You can do it.’

It was relaxing, letting me slip out of its grip. I kicked hard, spluttered. I felt a scrape of gravel as I reached for the bottom. I was back in my depth again.

You waded towards me, grabbed both my hands, hugged me.

‘I didn’t realise you’d never swum it before. I should have checked. The current eases off just before you get to the bend. That’s where you should have made for the bank. But - you were brilliant. You did it where it’s really difficult.’

I hesitated. ‘I’m going to do it again,’ I said. ‘Properly this time.’

We perched ourselves, side by side, under the railing. You dived. I followed.

And this time, - yes – I swam out of the current just like you, made for the left bank, waded out.

We walked back to our stuff. You rubbed me dry.

‘I’ll see you – when I see you,’ you said, smiling. ‘We’ll swim the river to the source, one day.’

I felt my eyes stinging. ‘Or to the sea.’

ROSE PETAL MESSAGE

When I got home, dad was in the kitchen, heating a pizza and making a salad.
'Your practice went on late, sweetheart.... Why's your hair all wet? '

He pointed to the work surface. 'I started clearing the top so I could chop some vegetables, when I realised that wasn't just a lot of petals. It was words wasn't it? You and your artistic ideas. I'm sorry, love – but look – I left one line. Sounds like it's from a poem.'

The river never travels back but still goes gliding by.....

You weren't in school next day. Nor the next. All that summer, I went down to the weir by myself and swum with the current, and thought of the rose petal message.

Run softly till I end my song.

WORD COUNT: 1740

ITALICISED LINES IN THIS STORY WERE TAKEN FROM:

Anna Adams The River Goddess

T.S. Eliot The Fire Sermon

Jane Draycott Salvage

T.S. Eliot The Dry Salvages

Charles Sorley Hamilton The River

Spenser Prothalamion