A Memorial of Words (Dogged Rose)

My mother began to spit up blood just shy of her fortieth birthday, this disturbing sign revealing a weakened heart. Like her fellow Ayr-native, Rabbie Burns, both had contracted rheumatic fever early in their lives leading to damage of the aortic valve. Grasping the cruel ramifications of growing up poor and in less than ideal living conditions, my mother’s expectations for a long life were crushed with the diagnosis. It probably led to a great deal of depression over the subsequent years although you would never have known it as she raised her family; her heart was so big it could crush a town. Despite all the setbacks (and there were so many: two major open-heart surgeries, bladder cancer and numerous other complicated hospital-stays), she refused to leave us and in fact lived until she was seventy-eight. Where did she get the strength, twenty years ago to recover from a week in intensive care or to continue the fight so often? She was simply resilience personified, effectively doubling her time through sheer willpower and strength of character.

As the first child, I’ve always felt a greater psychological burden although, like some Faustian pact, this was seemingly in exchange for a little of her great wisdom of which she had plenty. I’ve always been enormously grateful for a pinch of it, better it is to get wisdom than gold they might say. I was the recipient too of her profuse kindness, another abundant quality and it wasn’t me or one of the family who upon being asked their first thought of Mrs. McAleese proclaimed, “there was a streak of kindness running right through her”. This was a characteristic consistently raised among family and friends when she passed as we all grappled with assessing her nature and how she lived her life; another common feature seemingly the marvel at her beautiful handwriting (although, more often than not, it was beautiful printing).

For a few years now, I have been seeking a metaphor to symbolise my mother. I kept thinking about her resilience, her openness, her beauty and her great love of the garden. “Like a red, red rose”, as Rabbie would have it, my mother was “newly sprung in June” and so I began to riff on the association possibilities with roses, for as well as love, they are intrinsically linked to honour, faith and passion too which she had in spades. These considerations led me to a working title of “resilient rose”.

All horticultural advice kept returning the same suggestion the “native dog rose”. I need to disclose my initial reluctance to associate my mother with any kind of dog but as I explored the species, there was no denying some of the shared characteristics beyond their robustness to survive.
Like the dog rose open to insects, my mother was open to people and new ideas. Always progressive, she was receptive and supportive of my natural curiosity and need to explore. I recall in 1999, even then not in the best of health, asking her if she’d like to take in “an acid trip without the acid” (a theatre piece by De La Guarda, a Brazilian Circus Group, performing at the Roundhouse London) and getting a “yes” without hesitation. God bless her, we weren’t aware of the lack stage set until we arrived at the “immersive extravaganza”, worse still for me (in terms of the guilt), the lack of seating meant standing throughout the whole performance. I was astounded there wasn’t any complaining either as we emerged, senses assaulted from something we both agreed was utterly intense and otherworldly. This type of positivity extended to travelling aboard and to “less obvious” destinations too. We’d often recall our memories of a 2002 trip to Prague, our experiences at a Black Light Theatre show and the multiple-course Medieval Banquet U Modre Ruze we so enjoyed under vaulted ceiling.

Like the dog rose natural in its uninhibitedness, my mother, a Gemini, displayed a dual nature, an almost regal air in the one hand but a touch of the earthy, an innate uninhibitedness if you will in the other. She enjoyed the occasional bit of salty language both in her own expression and from the mouths of performers. Her vaguely bohemian side was exposed, in part, by the astonishing number of songs she knew all the words to embracing both the rock’n’roll classics of her youth to the contemporary sounds of the day. It was like a secret side to her. It was like the public poetry reading she kept from me too. Her uninhibitedness was also expressed in never being slow to her feet when the occasion to dance arose. I recall, with great fondness, her throwing on all manner of Rock’n’Roll shapes to “Brown Sugar” at one wedding reception seconds after getting chastised for not getting “on the floor”. I recall her sashaying her way ‘round the table during her last Christmas dinner.

Living on borrowed time, hardy and deviant to the very end, she first footed my girlfriend and I, making the considerable journey from Troon to Edinburgh whilst barely able to breathe but still driven by her sense honour, faith and passion. This was only twenty-seven days before the Lord finally claimed her.

My mother always wanted me to volunteer and after she passed, I finally did. Offering my services to the Holyrood Park Rangers (Holyrood Park being a space I fell in love with years ago), in April. I became a Conservation Volunteer joining the collective forces attempting to eradicate the overwhelming scourge to other plant life that is Himalayan Balsam. It was during one of these sessions, in responding to a curious Park Ranger, that the stars finally aligned; my metaphor finally realised. Having explained my interest in creative writing especially the sort suffused with emotional resonance, I decided to share my need to find a “resilient rose” and a symbolic act that would go some way of honouring my mother. What emerged was a suggestion that I write a piece for the Volunteer Newsletter. What I certainly wasn’t anticipating was the Ranger’s backstory, as she openly shared her own battle for survival last year, a battle she won only to lose her dog Ralph a few months later. As the Ranger went on, explaining her planting of a dog rose to honour her canine friend, the phrase “dogged rose” came to me. That was what she was, my mother, “a dogged rose”, determined to prevail despite the harshest of circumstances. If ever there were signs for John, something to hang my instinct on, then the park ranger’s name? Rosie of course!

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So next year, to mark my mother's eightieth birthday on the day, I'll be planting some of the finest dog-roses in her honour, for her sickness will not end in death.

Just shy of her eightieth birthday, I'll be doing some spitting of my own, some spitting of blood-red rose ice cream. Ice cream that ephemeral pleasure, fragile and temporary like life itself. Saviour every moment, The Emperor would surely approve. “My dear old mother said to me, go down, ye blood red roses, go down” but we'll be spitting some of it back up for to spit might “protect” us in some way. When the roses are fully grown, I will be immersing myself in their sweet intoxication and my mother’s love. She is free now. With her light inside me, I have greater willpower and spirit.

She was a Rose, no doubt, a dogged Rose at that.