

# **Rusty Fears 7**

**“ROSES”**

**BY ABI KINSELLA  
PROMPT: THEATRE**

**[Music]**

**ANNOUNCER:**

**Roses by Abi Kinsella**

**[Music]**

**NARRATOR:**

**Violet Steele, eleven years old, bright under Fresnel and cradled in a thousand-strong gaze, holds hands with a ghost.**

**She had landed in Chicago seventeen hours previously and slept six since then, curled under Othello's cloak like a sparrow in a nest. Othello had not been performed since the previous November and the cloak smelt stale, but the man who had swaddled her in it had sad, kind eyes that shone like a hazy moon, and had glinted at the prospect of offering her a place to rest. So she had not complained, and had dreamt bleeding-watercolour dreams of being high up in the treetops.**

**She is Mary Lennox in *The Secret Garden*, and an unconventional choice. The antiquated Englishness she carries isn't soft and rosy-cheeked, not tea-potted nor gingham. She has instead the Englishness of nursery rhymes, those things sung softly and unscrutinised to dozing babes, *sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye, four and twenty blackbirds –***

***Oh...***

***Oh, that's actually rather dark.***

**She has large, brown eyes and hair the oil-spill black of corvids. She is clever like them too, calculated in her blocked forays through plastic-and-canvas-built foliage. She needs, after all, to be careful in her movements, light-footed and mindful of obstacles, and not just for the audience.**

**The ghost does not like passing through objects.**

In the outstretched palm of her free hand, a tiny polystyrene robin perches daintily. It is suspended from the ceiling by transparent twine, pulled taut so it bounces, and quivers, and does not fall.

“Are things stirring down below, in the dark in that garden where he lives?” she asks with wide-eyed solemn reverence.

“Yes,” whispers the ghost, louder somehow than the scripted gruntings of her Weatherstaff, a native New Yorker wrestling nobly with the Yorkshire accent. “Things are always stirring, everywhere, but especially in the dark.”

Violet nods, and a flower falls from her hair. She stares at it a moment, curling under the lights. The ghost nudges her, and though the line is not quite right, she gasps –

“Roses. There must be roses.”

The ghost chuckles, and later when she is showered with those very things, it laughs right from its belly.

The ghost holds her hand a week on as she is ferried back across the Atlantic, sipping orange squash in business class. It sits cross-legged in the aisle, the seat beside her occupied by a man in sunglasses who she thinks might have given her a Rubix cube to play with once. Maybe in Massachusetts in June when she was Young Cosette, or in Philadelphia, a frigid February, begging Medea to *spare me mother, spare me*. Whoever she was, it does not matter; she had perched cross-legged on the make-up desk against the finger-pointed warning of the chaperone and listened intently as the ghost told her which ways to spin the colours. She had hopped off the desk just in time to innocently present the completed puzzle to the chaperone and had received a purse-lipped hum of appreciation. She had shared a conspiratorial smile with the ghost, who had shrugged sheepishly and scraped its toe across the floor.

The ghost is restless and excitable when they land, and tries to pull her through the aisle the second the seatbelt light flicks off. Its fingers just slide through hers, and it yelps at the strange sensation. Violet rolls her eyes and uses the break in contact to

wrench her belt open, beckoning the ghost back with a small flick of her head.

“I’m excited too,” she murmurs, as the now slightly queasy-looking man in sunglasses wiggles his earplugs out with a grimace. “But we can’t go anywhere without the grown-ups.”

At baggage claim, the ghost pouts as she reminds it patiently that they won’t be going immediately to the theatre, since the living must unfortunately do such tedious things as eat and sleep. The ghost comments that it forgets sometimes that Violet is among them and she replies that yes, she does too. She accepts, however, the Cadbury snack bar offered by the paternal looking man who heaves her bag off the traveller - Simon? She wants to say Simon.

“Welcome back to Blighty,” he says drily with a wink.

She lets the pieces melt on her tongue in the back of a black cab and concentrates on how her body heat is enough to set the molecules *thawing spreading coating running, I’m alive I’m alive I’m alive.*

*I’m alive and there are roses.*

Violet’s mother greets her cross-armed at the door, all red lip and cashmere. She tells her absently to remove her shoes, glancing over her shoulder, and Violet bristles, one shoe already off. The ghost mimes picking it up and launching it at her mother’s head, and Violet’s face relaxes into an unseen smirk. The carpets are cream and familiar, and the dining table is glass and not. She knows better than to drop her bag onto it, but her mother still exclaims in alarm when she gets too close. Violet places it on the floor pointedly and finally, her mother sighs and opens her arms for a hug. Three silver bracelets clang on her wrist like church bells, and as they embrace stiffly, one gets tangled in Violet’s hair. Her mother picks the strands off gingerly and rolls them into a ball in her palm with a French-manicured fingertip. The bin is sensor operated and says *thank you* in an American accent. The ghost snorts.

Dinner is things on crackers that smell like the sea. There is fruit for dessert, eaten with forks that look like tridents, and Violet wonders abstractly if Poseidon had washed them after spearing whatever was on the crackers. She also wonders, less abstractly, if the man with the chocolate is still around somewhere.

Sleep does not come easy, however many times she tells the ghost to stop pacing. *It won't make morning come any sooner*, she says, recycling the line of her first nanny when she would spin in dizzying circles late on Christmas Eve.

“You’ll be like me again,” it says. The grandfather clock strikes two. “You’ll be like me again,” it says again, and she smiles into her pillow.

There had been pushback to Violet reprising the role. Two years on, she was thought to be now too old, too tall, too sharp. But her agent had slapped the press photographs onto the mahogany desk and gestured at them sweepingly. In one, she was staring through a two-way mirror with a branching crack splitting her forehead in two. In another she held a dagger with a gentle expression on her face, corn syrup and food colouring coating her fingertips. A third, she stood on a bed of roses, crushing them beneath her clenched toes. These were enough.

After that photoshoot, she had slipped silently into the wings. A hand on her shoulder had whispered that she’d done a stunning job, and she smiled politely as she wrapped her arms around herself, the cool air of the theatre chilling her bones. There were roses in the crevices of her icy toes.

“Go and warm up,” a lady with large round glasses had said over her clipboard with a shooing gesture. Violet had padded the crumbling roses through the winding corridors to the room where the lights buzzed, and a frayed-edged Cary Grant smouldered six-feet up. She had dug frantically in a bag-for-life for fuzzy socks and sighed in relief when she found them.

“You’re like me.”

**She had not jumped, curiously. She had stilled, heel hanging loosely out of the fuzzy sock, but she had not jumped. She had finished putting her sock on, trembling only a little. She had turned her head, slowly. There it was, translucent and abstract and shimmering like a lagoon. Behind it, was a mirror. There was pale glitter on her cheeks.**

**She had swallowed.**

**“I’m not a real ghost,” she had said calmly.**

**“You’re like me,” it had insisted.**

**She had looked down at her hand, painted veins running purple across her skin. In a gesture like coaxing a wounded fox, she had raised it slowly. The ghost had done the same.**

**A mirror image.**

**The socks were too big. They were not meant for her.**

**“Maybe,” she had whispered. “Maybe.”**

**The ghost had smiled, somehow damp-eyed even in its formlessness, and taken her hand for the first time.**

**For the next two years, the ghost pulled her through corridors and coaxed her through wings. It hauled her up staircases and dragged her across carparks, and when her bare-walled bedroom of the night in whatever unfamiliar city became a ballroom, it spun her around and around and around. It pointed out of taxi windows and told tales of when things were different. It marvelled at what was the same. It applauded when she deserved it and grimaced when she did not. It mimicked her mother with a snooty upturned nose, it bounced on the forbidden furniture, it screamed beside her in the clearing behind the house.**

**It asked quietly if her feet were cold and looked sad when she said they were.**

**She had kept the socks that were not for her, and sleeps in them now.**

Early morning, Violet weaves her way through unfamiliar faces. She is one of only two returning cast members, Duncan giving her a small half-wave as she is blown through the doors by a gust of wind.

“Remember me?” he asks cautiously, like she is five years old and he a half-remembered uncle.

“I remember you,” she says softly, and immediately feels a steering hand between her shoulder blades.

It is the read-through today, but Violet’s silent role renders her presence useless. She is taken, instead, to the dressing room, and given a robe to change into. The ghost faces the wall politely.

The lady does not ask before pouring the brine onto her head. She does not explain, nor converse, nor check for comfort as she works the saltwater into her skull, massaging with thick fingers adorned with stacked and shining rings. She works tangles out with a wide-toothed comb, then teases them back in with a fine brush. She peers through the tresses, micro-managing a ruin of undead follicles, moving three strands left, four right, backcombing here and smoothing there, an abstract of lifelessness blooming from her scalp.

Blooming like roses.

Watchfully, the ghost’s smile takes root, and it grows.

It grows as grey is brushed under her eyes, it grows as a shimmer is dotted across her cheekbones. The tiniest fissure of red is painted at the corner of her lip. A spot by her ear.

The ghost grins, the ghost glows, the lady with the fringe steps back to admire her handiwork. She stands with her head cocked to one side and her thick thumb pressed to her lips. She cups Violet’s cheek and applies one final dash of glitter to her cheekbone.

Then she nods.

“Your costume is in the other room,” is all she says before she is gone.

The ghost shifts from foot to foot, grinning so hard that it looks like it would hurt, if it experienced such things.

“You’re back,” it says softly. “You’re back like me.”

Violet smiles in return and hops down from the chair. She crosses the room to the mirror and admires herself in the mirror. She raises a hand to tousle her hair but stops herself. She is perfect, she reminds herself.

She is perfect and there will be roses.

Opening night.

Violet Steele, eleven years old, bright under Fresnel and cradled in a thousand-strong gaze, holds hands with a ghost.

She is Lady Macbeth’s once-mentioned lost babe, aged despite its deadness, and gender-swapped for the irresistibility of dangling willow-tree-by-night hair and moonlight complexion. Saltwater is soaked into that hair and there is glitter dashed across her cheekbones. She feels grit beneath her bare toes and shivers under the gossamer she is draped in as a facsimile of swaddling cloth. She is a will-o-wisp of tragedy, a siren of inevitability, a soundless call to denouement. She is the silk-string noose hanging loose around the neck of the piece, tickling, teasing, taunting.

She is pale and solid beside Lady Macbeth’s as both of their toes curl over the edge of the plywood battlement. Beside her, the ghost squeezes her hand. She shivers into it, and closes her eyes. It squeezes harder.

Then.

It *jumps*.

Violet gasps high and sharp, her first and only sound. She stumbles but does not fall, the ghost’s rough intangible fingers slipping through hers like sandpaper.

And *god*, the director thinks, it works beautifully, her gaining a voice then, just at the moment of blackout. *Why didn’t he think of*

*that*, but then he has no choice but to think of something else, because startled Lady Macbeth has become uprooted and the scream that rips from her throat isn't the rehearsed turmoil of a tragic heroine falling to her madness. It is the terror of shock, the terror of anticipation and then, *oh god*, the prolonged terror of falling. It undercuts the slap of heaviness on the ground, though the sandbag remains high, and sandbags don't *crack*. The audience has coalesced into a single straight-spined entity. It cannot see what has happened, and remains ensnared in the rabbit-trap of Violet's gasp. Applause begins, and Violet makes her second sound of the performance to tell them, *no*.

To the ghost who is not there anymore, she repeats *NO*.

She climbs down from the battlements, even more ignored than usual, slipping, shivering, shaking through frantic crowds that swarm and dart and crackle their voices down walkie-talkies. She passes Banquo, drenched in cornstarch blood, ragged cotton ballooning from his skinny wrists, matted hair clinging to his cheeks, half a broken crown threaded through the tresses. A false ghost, with a slight stammer that made his living scenes tight and taut with the weight self-discipline, but gave his dead scenes the gift of a spitting rawness, his every grief-stricken indexical jab punctuated with venom and vulnerability.

*Thou.*

*Mayst.*

*Revenge.*

Violet recalls seeing him and Lady Macbeth giggling over toasted sandwiches, cross legged on the floor.

"What happened?" he is asking over and over again, to nobody.

*"What happened?"*

The room with Cary Grant. There is the ghost, backed into the corner with its palms raised in surrender.

"It wasn't meant for her," the ghost pleads. "It was meant for - "

**Violet goes very cold.**

**“I wanted you to be like me forever.”**

**Violet thinks of stirrings, and how they are always happening, but especially in the dark.**

**“Are there roses, in the dark in the garden where you live?” she asks in a whisper.**

**The ghost does not reply.**

**Colder.**

**Colder.**

**Colder.**

**“Are there roses?” she asks firmly.**

**A long, long pause.**

**Then, very small:**

**“No.”**

**“There must be roses,” Violet whispers.**

**Somewhere close, beyond the door, echoes a deep and mourning sound.**

**[Music]**

**ANNOUNCER:**

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**Thanks for listening.**

