

Roses

Emma Hejtmánková

I can't tell you exactly when they started appearing. They just did. And then, they simply stopped.

The postcards I mean. Sorry, you have to understand it's not easy for me to talk about this. But I have to get it out. For you. You're the only one left that will listen to me. I'm scared.

I received the first one out of the blue; an unknown sender who evidently wanted to keep his identity that way. On the postcard was a photo of a woman, in her early twenties I assume, wearing a loose floral dress and holding a baby. I don't know who she was. I don't know if it was a photo of the sender or a relative or wife. You see, I really don't know anything about these people yet it feels like I've known them for ages. But I'm getting ahead of myself. On the back, in tiny, cursive letters, was written:

*Roses may grow,
through drought and through snow,
but day after day,
roses wilt away.*

The second postcard arrived a year later, the edges ripped and bent, the colors faded, as if it had been sitting in someone's attic since the fifties. The photo was of an old man holding a beautiful, bright red rose. It was strange, the whole photo was washed out and pale, yet the flower seemed to be freshly printed. The old man wore a blank expression and a gaze that seemed to follow your every move. He had a face that always reminded you of someone you knew, though you could never pinpoint who exactly and it drove you nuts. When I flipped the card over I was once again met with little perfect letters, though this time they seemed more rushed, a bit of black ink smeared in the corner:

One day we all become obsolete.

This went on for ten years. Each year one postcard showed up in my mailbox and that was it. That... was it. I stored all ten of my postcards in a little tin box with a fox terrier wearing a beautiful silver collar on the lid. It was family memorabilia I never found good use for until then. I hoped one day I'd pull it down from the top shelf in my closet to show my kids and grandkids this strange collection and have a great story to go with it. That's all I really saw it as. A strange series of events that would make a really good story. That was until about a month or so ago, you see.

I received my “annual postcard”, but this time the photograph seemed different. I knew I had seen it somewhere before; I knew there was something I was missing. On the photo was a child sitting between rose bushes. He was dressed in a little green playsuit and had brown curly hair. I simply couldn’t shake the feeling I had seen the exact picture before. I decided to simply forget it and put it away with the rest, hoping the feeling would go away and just become another part of my elaborate story.

However, the *déjà vu* I got from that photo kept eating at me. I couldn’t sleep at night. Every little creak, every gust of wind, every sound resembling a breath made me clutch the kitchen knife under my pillow harder. The bags under my eyes grew, but no one seemed to notice. In the morning I pulled out the old photo album I’d inherited from my grandmother, desperate to shoo the nagging feeling in my head away. And I found it. Completely at the bottom. I quickly went to grab my small tin box with the pretty dog on it, but that wasn’t what I saw in my closet. In its place was a small tin box, same size and shape, same dent in the top left corner, but with a bright red rose on the lid. I dropped to the floor and felt my lungs collapse inside me. It felt like someone was playing a sick joke on me but I didn’t know who or how to tell them to cut it out. But I found the courage to open up the box and pull out the postcard.

It was the same photo. Well, almost. The little boy in the green playsuit sitting under a rosebush was the same. However, the boys had different faces. I desperately tried to look for other discrepancies, feeling as if I was playing some strange version of ‘spot the difference’, hoping maybe it was just a bizarre coincidence. Nothing. Both faces intensely stared at the camera through different eyes and with different button noses and pouty mouths, but both clutching at the pale green grass with the same little chubby hands. Even the roses shone in the same crimson shade. This must sound so ridiculous to you. I need you to believe me, though. It’s all true, every goddamn word I’m telling you. I swear I’m not crazy. Maybe it would be easier if I was. Anyone I’ve tried to tell has said the boys look the same, that it’s just a copy. They don’t see it like I do.

After that postcards came in waves. First two. Then the next day five. Ten. Thirty-two. Forty-seven. Then too many to count. I didn’t even bother reading or looking at them anymore. At first I simply threw them away, but once my trashcan filled up I started burning them; a nonstop cloud of smoke puffing from my chimney. I stopped going to work. This person, this... demon was taking over my life. But the reason I’m telling you all this is because of what happened yesterday.

After weeks of this twisted torture I received another postcard. Only one. I don’t know why I took it, maybe it was the curiosity of it being alone. I really should’ve just left it there to rot, but somehow deep down I know that it would keep haunting me if I didn’t acknowledge it. So I did.

On this postcard was, as per usual, a person. But it wasn't just any person, no, this time it wasn't a stranger. The photo was of me. I had the same blank expression and emotionless eyes as the rest. I was sitting on my couch, the one that's in my living room now that I bought two months ago. There was even that hideous painting I got for my birthday from my uncle behind it.

In my hand was a single red rose.

I flipped the postcard over. In the same perfect letters as always stood:

*The roses have wilted
The candles burned out
Outside crows are cawing
The dead woman's house*

The street fell silent.

In the corner of my eye I saw a jet black crow on my windowsill.