The Worm Becomes Visible

by earlybloomingparentheses

Summary

The roses are dying at Staghorn Lodge Preparatory School, and a certain classics master develops an interest in Laura. Why that bothers Rosemary so much, she isn't sure.

Until, of course, she is.

Notes

Apparently it's a tradition to post an R&T fic for bigblackdog's birthday. She did introduce me to the show, so I owe her all the thanks. <3

1.

The roses at Stagford Lodge Preparatory School are dying. Rosemary and Laura chatter as they dig, a quick back-and-forth banter that feels as easy and familiar to Rosemary as the weight of a fanny pack around her hips. She marvels at it for a moment, but then thinks, no, it isn’t that surprising; Laura has always felt familiar, right from the first time Rosemary saw her crying in that hotel restaurant. Rosemary hadn’t exactly planned on spending her life as an itinerant gardener with an ex-copper partner who casts aspersions on her Land Rover, but it suits her awfully well for all that.

“You’re a very odd woman,” Laura tells her, digging her shovel in.
“Yes, I like to think so.”

Laura really ought to be wearing gloves, Rosemary thinks at the back of her mind as they exchange quips. She was joking about the septicemia, but it could happen. And then where would she be?

In the hospital, scolding Laura and berating her into getting better, she realizes. Work be damned.

She’s so caught up in their conversation, and in the pleasant feeling of expertly lobbing their words back and forth like tennis balls, that she doesn’t realize the schoolmaster is coming up behind them until he speaks. Both of them jump; Laura didn’t see him coming, either.

He’s an odd little man, this classics master. A posher accent than either of them, and funny precise hand gestures, but he doesn’t seem affected, somehow. Putting it bluntly, Rosemary doesn’t want to toss him out a window, despite his accent and his hand gestures, so that’s good on him.

Then he invites Laura to dinner. Rosemary sees him look her up and down—not rudely, but quite obviously—and raises her eyebrows. Only after Laura reminds him of Rosemary’s presence does he invite her too.

They like to laugh about men like this. They’ve flirted plenty of information out of oblivious male coppers, and it’s a bit of a running gag to encourage each other, in the presence of hopeful prospective paramours, to go have a drink or go out to dinner. Rosemary turns to Laura when Richard Oakley walks off, anticipating the usual shared smirk. But Laura is still looking after him, blinking, and—and are her cheeks—pink?

Is Laura—blushing?

2.

Normally Rosemary doesn’t mind when she and Laura are seated apart. But tonight, at dinner in the school dining hall, she feels a prickle of annoyance. It’s just that the headmaster is so dull. So terribly, terribly dull. His wife’s not very nice to him either. And from here, she can’t hear what Oakley is saying to Laura to make her smile like that.

Laura does look guarded. Or cautious, at least, Rosemary amends. And shouldn’t she be? Rosemary’s all for a friendly, smart male of the appropriate age taking an interest in Laura, but they don’t know this one yet, and Rosemary can’t vet him when she’s seated so far away.

Then there’s the matter of the jacket. Laura is particularly dressed up tonight—which, why shouldn’t she be, it’s a special occasion—but she’s in a jacket Rosemary has only seen a few times before, a very nice brown and navy number with pale purple flowers and—here’s the kicker—images of women parading across the front. Greek women.

Of course Laura couldn’t have known she’d attract the interest of a classics master when she packed for their visit to the school. Perhaps she simply thought the jacket was appropriate for a place of learning.

Still. She did choose to wear it tonight. And Richard Oakley teaches Greek.

“What do you think, Rosemary?”

“Hm?” She pulls her attention away from Laura and Oakley to blink at Mrs. Marshall. “Sorry, what was that?”
“Old school traditions. My husband thinks they’re frivolous. What do you say?”

“I—well, in my school days—” She breaks off. Laura has just lifted Richard Oakley’s hand from her lap and placed it on the table.

The nerve of the man! And what’s worse, Rosemary thinks, watching him leave the hall with narrowed eyes, is that he gets away with it because he’s so damn charming.

Then the lights go out, and it isn’t long before all hell breaks loose.

3.

Whatever happens, thinks Rosemary the following morning, whatever mayhem and murder they stumble onto—and they do stumble onto quite a lot—it always comes back to this. The two of them in a garden, hands in the dirt, side by side.

They sit down on the low wall beside the ailing rose garden and try to work out who might have been dressed as the stag that attacked Miss Wells. If Rosemary gets in a small dig at the headmaster for being a bore, well, she did have to suffer through his conversation all through the previous evening. It is just slightly possible that’s she’s probing Laura for her reaction when she mentions Oakley.

“Richard Oakley’s got the hots for you,” she says, “and that’s not a motive.”

Laura raises her hands in the air, as if to say, I wouldn’t know anything about that, and then pats down her hair, a little self-consciously. Making sure it looks nice in case Oakley appears? Rosemary finds herself wondering, and then gives herself a little mental shake. Oakley is a nice man. And he’d be hard pressed to do better than Laura—and what’s more, unlike most men, he seems to know it.

4.

Rosemary has to lie down for a bit after they find Simon Todd’s body in the greenery. Laura tuts and bustles around their cramped little room, two single beds in a squarish chamber that now houses guests of the school, but that Rosemary is fairly certain used to be a dorm room.

“You’d think you’d be used to it by now,” Laura says, fetching a glass of water from the tap in the adjacent bathroom. “Normally, you barely bat an eye at stumbling on a corpse.”

Rosemary rests her arms by her sides, palms up. She’s washed her hands thoroughly, multiple times, but she can still feel the clammy touch of a dead appendage on her skin.

“Normally, we discover corpses by seeing them, not shaking hands with them.” She shuts her eyes tight, stomach swimming.

“Fair point.”

Laura comes and sits on Rosemary’s bed and hands her the glass of water. “Drink up. You’ll feel better.”

Rosemary manages to sit up a little. She eyes the glass suspiciously. “You haven’t put one of your herbal remedies in that, have you?”
“Just water, I promise. That was just the once—and besides, ginger is a well-known cure for a queasy stomach!”

“Maybe, but not in that particular quantity.”

Rosemary sips. The water does help. Laura takes the glass from her when she’s finished and puts the back of her hand against Rosemary’s forehead. Her skin is so cool and soothing that it takes Rosemary a moment to catch up with what’s happening.

“Are you… checking for a fever?”

Laura pauses, hand still resting against Rosemary’s head. “Well. I suppose I am.”

“I’m not ill.”

“Force of habit, I suppose.” She takes her hand away, and an odd part of Rosemary wishes she hadn’t said anything.

They sit in companionable silence for a moment. Rosemary’s stomach settles. Well. Enough of that. She swings her feet off the bed and stands up.

“Oi, you’re not well!”

“I’m fine now. Shall we catch a murderer?”

“Rosemary!”

“The question is,” Rosemary says, brow furrowing, “who on earth keeps a harpoon in a boy’s school?”

5.

But a more pressing question emerges soon enough.

“Do you think he did it?”

They are waiting until it gets late enough to search the headmaster’s room for (ostensibly) a receipt for the rose garden soil and (actually) anything that might give them a clue to the murder. Laura’s hand is twitching against her knee as she watches the sky grow dark outside their little room. Rosemary knows she isn’t talking about the headmaster, or about the murder.

“No, and neither do you. You said he told you he was falling on his sword.”

“I know.” She grows quiet.

“But?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t believe he had assaulted Welly, not even while he was confessing. Except—there was one moment, in the study, when I thought… well, what if he did?”

“I suppose I had that moment, too. He had a ready explanation for everything. If not a particularly convincing one.”

“Yes, but…” Laura gets up from her little bed and moves closer to the window. She looks out over
the grounds, at the mysteriously dying roses.

“But?”

“I felt this—sharp sort of…disappointment. When I thought perhaps he had done it.”

Rosemary’s heart sinks. A peculiar hollowness opens up in her gut. “Well. It would be disappointing. He’s…a nice man.”

There’s another silence. Finally, Rosemary asks, tentative, each word falling heavy from her mouth, “Do you like him?”

“Yes,” Laura says. She’s still looking out at the dying roses. “I do.”

Rosemary’s gut twists so hard it takes her breath away. But…the gardening business, she thinks. What about the business? If Laura left—

“But,” Laura says, and then stops.

“But?”

Laura turns to look at her. She has an unusually pensive expression on her face. For a moment, Rosemary’s heart is in her mouth, and she can’t tell why.

Then Laura shakes it off. She shrugs, throwing up her hands. “Oh, I don’t know. I don’t even know the man!” She looks impatiently at her watch. “Isn’t it time yet?”

“No yet,” Rosemary answers automatically. She watches Laura pace, and feels a confused flutter in the pit of her stomach.

6.

Things at Stagford Lodge Preparatory School, Rosemary thinks, are getting a bit ridiculous.

There’s Crispin, the unpleasant young man purchasing a peculiar number of household supplies. There’s the headmaster’s wife, who seems not especially disposed to defend her husband against anyone’s suspicions. There’s the suspicious headmaster. There’s Welly, who’s begging them to tell the school that Richard Oakley wouldn’t ever have put on a stag costume and assaulted her, though what sway she thinks two gardeners will have with the governors, it’s hard to say. And then there’s Oakley himself, determined to take the blame for the school’s troubles—stopping short of murder, of course—though at this point, the school is in for a bout of worse publicity than a silly ritual gone wrong, so how exactly Oakley is going to help unless he does confess to the murder, too, Rosemary can’t see.

She did have a thought that perhaps his desire to leave has something to do with Laura. Maybe he’s ready to settle down. But Miss Wells insists he doesn’t want to go. That he’ll never want to go, in fact. Which doesn’t exactly bode well for Rosemary, either, if Laura…if Laura…

Oh, to hell with it, Rosemary thinks. She’ll get to the bottom of all this nonsense if it kills her.

She hoists a shovel over her shoulder and says, “Now where’s that cricket pavilion?”
There’s an expression—like being hit over the head with a shovel. That’s what happens to Rosemary.

She’s all ready to pry open the door to the cricket pavilion when Laura stops her. At first Rosemary thinks Laura’s against breaking in, an objection which Rosemary is fully prepared to override, but then Laura says, “You’re doing it wrong.”

That’s my girl, Rosemary thinks.

Laura inspects the door carefully. She talks about patience. She talks about having the right tools for the job. And then she simply slams the shovel down on the padlock and breaks it open.

And that’s when the metaphorical shovel hits Rosemary over the head.

She loves her. Oh good lord does she love this woman.

She stands there for a split second, ears ringing. Laura gives her a mischievous, delighted look that melts Rosemary, just reduces her to a puddle, and then pushes her way inside.

Rosemary follows.

They pry up the sticky floorboards with the shovel. It’s harder than it looks. The angle is, for some reason, rather funny. Or maybe it’s Rosemary who’s at a funny angle. She keeps bumping into Laura and getting her fingers stuck in the wet paint.

You love her, her brain keeps echoing. You love her.

Rosemary would never have denied that Laura is important to her. That she cares for Laura. That she’s her best friend in the world, even.

It’s something else, her brain says. You know that now.

Rosemary does a quick flip through of the Rolodex of men she has dated in her life. All of them, in the end, a disappointment. Rosemary doesn’t believe in fate—she believes in seizing fate by the horns, in fact, and steering it precisely where she wants it to go—but there’s some shockingly sentimental part of her that wonders if this is why none of those men ever worked out. Because in her future, waiting for her, was…a woman.

This woman.

“Oh, for pete’s sake, let me do it,” Laura says impatiently, and seizes the shovel from Rosemary. Rosemary lets it go. She stares at Laura as Laura sticks the shovel into the crack between the floorboards and, with a mighty grunt, pries one loose.

“Ha!” she says in triumph. She attacks a second floorboard, and then a third, and then there is a hole large enough for them to reach inside.

“What’s this?” Laura asks, lifting out a peculiar long package wrapped in blue tarp. She surveys the duct tape that holds it together and then bites into it with her teeth.
Rosemary is in love. She is in love with Laura’s grunts and her *ha!*s and her absurd way of problem-solving by just ploughing through any obstacles in her path. Laura pulls at the tape until it rips, then takes her mouth off it and makes a face. Rosemary is in love with that face.

“Blergh,” Laura says, but she pulls the tape off the tarp to reveal the murder weapon.

And it’s then, with Laura holding a harpoon gun in both hands and still smacking her lips against the taste of duct tape, that Rosemary kisses her.

9.

Laura yelps.

Rosemary pulls her mouth away as if she’s been burned. She rockets backwards, away from Laura. Suddenly she’s losing her balance, her foot meeting the empty air of the hole in the floorboards. She scrabbles for purchase, arms flailing. Laura drops the harpoon gun, grabs hold of her hand, and pulls her forward, away from the hole and into Laura’s arms.

“Howdy,” says Rosemary stupidly.

Neither of them moves.

“Did you mean to do that just now?” Laura asks, a bit breathless.

“What, nearly break my ankle falling into a hole?”

“The other thing.”

“Oh. You mean kissing you on the mouth?”

“Well. Yes.”

Rosemary looks at Laura. Laura’s arms are still supporting her, warm and steady.

“I suppose I did, yes.”

“Ah.”

“Yes.”

They look at each other, still not moving.

“Would you do it again?” Laura asks diffidently. “I, er…wasn’t prepared the first time.”

“Gladly,” says Rosemary.

Laura’s mouth is soft and warm and full. Rosemary lets their lips move together gently for a moment and then, never one to tread lightly, kisses with rather more vigor. Laura makes a startled sound, but this time she doesn’t pull away.

“You taste like duct tape,” Rosemary says breathlessly.

“I know, it’s dreadful.”

They kiss again.
“So, er,” Laura says after a long moment, “not to break the mood, but—”

“Oh. Yes. We are standing over a murder weapon.”

“Oh! That’s right. Goodness, I’d forgotten.” She hastily picks up the harpoon gun, careful to keep it wrapped up in the tarp. “We’d better do something about this.”

“I was thinking—a little switcheroo? Then we can catch whoever put it here in the act of trying to recover it.”

“Oh, I like that.”

Rosemary smiles. Laura smiles back.

“What were you going to say, then?” Rosemary asks.

“What? Oh! Just, er…well. That is to say. How long…”

“Oh!” Laura laughs too. “I didn’t know I wanted to kiss you until you kissed me!”

“We’re a bit slow on the uptake, aren’t we?” Rosemary asks. She feels overflowing with glee. She wants to pump her fist in the air.

“I suppose we are.”

“I got there first, though.”

“Only by a matter of minutes!”

10.

They solve the mystery. Order is restored at Staghorn Lodge Preparatory School. Richard Oakley becomes headmaster, promising to continue all the peculiar old traditions that make the school what it is.

They plant a beautiful rose garden. Rosemary makes Laura change the layout three times. It’s only a little bit because she likes watching Laura work.

There is quite a good deal more kissing in their tiny little room. And as soon as they can find a bed larger than ones originally intended for schoolboys, there will, Rosemary thinks with pleasure, be quite a bit more than that.

Everyone at the school is grateful to them—well, everyone who isn’t a murderer or an accomplice or dead—and they leave with rather a lot of fanfare. Richard Oakley ambles up to the Land Rover, conversing with Laura not quite casually. Rosemary slips into the driver’s seat. A few days ago, she’d have let them have some time alone, but not anymore.

Well. She might have let them have some time alone.

“It’s not a bad life, you know,” he says.
“What isn’t?”

“Headmaster’s wife.”

Laura falls silent, shocked. Rosemary can see her searching for something, anything, to say.

Oakley gets the message anyway. He graciously moves the conversation along, charming as ever. Only the sadness around his eyes reveals how much Laura’s refusal affects him.

Rosemary feels sorry for the man. Goodness knows how she’d feel if Laura were to reject her.

She shudders at the thought and kicks the Land Rover into gear. As they drive away, Laura cries a little bit. Rosemary hands her a tissue.

“I can drive you back if you’re that upset,” she says archly.

“Oh, don’t be daft,” Laura says, but there’s no heat in it. She takes a deep breath out the open window. “It’s just all been a lot, these last few days.”

“I won’t argue with that.”

“And,” Laura says after a moment, “well.” She doesn’t look at Rosemary. “I just realized—when he said that to me. I can’t be a headmaster’s wife—or anybody’s wife—because…”

Rosemary’s stomach dips and heart soars.

“I feel just the same.”

Laura looks at her, startled, and then gives her a bright, full smile.

They drive in silence for several miles. Then Rosemary remembers something.

“That jacket,” she says.

“Which jacket?”

“The purple one. With the Greek women on it.”

“Oh yes. What about it?”

Rosemary taps her finger against the wheel. “Did you wear it for him?”

“What?”

“Richard Oakley.”

Laura looks confused.

“The classics master.”

Laura raises an eyebrow.

Rosemary sighs. “Who teaches Greek.”

“Does he?” Laura asks, surprised

“That’s what classics means, Laura.”
“I suppose it does! I didn’t think.”

Exasperated as she is, Rosemary can’t help but feel pleased at this. “Oh.”

They drive on in silence.

“You know why I bought that jacket?” Laura says.

“Why?”

“Persephone.”

It takes Rosemary a moment.

“You mean the statue of Persephone, that I chose for that churchyard garden we worked on? For the medieval fair in that little village?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

Rosemary considers. She watches the road ahead, lined by tall green trees.

“So you bought it for me, then.”

“Well. I wouldn’t say that,” Laura replies.

“No?”

“I wasn’t thinking of buying it for you. I mean, I wasn’t…thinking like that, then.”

“No.”

“No.”

“But you bought it because of me,” Rosemary persists.

“Well…”

“You bought a jacket with a lot of dancing ladies on it because of the statue of a naked woman I chose for the garden.”

“When you put it that way,” Laura says, laughing. Rosemary laughs, too, and takes her hand.

Epilogue.

Richard Oakley watches them go. He is wounded by Laura’s refusal. Not wounded as in hurt by being denied something he believed he deserved, but wounded as by the sharp point of an arrow piercing the side of a felled stag. His heart will hurt for some time, he thinks, as a tender bruise, as red anemones sprung from the blood of Adonis. But he is a classics master. He recognizes Diana, the huntress, in these women, forever running free beneath the moon; recognizes Pomona, the goddess of gardens, loyal to fruits and flowers above all. And unless he’s very much mistaken, he recognizes a favorite Greek poetess in them as well. What was it Sappho wrote?
Like the sweet apple which reddens upon the topmost bough,

Atop on the topmost twig, — which the pluckers forgot, somehow. —

Forget it not, nay; but got it not, for none could get it till now.

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