

## SUSAN

– England, 1831 –

It was here in this garden, years ago, that she had first told her mother about him. She had thought that the flowers might soothe the older woman, bobbing their heads and laughing at their conversation. She had said things like, mother, don't take on so – you knew one day I would leave here, and marry, and make my own home. I think he is the one, the right one for me.

But even as she had spoken it seemed that the moving hollyhocks were shaking their heads instead of nodding, as if they heard her words for what they were – parroted phrases, things people said in stories, because she did not know how to explain to her mother how it really was. Mother, she should have said – I can hardly bear to leave you in this great lonely garden. But I must go. And I could not pull you with me – I could not uproot you from the place your family has grown for so long. I am a young plant – I can be repotted, and I must be, else my roots will circle the pot and press against the sides and I will be moulded into the shape of this tiny world I know.

So I must go. But you, mother – you are an old plant now. You have lost your blossoms. You have not many seasons left to see, not many more rainfalls. Your pot is part of you – you could not survive being ripped from it. So you must stay. That was what she should have said.

*That was how we would have told her, said the hollyhocks.*

It was here in this garden, long ago, before even that, that he had begun to poke fun at her, before they were married, before she left these flowers to grow alone.

He had been quiet awhile as they walked, and she had been hoping he might compare her to a flower – she was taking care to walk very slowly, as if bobbing in the wind. He stopped suddenly, and pushed a flowerhead at her.

‘Look, Sue,’ he said, ‘this one’s you. Didn’t they used to call you Black-eyed Susan when you were little, you got into so many scrapes?’

Black-eyed Susan? That flower!

She had pretended to be angry, so she could hear him say sorry with a smile, as if he didn’t really mean it.

It was here in this garden, just after that, that she had told her closest friend, her only friend, everything— every word, every joke he had ever said to her, as if she needed to prove to someone that he was the right one.

‘Look! He said I was *this* flower!’ said Susan, pushing the big, dark, daisy-like head of it at her friend, laughing.

‘That one! You’ll marry him?’

‘If he stays alive! He said he might die of joy before then. Him and his jesting. He’d better not!’

‘Whatever would you do if he *did* die?’ this question seemed to Susan suddenly serious, and the flowers slowed their bobbing.

‘Lord knows... but I’d die, too, most likely! I must.’

She stood here now, years later, and thought— It was this garden he must have run through that night last month, to the meeting in the woods.

‘I must go, Sue,’ he’d told her, using the short name she said sounded like a pudding, and would let no one else call her by. She looked at him, the man she had married when he barely was a man, now the father of her daughters, and saw no laugh in his eyes. He was not jesting.

He had stopped jesting the winter before, the winter the big farm hadn't needed him to thresh the husks with his flail, the winter the house was cold and the food thin.

'I must go. We promised. We promised we wouldn't stand by and starve.'

His words – were they real? Could they be? He sounded like a storybook hero.

She hadn't stopped him. How could she have? She needed him to fight. She knew the fight was her own fight too. When the rioters met in the woods and planned, when they stumbled at night to the farms and broke their way in – it was for her and for her daughters. Every threshing machine they smashed or set alight – every match struck and spade brought down.

He had said more things, trying to convince her – that next winter they would not want him and his flail, they would not pay him for threshing their husks – that it would be even colder and hungrier than the last. That the machines, those great cold metal things, would do it faster and cheaper than he could. But she already knew this. And before he'd even told her – she wanted him to go.

He must have run through this garden, then, her maiden garden, where they had met, that night, with his heaviest pitchfork.

She stood here between rows of defenceless flowers, and she was angry now. It seemed to her that the threshing machines loomed on the horizon of her country, of her garden even, cold and efficient and faster than a man could even be. It seemed to her, and in her dreams, that there were many more machines, huge ones, huger ones, behind them, and they could do things better than any man who was made merely by God.

She was angry at the newspapers who shouted that the rioters wanted blood, when she knew them, when one had been her own husband, and they had not yet hurt a human soul. She was angry at the farmers for loading guns, and angry at the farmer who had shot that shot, and angry at the smoke for obscuring a shot meant to scare so that instead it hit a man.

But she could not be angry at that man for being there. If it were not for many things, she would be there now.

She wanted it to stop, sometimes – all the colours and the voices, everywhere, too many, the voices of her friends, of her daughters, speaking or silent – even louder when silent, looking at her, waiting. They all wanted her to talk back and notice them and she needed silence. ‘Susan!’ they said, ‘Susan, Susan, Susan!’

– and all she could think of was the grave he lay in now, and it was a yew tree above it – and he loved yew trees, had nearly died eating the pips once as a boy, and now it was guarding him, so it would be all right – but the grave was small, narrow, and would there be space enough for all of them, when the time came? And her mother, her mother was lying alone – near the river she liked, but alone – who would lie with her? There was nothing worse, nothing, than waking up in the night and being alone in the cold and not daring to call out... lying alone with no one beside you... if they woke up now, they would be alone... there was nothing worse in the world, and every night when she fell asleep now she was afraid of waking because she knew she would forget, and find herself alone in the dark...

‘Susan,’ they would have told her, all the noisy women, ‘Susan, Susan, Susan! Bring your daughters with you. They need you... and you won’t be alone, then, if you wake...’ but Susan saw that they didn’t understand, they couldn’t see that she could not stand to hear her daughters mewling, no, not now, later – later she would turn back to them, all of them, and smile and answer their questions and cook and resolve the arguments of the girls, but not now. Not now – now, today, she needed silence, silence and the flowers.

...But she could not stop it, feeling or seeing or listening, even when she wanted to the most.

*What will you do?* asked the hollyhocks, knowing the answer.

‘Lord knows,’ said Susan. ‘But I must live.’

Yes, said the Black-eyed Susan, *always* – and the wind moved it up and down like flames.

**HISTORICAL NOTE –**

The better-known riots in England brought on by the industrial revolution were carried out by the Luddites – textile workers attacking the new industrial looms.

Years later, in the 1830s, there was another series of riots, these ones agricultural, carried out by the ‘Swing Rioters’. The rioters targeted the threshing machines that were replacing their handheld flails and robbing them of winter employment. They spread from Kent across the country. Hundreds were caught and put on trial – many were deported and several executed.

*–“Rioters were usually young men, many of them married, therefore they may be deemed to be stable and respectable.” –“Only one person is recorded as having been killed during the riots, which was one of the rioters by the action of a soldier or farmer.”*

I could find out nothing else about him, even his name.