

# THE AUGUST ROSE

BY VIRGINIA WALLACE

"Sixteen, please, Pete." Miss Sidwell spoke to the nightwatchman and leaned back against the rail of the elevator, faintly weary in her navy linen suit. Drawing in her breath at the sudden upward thrust, she watched the red light flicker up the numbers of the control board. Everyone who rides an elevator does that, she thought, staring as "three" dimmed and "four" glowed in its place. Or else you look at the neck of the person in front of you. Necks were almost obscenely personal, though, in their revelation of uncut hair or collars dirty beyond bleaching. Old Pete's neck was suntanned, creased with age. Everyone that rides an elevator tries to put his back to the wall, doesn't he? Then no one can see his neck while he watches for the little light to summon his floor.

She stiffened as gravity caught the elevator. Old Pete reached out and slid back the tarnished brass lattice door. The handle gleamed in contrast, polished by the endless touch of fingers.

Pete smiled above his clean grey denim shirt with Burkhart Bld'g embroidered in red on the pocket. "Sixteen, Miss Sidwell. You planning to work late again tonight?"

"Not too late, Pete, but you know how it is. We're training a new girl and that cuts into my day." Miss Sidwell made a little step of departure but Pete leaned companionably against the door, the light from the elevator silhouetting his face.

"I've seen her: cute little blonde, isn't she? Wore a pink dress yesterday?"

"Yes, that's Mary."

The dress had been a crisp cotton, fullskirted, and the girl had worn tiny pink flower earrings, half hidden by her palely blonde hair. She seemed all of a piece, candy fresh and lilting as she walked among the dull grey rows of filing cabinets. Miss Sidwell had felt suddenly old, and the prospect of her thirtieth birthday in August grew much too real.

At noon the girl had returned from lunch with a pink rose wrapped loosely in green florist paper. The flower vender in the arcade where she ate had given it to her.

"It had a broken stem, you see," she explained, showing it shyly to Miss Sidwell, her blue eyes sparkling above the fresh pink collar, "And he said he couldn't sell it that way. Is there a vase? We ought to put it in water."

Miss Sidwell brushed against the girl's soft hand as she touched the half open petals. The girl's name was Mary Glory. Miss Glory.

In the back of the supply shelf they had found a dusty glass bud vase, chipped on one fluted edge. Mary Glory had disappeared down the hall and returned with the vase shining wetly. She put the rose in the narrow stem and moved it on her desk to where the sun slanted a prism scattering of light through the crystal fluting.

"Must be wonderful to still be young," Pete sighed, breaking her recollection. "Well, you just ring good and hard when you want to go back down, Miss Sidwell. If I don't come right up, wait a minute or two and ring again. I may be punching the inspection clocks."

The brass lattice clanged shut and Miss Sidwell was left alone to walk with staccato taps along the dusky marble corridors. The bloodless summer twilight filtered through the windows, giving a still cool afterglow to the white marble floors. On either side of her the frosted glass doors were closed and dark, the black title letters reduced to meaningless stencils. Really, though, it was rather pleasant, knowing she was the only live person in these silent floors. She might as well be alone here, typing, as alone in her third floor apartment, reading until it was time for bed. She thought of the office building as it would seem from the street, tiers of blank grey windows and then her window, a pinkish gold prick of light, secret and alive in the dead grey tower.

Miss Sidwell rounded the final corner and stopped, her footsteps fading in horrified echoes. Warm yellow light spilled from the open door of the office, a pool of brightness on the faint black veins of the white marble.

But she had locked the office when she—no, wait, there had been those workmen fixing the teletype in the other room. She ventured into the pool of light, startled at the sound of her footstep. Yes, they must still be there; she could hear the clank of a wrench against metal and then the low murmur of masculine voices.

Twitching at the jacket of her straight navy suit, she walked inside the office. The door to the back room was half open and Miss Sidwell could see two khaki backs bent over the teletype. The thinner, younger-looking one was smoking while he handed tools to

his companion. It was hard to see them clearly from this angle. The two showed no signs of have heard her enter.

She walked slowly across to the door sill, wondering if she should explain her presence . . . but of course not, it was her office.

"I'm closing this door," Miss Sidwell said with exaggerated clearness and reached for the knob, watching, waiting.

"O.K., lady."

Neither of them seemed startled at the sound of her voice. Her echoing footsteps must have been ample announcement. She saw the darkhaired one grind out his cigarette on the floor as she pulled the door toward her.

Her desk was tidy, as she always left it. She glanced at the pink rose drooping on the other desk. Perhaps it would be nice to bring something for her desk—ivy, say, in a ceramic pot. Swiveling in the chair, she stretched to remove the typewriter cover. Miss Sidwell paused and transferred the gold band from her left ring finger to the right, rubbing at the red mark to make it disappear. The gold band was worn so smoothly a stranger could never have seen the name engraved there. Joel.

It must have been five years ago that she had received it in the mail, a tiny white package with the letter from Joel's parents. They had not written of the accident until after the funeral. They had sent her this, because Joel had always worn it and had wanted her to—the ache of remembrance was only a familiar dull thing now, like a faucet that dripped because she occasionally forgot to shut it tight.

Wearing the ring on her left hand made it look like a wedding band. Joel's parent's hadn't known that he was to give her an engagement ring that August, on her birthday, and after their letter, brief and anguished, she had never told them. Often she wore the ring as she had tonight, on her left hand. When she sat alone in a restaurant she would trace the beaded surface of her water goblet with one finger, using the ring as a foil for inquiring glances.

The murmur of voices in the other room rose. They were laughing at something, secretly, in the intimate laughter of workmen. Miss Sidwell rolled a sheet of paper in the typewriter and clattered efficiently, drowning their warm secret laughter, thinking against the rattle of the keys, Joel used to laugh that way. The sound would swell up from within him, rich and deep and smooth.

She stopped typing. In the adjoining room there was silence, then the muffled accents of the younger one and the deeper tones of the other in reply.

She typed again and paused. Silence. And then the voices. With

a quick motion she looked at her watch. The tiny gold hands pointed beneath the crystal accusingly. It was a quarter to eight, later than she had planned to stay and here she was sitting, not even typing, listening against her will to the men in the next room.

Curiously nervous, Miss Sidwell looked at the closed door, trying to think beyond the rough edged laughter. There was no use leaving just now. Pete would be touring his eight o'clock inspection route, and wouldn't be back to the elevator for at least fifteen minutes. And it did seem ridiculous to grope down sixteen flights of dark stairs.

As she rolled the second letter in her machine Miss Sidwell concentrated on not hearing the voices. They seemed louder, now, raised in humorous argument, tone playing against tone, sensuously pushing against her eardrums. Then she saw that the door she had pulled closed had swung slowly open. She fingered Joel's ring, thinking to return it to her left hand. The younger one was speaking, banteringly, "Who'd know, Mike, who'd know?"

The man's reply was low and indistinct and the young one cut him off impatiently.

"All right, all right. Here, help me with this cover."

She got up to close the door again, pausing by the tall metal cabinet. Through the open door she could hear their breathing, heavy strained with lifting. A clank of metal followed, then the clatter of a hand searching in a tool box. "Hand me that damn wrench, will you?"

Their labor was punctuated with grunts and little sighs as the bolts were tightened. Then the young one's voice came again, at first loudly and then abruptly lowered as the deeper voice cut across it; apparently they were looking at the open door. The older man made a short sly comment and the two joined in cryptic laughter again.

Outside the first drops of a summer rain tapped tentatively against the window ledge. Inside the other room there was sullen silence and Miss Sidwell strained to hear their breathing, their mysterious warm laughter, their rough voices. Nothing. Just silence, and against the window, the growing trickle of rain. She extended her bare left hand, palm down, following the line of her spread fingers to the pink rose on Miss Glory's desk. Why were they so quiet? Four steps would take her to the door, but if she moved now, they would know she had been listening to them.

The elevator? Old Pete would not answer and then she would be alone in the dark tomb of the halls.

From the silence of the next room the old one cleared his throat softly. They're waiting, Miss Sidwell thought, marveling at

the quick way her thoughts marched, as clearly as though she was typing them on clean white paper. They're waiting for me to come to them, to walk to the door. Why, I don't even know the young one's name.

The rain died quietly, as quickly as it had come and she turned, drawn to the door with a strange anxious feeling she could not define. Just four steps, then———the teletype burst into life with a frantic clatter and she froze.

"That does it, Mike."

"Yep." The old one chuckled. "Thought we were going to have to stand there all night, waiting for some station to send a message." He spoke over his shoulder as he strode out the doorway, tool box clanking against his hip. The younger one followed, strong shouldered and smiling. He turned at the doorway, the laughter still in his eyes, "Goodnight, lady."

Their voices echoed, rough and warm down the hall, curved and mingled with their footsteps, fading in the maze of corridors. Then the marble silence rushed back in to fill their trail. The rain crept questioningly back and Miss Sidwell nodded, leaning on suddenly tired arms over her desk. In the rain-sifted stillness, she picked up her calendar. There were only eight days left until August.