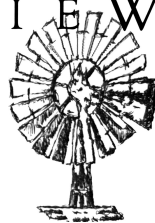


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SWOSUTM

RING AROUND THE ROSES

by Maggie Logan

“Ring around the roses
A pocket full of posies
Ashes! Ashes!
We all fall down.”

The song tirelessly danced through my dreams. It blackened even the happiest moments of my slumber, like fire burning on a page. No matter how fast I turned, it was always there. Echoing. Haunting. I would try to outrun it with each shift of my sleepless body, but nothing I could imagine would get that high-pitched singing out of my head, at least, not until it was ready to end. And it would end, but always in the same gut-wrenchingly, disturbing way.

Bolting upright in my bed, I followed the same routine as I'd been doing every night for the past two weeks. I peeled off my sweaty clothes—which is surprisingly difficult when you're half asleep—just as difficult as pulling off your own skin or your wet bathing suit after a long, exhausting day of swimming. I took a quick, cool shower, put on clean clothes, and jumped back into bed. It wasn't long before I was able to sleep uninterrupted by the nursery rhyme.

Three hours later, the alarm on my phone went off, lighting up the whole room with its white light. With one eye shut and one eye open, I perused Facebook till I was sure I had seen everything new since I last checked it the night before.

The world was going to hell. That much was clear. Occasionally, I would see a funny meme about SpongeBob or some random person on the internet, but it was mostly just arguing between political sides or news stories of how the world was ending. I know every generation thinks, “This is it. The world can't get any worse than it is right now,” but I really feel it's true this time. The opposing political parties have all but devoured each other. No

one has openly listened to the other side for years. The parties have simply become a tool for the government to keep the U.S. divided and hostile. Politics, man. Due to open immigration laws, one-third of the population has been wiped out because of unknown and untreatable diseases. The environment was wrecked; the oceans were filled with plastic waste. Everyone always said, "We must recycle," but no one ever did. The bees were extinct. The whales were all dead. The air was unbreathable.

I got an alert on my phone to wear a respirator mask because the air was too toxic. It was then that I heard it, a faint, high-pitched: "Ashes! Ashes! We all fall down." It sent a painful chill so far down my spine I thought I was getting an epidural.

I had to keep my thoughts moving. Don't dwell on it. Don't let it haunt you even in your wake.

The way the government controlled us was far different than the way most people think or have seen depicted in sci-fi novels or movies. They don't ration our food or escort us to and fro. There is no one standing guard with guns or weapons. There is no weird device injected into our skin to control us. They do, however, watch and read everything we say or type. They track our movements and habits. They silence anyone who starts digging in the right places and asking dangerous questions, but the media doesn't report on that because it, too, is controlled by the government. In fact, posts on Facebook or other social media outlets will be deleted for simply reporting on what's actually going on in the world. It is a silent stripping of personal freedoms.

After spending roughly thirty minutes on social media, I made efforts to get out of bed and ready for work. I work at a bank, and while it is an easy job, I hate the monotony of it. I spend all day, every day doing the same thing, which gives my mind countless opportunities to dwell on my nightmare. I knew I had dark bags under my eyes from my many sleepless nights, but that's how most people looked now-a-days, so I never try to cover it up.

I was counting back money when I saw her. I knew I had to be imagining things because I only ever saw her at the end of my nightmare, but there she was. Watching. Humming. Humming, "Ring around the roses" as she fidgeted with the flowers in one of the vases by our waiting area. A cry caught in my throat.

I tried to brush it off and continued asking my

customer how their day was going.

Focus on the money, I told myself.

The bills felt crisp in my hand. They always did. They felt like the rush of the coming fall season, and the excitement of the first swim of summer, or the first sip of a cold Sprite. I relished in counting out the one hundred dollar bills, even if it wasn't my money. I hated admitting it to myself, but there was always another emotion I felt creeping in when counting back money. One I wasn't proud of. It was a warm bolt of greed and jealousy. I welcomed its poison. I disliked myself for it but not enough to fight it. I knew I would never act on the feeling, so what was the problem with enjoying it? Oh, how great it must be to be able to take out one thousand dollars at will, with no worry or added thought. Sometimes, I would imagine I was on the other side of the counter receiving the money.

Money. These tiny little slips of paper is what ruined the world. It's crazy how something so small can have a grip so tight.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and was immediately brought back to reality. "Honey, will you go clean up those roses? I can't believe someone took them all out of the vase and stripped them of their petals."

"What?" I asked weakly, too scared to look up. How could something from my nightmare actually affect something in the real world?

"Honey, why are you so pale? Are you sick or something?"

"Uh, no. Um, sorry." I cleared the weight in my throat before continuing, "I'll go clean it up. Yeah, sure, no problem." Why would there be a problem with cleaning up rose petals? Chill out!

My hands hovered shakily over the red rose petals. As I began scooping them into the trash, I started to feel sick. The petals felt soft against my skin, like tiny little pieces of silk. Thin and papery, the veins were highlighted by the light from the front door. I thought I could see their veins pulsing to the same rapid pace as mine.

"Ring around the roses

A pocket full of posies

Ashes! Ashes!

We all fall down.”

Bile collected and burned in my throat as I heard the song. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a gangly frame draped in black cloth, rocking back and forth. Rocking and singing. She was a biped, with skin like wrinkled leather. She was desolate, she was everything I feared, she was nothing at all. I felt a blistering cold creep around me, covering me like a blanket. A terrorized scream escaped from my lips, and I fell to the ground in terror and agony. The song echoed in my ears. It wouldn't stop. She wouldn't stop singing. All I wanted to do was tear my ears off, so that I wouldn't hear it anymore. But, somehow I knew that even that wouldn't make it stop.

My boss called an ambulance, and by the time the doctors got there, the ghostly woman was gone.

I was losing my mind. I was chained to a white hospital bed. The bleached walls seemed to tower over me. They made me feel small and weak. Helpless. The room was devoid of anything enjoyable, much like how I was devoid of any hope. I knew I wasn't crazy; in fact, I knew it so much so that I might actually be going crazy. I had to get out of here. There was nothing in this room that could distract me from my darkening thoughts. Why me? Why was this happening to me? I couldn't be imagining all of it. The rose petals were real. They were real!

My hands and feet were tied so tight they hurt. I remember being inconsolable, screaming and flailing. I couldn't help myself. I couldn't control anything. Tears began carving their paths onto my cheeks. Drop. Drop. I tried to contain myself.

Okay, okay. I have to think of a way out of this. Think. I could say extreme panic attack, maybe combined with possible symptoms of the toxic air...they may believe me.

Before too long, the doctor and nurses filed in with their clipboards. Fake smiles plastered on their faces. “You gave us quite a scare there. Can you tell us what happened? We tested your blood and found no traces of drugs. Did you take anything that might not be recognized in our systems?”

Great. They think I was on drugs. I tried to appear confused. “Well, I suffer from regular panic attacks, and I accidentally

took my mask off when I was walking to work today...I don't know, maybe, maybe that had something to do with it?" I lied.

"Hmm," the doctor mumbled with a sort of patronizing reassurance. I wasn't sure if he was believing what I was saying. "You kept mumbling something about the world ending—burning in ashes—and that it was all our fault. You kept saying, 'we could have stopped this. It's almost too late.'"

I did? "Well, that is one of the things I'm anxious about. I know it's silly, but I can't stop myself from thinking about it."

"It's not silly. Plenty of people feel the way you do." Maybe they were buying my story. "We've decided to keep you here for another day. We'd like a psychiatrist to come in and evaluate you, just to make sure everything is back to normal."

"That's fine," I said, trying to sound calm. "I'll have to tell my job."

"Of course. We will supply you with a documentation to get out of work."

I was finally able to breathe again now that they were gone. I could feel my veins pumping with blood in my head. I hadn't noticed it before, but I had a headache. It was then that I heard it. The same shrill voice that I'd been hearing for several months now, only this time...it said something different.

"You are all to blame."

"Ashes! Ashes! We all fall down."

I had to pretend I didn't hear anything. I knew they were watching me from the cameras. I couldn't stay here any longer than I already was. I wasn't crazy!

What are we to blame for?

I rung for a nurse and asked for some sleeping medicine. It was the first night in so long that I actually slept all the way through.

My walk home from the hospital was uneventful. There's a certain peace about being able to walk through a crowd of people and not be noticed. Some days it's depressing, but when it's a time—like this—where I don't want to be seen, it's welcoming.

We all looked like the sorriest bunch. Most people kept their

heads down, their eyes full of doom and pain. Everyone looked like tiny soldiers. Masks covered our nose and mouth, and we walked quickly to avoid the dirty streets. Most people didn't drive anymore. There was a deficit of oil and fuel, and the bits that remained were exorbitant in price. Dirt, trash, and pollution tainted our town like a black paint stroke; it covered everything in its path with a sense of desolation. Funny how people who cared about the environment were labeled "liberals," but now we are all labeled "hopeless."

The night started off as it always did:

"Ring around the roses

A pocket full of posies

Ashes! Ashes!

We all fall down."

It encompassed every one of my dreams. It traced the lines in my oblivion, until my dreams came to a close. Only this time, it didn't end like it usually does. It didn't end with a woman in a black cloak, wielding a knife, and chanting the same nursery rhyme, walking towards me, cutting out my tongue, and turning me into a pile of ash. Instead, as the woman drew closer and closer to me—so close that I could smell the stench of her breath as she chanted—she began turning the world to ash. Everything was burning up; people were collapsing and dying from inhaling the smoke. "Ashes! Ashes! We all fall down," she sung over and over again. She was destroying what little of the world there was. I started coughing up blood and choking on the smoke that swirled into a noose around my neck. I knew it was a dream, but it felt so...real.

"Please, stop. Why are you doing this?" I gasped, barely able to form the words as I heaved on the ground from the lack of oxygen. The woman stopped for a moment, the wails and shrieks of the people around us filled up the momentary lapse in her chanting. I watched as her bloody, bare feet drug themselves across the ground. She stopped right above me. When I looked up into her face, hoping to either wake up soon or perhaps strike sympathy in the heart of my afflicter, I saw that she was me.

And she said, "You did this by not doing anything."