

EVENTYR

12 TALES OF LOVE
BEYOND THE GRAVE

Andrew O'Connell

EVENTYR: 12 TALES OF LOVE BEYOND THE GRAVE

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Creator: O'Connell, Andrew, author.
Title: Eventyr: 12 tales of love beyond the grave / Andrew O'Connell.
ISBN: 9781925497335 (paperback)
9781925497342 (eBook)
Subjects: Short stories.
Dewey Number: A823.4

Published by **Andrew O'Connell** and InHouse Publishing
www.inhousepublishing.com.au



Dedication

To my four grandparents, all of whom, I believe, have loved me from beyond the grave.

Acknowledgements

I think any author is 'haunted' by his, or her, characters. I certainly was while writing these stories. In fact, I'm learning how writing is less about writing and more about listening to the stories the ghosts who come to visit you tell. The act of writing a story is, essentially, a séance, the writer the medium.

In any case, I must again thank my wife Yudy, who has helped me tremendously with the creative process, exhorting me, as always, to tell the truth. I must also thank Fran Hanna, who read these stories when they were still in draft form and provided me with invaluable feedback.

Thanks also goes to the formidable Kaya at InHouse Publishing, who edits my work, likewise bringing out the best in me.

The next amazing woman who breathes life into the stories is Lika Kvirikashvili, the illustrator, always enhancing, not just reproducing the images I have in my mind's eye.

Lastly, the immense Ocean—Ocean Reeve that is—of InHouse Publishing, who has brought another one of my books to life. Thanks Ocean!

EVENTYR

I would also like to thank an unassuming but prodigious composer, Richard Kant, whose memorably haunting pieces provide the backdrop to the Eventyr book teasers you can view on Youtube.

—Andrew O'Connell

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Mrs. Roberts and her Roses

*S*nip, snip, snip went the pruning shears as Mr. Redford pruned Mrs. Roberts's roses in the cool of the evening. They had known each other for over twenty-five years, but ...



'Who are you?' asked Mrs. Roberts.

'I'm your gardener, ma'am - Mr. Redford,' he replied politely, with a smile.

'Oh, are you?'

Mrs. Roberts suffered from a condition she would not recover from – a deterioration of the mind. Each day her condition worsened, and she had started to forget people’s names and who they were to her.

On one occasion, Mrs. Roberts had asked Mr. Redford when her son James was coming for tea, which was nonsense, as she had never had any children.

She had once mistaken Mr. Redford for her husband – nonsense again, as she had never married.

‘Why don’t you love me anymore?’ Mrs. Roberts asked Mr. Redford one day.

Mr. Redford did not know what to say, but after concluding she would forget anything she heard, he decided to take pity on her and deceive her with kindness.

‘I do love you,’ he told her.

Little did Mrs. Roberts know how close to the truth that statement was. Mr. Redford had taken a liking to Mrs. Roberts when they had first met and he had grown quite fond of her over the years. He had never listed her as one of his clients and had never charged her for his services. Pruning her roses was a pleasure, not a chore, because it meant he could spend time with her.

But although their friendship had grown stronger over the years, Mrs. Roberts had never quite understood the nature of Mr. Redford’s feelings for her, and by the time he had mustered up enough courage to tell her how he felt, her condition was well advanced.

Mrs. Roberts had started to become quite confused about things, but there was one thing that she was never unsure about – her roses. She knew how many bushes there were, the names of the different varieties, and she could predict, almost to the hour, when they would flower. And the more her memory failed her, the more she obsessed about them.

'Don't prune them back too far!' she sometimes said to Mr. Redford, when all he was doing was cutting a flower for her.

'Are you taking the bushes out?' she would ask him at other times, when all he was doing was deadheading them.

Mr. Redford would reply politely on these occasions, saying 'yes ma'am' or 'no ma'am' as the situation required.

When the roses bloomed, Mr. Redford would always cut off the finest flower, irrespective of its colour, when it was at the exhibition stage – unfurled but not fully open – and place it in water, in a crystal vase Mrs. Roberts kept for the purpose. He would place the vase on top of the railing of the front porch, where Mrs. Roberts sat in her rocking chair, so she could admire it while she sipped her tea. Mrs. Roberts would ask him to join her sometimes – an invitation Mr. Redford always accepted even though, when they did take tea, they hardly said a word to each other.

* * *

Mrs. Roberts was thrown into confusion when Mr. Redford died. She sat in her rocking chair, days after it happened, waiting for someone to arrive though she knew not whom. She knew she was expecting company but she had forgotten which day the person was due to arrive. To make things worse, she had started to forget what day of the week it was.

She had forgotten that Mr. Redford would come on a Sunday afternoon at around dusk, when it was cooler, so he could carry out his work more comfortably.

'Oh, where *is* he?' she said, when Sunday evening came round. 'He was supposed to be here an hour ago!'

On this occasion, she was right.

'He's late, he's late!'

Mrs. Roberts's neighbour approached her the following day. 'Mrs. Roberts?'

'Where are the grandchildren?'

'I'm your neighbour ... Fran.'

'My neighbour?' Mrs. Roberts thought for a moment.

'Have you brought cake?'

'No, ma'am.'

'Would you like a cup of tea?'

'No thank you ... I came to ...' The young woman started crying.

'You're upset.'

'It's Mr. Redford, our gardener ... he passed away last night ...'

'Mr. Redford?'

'The gardener ... it was his heart. He died peacefully, they say ...'

'Mr. Redford ...'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Mr. Redford! He needs to prune my roses!'

Tears were streaming down the young lady's cheeks.

'Mr. Redford has *died*, ma'am.'

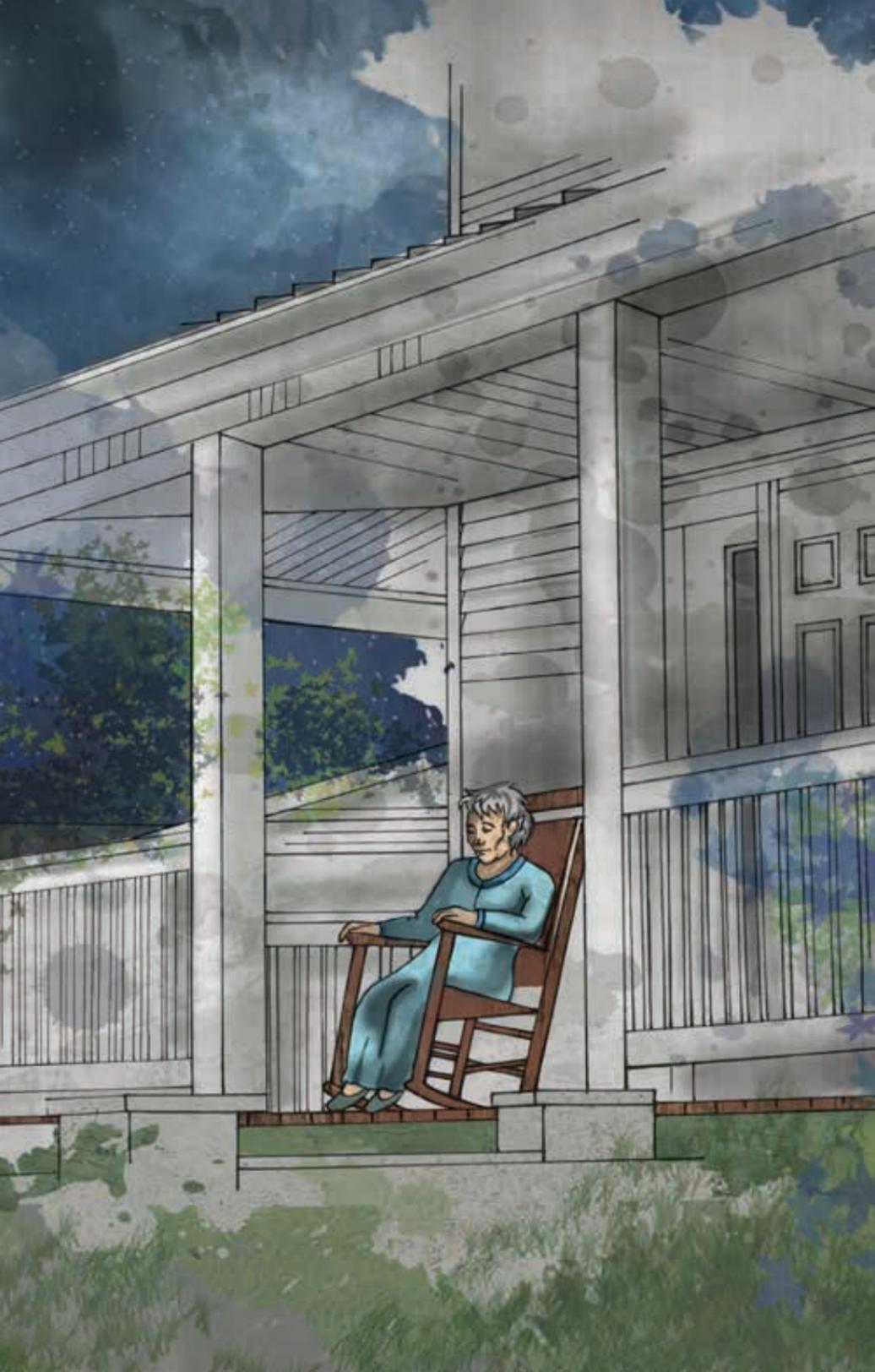
'If you see him, tell him to come at once! I've got a bone to pick with him! Last time, he pruned my roses back too far – I don't want to see a thicket of thorns! I want to see some green!'

The woman understood the extent of Mrs. Roberts's mindlessness and decided not to try to make herself understood any further.

'I'll tell him, ma'am,' she said, and after wishing her a good day, she left.

* * *

Weeks passed. Some roses bloomed, others died. More and more petals started to gather in the garden beds because Mr. Redford was not there to clean them up.



Autumn came. Fewer roses bloomed now. Many of them had withered and a number of rosehips had formed. Mrs. Roberts became distressed at the sight of it all.

'Just look at my garden, it's a disgrace! Anyone would think the house had been abandoned! Oh, where is Mr. Redford?'

She got up from her rocking chair and descended the steps of the front porch to go into the garden. She took hold of a rose whose petals had faded and died. All the petals came off in an instant, leaving only the pistil behind. She threw the petals to the ground.

'Dead! Deadheads! He hasn't deadheaded the roses! I'm not paying him another cent until he does, that lazy so-and-so!'

She walked quickly, by her standards, back up the stairs and into the house. She marched over to the phone, picked up the receiver, and was about to dial Mr. Redford's number when she forgot who it was she had come inside to call.

'Now, who was it I was going to call?'

She stared out the front door and looked at her garden. When her eyes landed on a deadhead rose, it all came back to her in an instant. 'Mr. Redford!'

She called Mr. Redford. The phone rang on the other end. Mrs. Roberts tapped her foot impatiently.

'Hello?' came a woman's voice.

'Could I speak with Mr. Redford?'

There was silence for a moment.

'I'm sorry but Mr. Redford passed away some weeks ago.'

'He hasn't pruned my roses for weeks! My garden is looking very wild!'

'I'm not sure you understand – Mr. Redford *died* about a month ago.'

'He died ...' The news caught Mrs. Roberts in a moment of sanity.

'Oh ... I'm ... I'm very, very sorry ... no-one told me about it.'

'I'm sorry, we tried to contact everyone.'

'Who are you?'

'I'm Charlene, his daughter.'

'Why didn't you call me?'

'We tried to contact everyone. I called all the customers in his book.'

'Well, you forgot about me.'

'What's your name, can I ask?'

'Sally Roberts.'

'I'm not sure I saw a Mrs. Roberts in the book.'

'You can't miss it, it's under R, for Roberts.'

'Could you hold the line for a moment?'

'I'll hold.'

The woman was on the line again a moment later, evidently with the names of her late father's clients at hand.

'I have a Mr. Rainsford here, a Mr. Reed, Mrs. Rogers ... after that, Mrs. Tucker ... there doesn't seem to be a Mrs. Roberts.'

'Look under S, for Sally.'

There was a silence while the woman checked.

'There doesn't seem to be anyone by the name of Sally. Were you a regular customer of his?'

'For twenty-five years!'

'There must be some misunderstanding - '

'There can be *no* misunderstanding - Mr. Redford has been doing my gardening for a very long time!'

'I'm sorry ...'

Mrs. Roberts's mind began to falter again.

'Who are you?'

'I'm Mr. Redford's daughter, Charlene. I'm sorry we didn't contact you to let you know - '

'Let me know what?'

'That Father had passed away.'

'Who passed away?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Are you coming over for tea?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Would you like to come over for tea?'

'The fact is I'm quite busy at the moment and I - '

'Sarah is coming, and Robert and James - James always brings scones.'

'Mrs. Roberts, I'm sorry, I really must be going - '

'And home-made jam and cream. You really must come!'

Mr. Redford's daughter understood that Mrs. Roberts had lost her mind. 'I'm sorry, ma'am, I have to go - '

'Do you prefer raspberry or strawberry jam?'

'I'm so sorry - '

'Butter or cream?'

'Goodbye - '

'Coffee or tea?'

'Goodbye,' she said gently, and she brought the conversation to a close.

Mrs. Roberts heard a dial tone. 'Hello? Hello?'

She hung up the phone and stared at the garden. Her heart was heavy and she began to cry, though she knew not why. She cried and cried until her eyes went dry.

Dusk fell upon the garden and soon the moon came out. She went out onto the porch and sat on her rocking chair. And there she sat all night, rocking back and forth, drifting in and out of sleep, not knowing why she was there, what she was doing, and more importantly, why she felt so unbearably sad.

* * *

Months passed. Winter came. Frozen and dusted with snow, the rose garden looked rank and vile. Mrs. Roberts's own condition worsened. She started to take tea at midnight, and breakfast when the sun went down. She read books upside down and between times she would sit in her rocking chair, looking intently at her garden, not knowing why, all the while feeling a keen sense of grief she could neither explain nor distract herself from.

She had gained a reputation among the children of the neighbourhood as 'the witch', and they dared each other to step into the 'witch's' garden' if they were brave enough and not afraid she would cast a spell on them.

Some women of the neighbourhood, who had always known Mrs. Roberts, continued to wave to her if she was sitting on the front porch when they passed her house. Mrs. Roberts would wave back if she was not staring at her garden. Other women, who made it their business to know *other* people's business, and who seemed to be happy only when others were miserable, started gossiping about Mrs. Roberts and her state of health. The gossip soon turned into rumours – that Mrs. Roberts was a miser, that she was conniving, that she had poisoned a cat that had entered her garden, and that she was even enticing children, with sweets, to come into her house. None of it was true, of course.

But the wagging tongues of the wicked women of the neighbourhood soon had their way. The unkempt garden, the accumulating mail, the slowly dilapidating house, and the 'crazy woman' on the front porch were soon brought to the attention of the authorities, who sent an official round to see her.

The official removed his hat as he stepped onto the front porch.

'Mrs. Roberts?'

'Oh, hello James! I'll put the kettle on. Did you bring scones?'

'My name's Donald, ma'am, from the town council.'

Mrs. Roberts stared at him. The councilor felt nervous. He was confident that Mrs. Roberts was harmless but he had not been indifferent to rumours she was a witch.

'Unfortunately, ma'am,' he proceeded politely, 'we have an eviction notice.'

He handed Mrs. Roberts the official document.

'A letter!' she replied, taking it. 'My son hasn't written to me in such a long time!'

'It has been decided that you are no longer able to maintain this house. You shall be admitted to a home for the aged.'

Mrs. Roberts stared at him again.

'You must leave this house, ma'am.'

Mrs. Roberts suddenly became lucid. 'I'm not going anywhere!'

'You can't maintain this house any longer, it's going to wrack and ruin. Look at your garden, it's terribly unkempt.'

'I have a gardener and handyman but he hasn't come yet - he's late.'

'Late indeed.'

'I'm waiting for him to prune my roses and to do some other odd jobs round the house.'

'Well, he'd better come soon - you've been given one month's notice. Have you called him?'

Mrs. Roberts had to think for a moment.

'Yes, I have ... I think I have.'

'You *think* you have? What's his name?'

'Mr. Redford. His first name is Geoffrey.'

'Geoffrey Redford! Mr. Redford was our gardener too but he died over six months ago. I think you'd better find someone else.'

'Would you like some tea?'

'No, thank you – I must go about my business. Be sure to call another gardener soon. And perhaps a handyman to tidy up around the place.'

When dusk came, Mrs. Roberts made a pot of tea. She sat on the porch and took up the eviction notice.

'Finally, some peace and quiet.'

She tried to read it but could not make any sense of it. The effort she expended trying to understand it soon made her sleepy, and before long it had slipped from her hand and she had fallen asleep.

She awoke in the middle of the night to a snip, snip, snipping coming from the garden. She looked out into the darkness but she could not see anything. But she heard it clearly – a snip, snip, snipping coming from the garden.

'Is that you, Mr. Redford?'

There was no answer – just a snip, snip, snipping.

'You're late! Look at the state of my roses – they're in desperate need of pruning!'

The snip, snip, snipping continued, so gently, so rhythmically, that it sent Mrs. Roberts back to sleep.

* * *

It was quite warm the following morning. Mrs. Roberts was roused by the heat, and awoke disorientated, not realising she had slept through the night in her chair. She was even more confused when she looked at her garden to find all the rose bushes perfectly pruned.

Another day came and went and, in the cool of the evening, Mrs. Roberts again took up the eviction notice and tried to read it. She fell asleep trying to do so, and was awoken later in the night again by a scratch, scratch, scratching, which seemed to be coming from the side of the house.

'Is that you, Mr. Redford?'

There was no answer – just a scratch, scratch, scratching coming from the side of the house, as if someone was sanding a surface to prepare it for painting.

'You're late again! Just look at my house – the paint is peeling on the weatherboards – it needs fixing!'

The scratch, scratch, scratching continued slowly and softly, and soon enough, Mrs. Roberts was asleep again.

* * *

Seven nights passed. Mrs. Roberts was woken each night by a different sound – a snip, snip, snipping; a scratch, scratch, scratching; a tap, tap, tapping; a slosh, slosh, sloshing; a whir, whir, whirring; a tink, tink, tinkering; and a bang, bang, banging.

Spring was approaching. Each day was warmer than the previous one. On the eighth day after she had been given the eviction notice, Mrs. Roberts looked at her garden and saw that a single rose had bloomed. She was very pleased. She knew many more would follow – and they did.

Over the following three weeks, they came out in abundance; magnificent, prize-winning roses – red and crimson, fuchsia and pink, gold and orange, peach and plum, cream and white.

At the end of the month – the month Mrs. Roberts had been granted to show that she was worthy of staying on as a tenant – the town official came round, accompanied by two men dressed in white overcoats, whose job it was to take Mrs. Roberts away. The official was amazed by what he saw.

Must have found someone to tidy up around the place, he thought.

The two men in white overcoats looked at each other questioningly. The house that appeared before them was not the same as the one they had heard described.

The official walked up the steps and onto the porch, where Mrs. Roberts was sitting, staring blankly at the garden.

'Harry!' Mrs. Roberts said, when she saw him.

'It's Donald, ma'am. Remember? From the town council? I see you've found a handyman.'

'Mr. Redford.'

'Back from the dead to do your gardening, eh?' he laughed.

Mrs. Roberts gave him a piercing look.

'Er ... well, I'm glad you've found someone to look after everything. It seems that we won't have to evict you after all.'

Mrs. Roberts stared into the garden.

'I'll leave you to enjoy your garden. I must be about my business. Just make sure the property stays like this, ma'am, and we won't have to meet again under these circumstances.'



‘Would you like a cup of tea?’

‘That’s very kind of you – ’

‘James is coming with scones.’

‘No, thank you, I shall leave you to admire your lovely garden. Gentlemen?’

The three of them left.

Mrs. Roberts rocked in her chair and did indeed admire her garden. When evening came, she got up to make herself a pot of tea and, when she was settled in her chair, she took up the eviction notice and tried to read it, which sent her off into a deep sleep. She slept so deeply and peacefully that, in the middle of the night, when things were quietest, her heart stopped.

* * *

It was very warm the next morning. But the warmth was not enough to rouse Mrs. Roberts from her sleep. There she sat in her rocking chair, looking as peaceful as she had the day before.

When the two men in white coats returned to take her away, they found Mrs. Roberts clutching the eviction notice in one hand, and the table set for tea for two. They also saw one of the finest roses they had ever seen in a vase set upon the railing of the porch.

They would never have guessed who put it there.

