

# TWO THOUSAND ROSES

By Jerry Rabushka

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ISBN 1-60003-038-6

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Five days now. Five days I lay under a dark wet ceiling. Under a spell of disbelief. I close my eyes and reach for the sun, and it approaches haltingly through my window high above my barren cot. It begs permission, unsure of passage. It doesn't like to be here.

I close my eyes and watch for it in a better homeland – reaching out, purple and orange over the sandy horizon – rays of light reaching, reaching to pull me up, pull me out. I float on the haze, on the fog and smog of life.

Maybe freedom doesn't feel like that. I don't know what it feels like. We forget so fast – we forget and we re-manifest it in a sun that doesn't burn, sand that doesn't sting, and water that doesn't drown. We wait for the impossible to come true.

A key in the door – the jingle of keys and the bolt, metal on metal, creaking across itself like a comet caught in a storm of asteroids. Food slides under the bottom of the door. A key means more – so much more – in this place there's nothing we're more afraid of.

Worse than a crime here, worse than murder, is politics. Not even my own – I am imprisoned as a potential heir to my father's belief. His belief in freedom. **(as father, making a speech)** “We will conquer! Eventually what is right must win, though the true freedom fighter may never live to see the gift he brings to others.” If they make me forget that – maybe I won't fight for it. Maybe I won't let anyone know that somewhere, under layers of oppression, it peeks out during small moments of safety.

They ask me questions which have no answer. Questions designed to have no answer, so they can beat me for not knowing that which can't be known. My father is dead and I can join him at any time. That would be freedom, at least from this living death.

Freedom and justice have no place here, and the tyrant himself is not free as he thinks. He must brutalize and subjugate and...

Ow!

Stop!

**(as an interrogator)** “Tell us where they are!”

*I don't know!*

*“You will know before we are through with you.”*

A tyrant is never more than a second from danger. But he can put that second off for years, by keeping millions wretched and afraid.

**(as an interrogator)** “We know you are connected with the revolution. And you have been engaged in commerce against the state – inciting riots and unrest.”

I was only engaged. She is gone. I don't know where. They came into the house and took her away in chains. No explanation. No protest, or you die. My mother was at the table – she ate rice and looked at her plate. She'd learned the routine. From behind a plate of rice, she's watched people dragged away before. She lives alone now, in fear. She's the lucky one.

"We know you are engaged in commerce against the state. We have evidence you are dealing in forbidden cultures."

Evidence is piled on me one stone at a time, until I am smothered with rock. I can't move under the weight of it, and soon it will crush me.

I hear screams from a room nearby. You don't know who, or why. You don't act like you hear, but it's all part of the plan. You're buried in your own cave of stone, river of quicksand, wall of fire, trying, looking, reaching for that purple arm of the sun, when the uniformed arm in blue flies across your face to remind you again that you are not and never will again be human. "You make the choice – cooperate or die," he says. He laughs. "I guess that's my choice – you die when I'm ready."

My father warned me it was dangerous. (**as father**) "The strong, the brave – they die just as easily, and quicker, while the rest live quietly, hoping no one notices, no one cares. Be careful who you meet, who you talk to, who sees you. Be careful, but stand tall."

My friend, he talked to someone on a street corner. He asked directions. He asked directions from a wanted man. How do I get from here to there? That's all he asked.

No one ever saw him again.

They're done with me for awhile, but they let me live. "You know more than you are telling, but we'll find out. We'll find a way." He threatens me, yet I am thankful to these people. To the hand in the blue uniform. I give thanks that it didn't kill.

*No! I don't know! I don't know!*

I still hear her talking to me. (**coy and giggly, as the fiancé**) "At our wedding you will bring me 2,000 roses. Two thousand because looking into each of your eyes is like getting one thousand kisses."

Then the door burst open and she was gone. I don't know if my mother still lives.

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