

## ROSE RAGE

by Aurelia C. Scott



Aurelia C. Scott,  
author of  
Otherwise Normal People

EDITOR'S NOTE: Aurelia C. Scott takes readers inside the world of competitive gardening in Otherwise Normal People. Here she

By five a.m. on Saturday morning, squished cotton balls and discarded rose petals litter the green carpet of the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Tulsa, Oklahoma. A damp flower smell scents the frigid air. Just four hours remain before the Fall National Rose Show opens for judging; despite the air-conditioned chill, three hundred competitors sweat as they nudge their blooms toward perfection and a possible top prize.

Most of Bob House's 150 hybrid teas already bristle with the purple-and-white Q-tips that he uses to train recalcitrant petals. "That's at least one hundred more roses than you should ever bring to a show."

Beside him, Larry and Doris Meyer of Hazelwood, Missouri, stand before their own regiment of hybrid teas and a jumbo box of one thousand Q-tips. Larry inserts a cotton-tipped stick between the outer petals of a pink-and-white 'Cajun Moon', pauses, and then wiggles it fur-

introduces us to some of the otherwise normal people she encountered during the national rose show.

ther in. It's a surprisingly sexual action.

"Cold room; tight petals," he explains. Yup, definitely sexual. No wonder the room is full of men.

I turn and almost fall over a woman kneeling on the floor in front of a welter of miniatures. She dusts the foliage with a sponge paintbrush, pausing every few seconds to flick her long braids back over her shoulders.

When I reach the end of the prep area, a wild-eyed man suddenly heaves into view pushing a flat cart laden with cardboard boxes. Jeff Stage and his wife, Patty, have driven straight through from San Diego, California.

"Took us twenty-seven hours, not the twenty-four that I'd figured." He slits open the packing boxes and begins to remove plastic baggies that cover the rose blossoms. "Let's see how these babies traveled." A low groan.

The hardest part of traveling long-distance to a rose show is

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getting the flowers there undamaged and at the right stage of opening. Cut a rose that's tightly closed in the garden, and at the show, you may not be able to coax it open enough to compete. But if you bring one that's almost open, by the time you get to the show, the blossom may have blown wide and could no longer be entered in the competition.

I look at my watch. Three more hours to go before the judges see the roses. At this point, Jeff's blossoms look dangerously open.

In contrast, Fred Wright's look perfect. Fred is a retired butcher who likes to "kick butt" with his flowers. He, too, drove nonstop to Tulsa with the air-conditioning cranked to keep his five boxes of hybrid teas and miniatures cool. But Fred arrived hours ago, and as he peers into a pink hybrid tea at a table near Jeff, he's the picture of calm. He straightens and smiles.

In his right hand, he holds what looks like a four-inch plastic toothpick attached to a cord around his neck. "Hair pick. I use it to groom the minis and arrange the centers of the hybrid teas." He demonstrates his technique, spiraling the hair pick among the petals. "I won three Queens of Show with my miniatures this year." Fred lifts out the hair pick. Queen is the top prize. As I learned when I traveled among the rose obsessed, many exhibitors will do almost anything to win it. I met an Ohio surgeon who persuades tight blossoms to open by warming them with his wife's hair dryer; an Arizona lawyer who chastises underperforming floribundas with a sharp shovel; a Minnesota potter who

buries tender hybrid teas in deep pits during the winter.

Why do they do all this? For the glory and the challenge of doing something difficult better than other people. There is no money in showing roses. Instead, they are rewarded by fame within the rose-crazy community.

During my year in that community, I encountered collectors who strive to possess every class of rose and specialists infatuated with a single variety. I toured greenhouses with breeders who dream of an elusively perfect bloom and met historians determined to save America's oldest varieties. I heard about marriages lost and made over roses. And I nodded as one seemingly rational person after another explained how their collection of three or five or nine roses had grown to three hundred, six hundred, even one thousand plants.

Rose lovers have an excuse. Their darling is more geographically adaptable; appears in more sizes, colors, shapes, and blossom types; and blooms over a longer period than any other flowering plant. Like Sheherazade, she tells a thousand tales, captivating us by adapting to our desire. It is almost impossible to resist the wiles of such a chameleon.

Indeed, why try? Just as we pursue love despite its complexity, it is the contradictions of the rose that enthrall us. Haunting sweet scent from a plant that can prick. Tender new growth, the color of rubies, on a cane that draws blood from the unwary. To the otherwise normal people whom she enchants, the Queen of Flowers offers a lifetime of fascination and an everlasting anticipation of spring. ■

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—AURELIA C. SCOTT