

# *Rose*

*John Biguenet*

“It must have been, I think she said, two years after the kidnapping, when your wife first came by.” The voice on the phone sounded young. “What was that, ’83, ’84?”

“Kidnapping?”

“Yeah, she told me all about it, how it was for the private detective you hired after the police gave up.”

“You mean the picture?”

“Right, the age progression.”

“You could do it back then?”

“It was a pain in the ass. You had to write your own code. But, yeah, once we had the algorithms for stuff like teeth displacement of the lips, cartilage development in the nose and ears, stuff like that, all you had to do was add fat-to-tissue ratios by age, and you wound up with a fairly decent picture of what the face probably looked like. I mean, after you tried a couple different haircuts and cleaned up the image—the printers were a joke in those days.”

“And you kept updating Kevin’s...” He hesitated as he tried to remember the term. “Kevin’s age progression?”

“Every year, like clockwork, on October twentieth. Of course, the new ones, it’s no comparison. On-screen, we’re 3-D now; the whole head can rotate. And if you’ve got a tape of the kid talking or singing, there’s even a program to age the voice and sync it with the lips. You sort of teach it to talk, and then it can say anything you want, the head.”

The voice was waiting for him to say something.

“I mean, we thought it was cool, Mr. Grierson, the way you didn’t lose hope you’d find your boy one day. Even after all these years.”

He hung up while the man was still talking. On the kitchen table, the photo album Emily had used to bind the pictures, the age progressions, lay open to one that had the logo and phone number of Crescent CompuGraphics printed along its border. His son looked fifteen, maybe sixteen, in the picture.

He had found the red album the night before, after his wife's funeral. Indulging his grief after the desolate service and the miserly reception of chips and soft drinks at her sister's, he had sunk to his knees before Emily's hope chest at the foot of their bed, fingering the silk negligee bruised brown with age, inhaling the distant scent of gardenias on the bodice of an old evening gown, burying his arms in all the tenderly folded velvet and satin. It was his burrowing hand that discovered the album at the bottom of the trunk.

At first, he did not know who it was, the face growing younger and younger with each page. But soon enough, he began to suspect. And then, on the very last leaf of the red binder, he recognized the combed hair and fragile smile of the little boy who returned his gaze from a school photograph.

As he thought of Emily secretly thumbing through the age progressions, each year on Kevin's birthday adding a new portrait on top of the one from the year before, he felt the nausea rising in his throat and took a deep breath. It's just another kind of memory, he told himself, defending her.

He, for example, still could not forget the green clock on the kitchen wall that had first reminded him his son should be home from school already. Nor could he forget the pitiless clack of the dead bolt as he had unlocked the door to see if the boy was dawdling down the sidewalk. And he would always remember stepping onto the front porch and catching, just at the periphery of his vision, the first glimpse of the pulsing red light, like a flower bobbing in and out of shadow.

In fact, turning his head in that small moment of uncertainty, he took the light to be just that: a red rose tantalized by the afternoon's late sun but already hatched with the low shadows of the molting elms that lined the street. And he remembered that as he turned toward the flashing light, lifting his eyes over the roses trellised along the fence—the hybrid, Blue Girl that would not survive the season, twined among the thick canes and velvet blossoms of the Don Juan—and even as he started down the wooden steps toward the front gate, slowly, deliberately, as if the people running toward the house, shouting his name, had nothing to do with him, he continued to think rose, rose, rose.