



# RING AROUND THE ROSE

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STORIES BLOWN IN THE WIND



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# I



Adriana turned down the volume on the radio as she leaned forward, her forehead almost touching the windshield if her belt hadn't prevented it; her long black hair, pulled back in a low ponytail, covered her white shirt in thick curls like waves on the sand.

Stunned and visibly disbelieving, she watched the partially ivy-covered gothic mansion emerge from behind the trees, as if it had just sprouted from the ground.

“Did I exaggerate?”, Millie asked, staring at her friend from under her dark glasses, a lock of her short copper hair falling over the left lens. Her green eyes sparkled like emeralds in the farewell low summer sunlight.

“I lost the bet.”, Adriana replied, still incredulous, without taking her eyes off the estate, which grew larger with every yard they drove toward it.

“You didn't believe me.”, Now, give me my prize.

Adriana shook her head, laughing, and reached into the back seat, grabbed her purse, pulled a fifty euro bill out of her wallet, and slipped it into her friend's hand, who grinned like an insolent child.

“You lie! All the time. How could I have imagined that this was serious?”, the young woman complained, pointing to the house in front of which they had just parked.

“And you think Phillip was going to start this start-up with whose money? Angels?”, she made a disdainful noise, unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the car door. “Only family would invest in his ideas.” Millie replied, stretching.

“Well,” Adriana said, getting out of the car, “when investors see this house, they will probably take a leap of faith.”

“Yeah...” Millie shrugged and crossed her arms as she looked at the mansion, “at least it can still be sold if he sinks the company.”

“If you don't believe in the product, why are you working there?”, Adriana asked, walking over to the trunk and opening it.

“And what about you, Miss Brazil? You could make more money as a camgirl; why are you working for a slob?”, Tossed her friend back and went to the back of the car to help her.

“My visa depends on him.”, Adriana replied, rolling her eyes, partly because she hated that her stay in Berlin (the best city in the world, in her opinion) depended on this arrogant guy who thought he was much smarter than he really was, and partly because she had already told Millie this story several times.

“Same!”, Millie exclaimed in defeat, picking up the boxes and placing them on the floor.

Adriana's big dark eyes widened and she abruptly stopped her unloading movements.

“Huh?”

“Brexit. Have you forgotten? And until I get a German passport, it is either sucking up to my childhood friend or returning to Mother England!”

“So, let's get drunk on hypocrisy and enjoy the good things about him!”, Adriana replied, hugging Millie's shoulders with her free arm, under the huge shadow of the silent manor.

They laughed aloud, a laugh of gay joy that stretched over road

and forest, carried by the last breath of the warmest season. And they entered Rosestone Manor.

The main entrance shimmered with the last rays of sunlight that poured through the glass of the long windows on the staircase in front of the door, casting sporadic glints through the walls, reflecting in crystals and glass, creating the illusion of looking at the surface of a lake at sunset.

The mansion was dark and had the suffocating smell of closed houses and wood deprived of fresh air. It was beautiful, Adriana concluded, in an oppressive way, as if the wealth that inhabited it tolerated nothing and no one it considered beneath it, and repelled her with shadows that seemed to move in the less lit corners, and the eyes of well-dressed ancestors, horribly marked by incest, followed her, judged her.

Millie coughed, reacting to the dust that had accumulated on the way up the stairs, and brought Adriana out of her thoughts.

Armed with box and suitcase, they went upstairs to inspect the rooms where the reception for the investors would take place.

There were no servants present; they had been given leave so that the house could be prepared for the ball by the heir's company, who had sent his team to take care of everything. By team, he meant Millie and Adriana, the only people he knew who had ever worked with events and theater; and they fit the budget.

THEY WALKED through carpeted hallways lined with wallpaper that featured flowers; the trademark of another era. The heavy mahogany furniture added to the feeling that they had stepped into a time machine and returned to the 19th century.

Adriana lost herself in the view from one of the windows overlooking a pond surrounded by willow trees; she paused in admiration, leaning against the windowsill.

The breeze blew lightly on the leaves, which hung like long

strands of hair, swaying slowly. The surface of the water trembled, as if struck by a deep sound inaudible to human ears.

She sighed and took a step back when she had the unpleasant impression of someone looking up from the courtyard just below her window. An optical illusion caused by a statue, but enough to bring her back to the present and into the shadows of the empty corridors, guided by the strangely infantile music coming from the room where Millie was.

They returned to the guesthouse after a day of cleaning and decorating, carrying the silent exhaustion of so many extraordinary impressions.

The sun was already giving way to a cloudless night, plunging the Indigo into darkness.

Adriana got out of the car in front of the small hotel where they were staying and stopped to watch a group of children across the street, dancing and singing a nursery rhyme under the yellowish light of old street lamps; and to think how we are all so alike and so different at the same time. Those girls, there in an English village on the edge of Scotland, reminded her so much of her cousins and herself, so many years and another existence ago, doing the same thing in the countryside of Rio de Janeiro.

The girl in the middle stared at her, intently, the way everyone stares at an Afro-Latina in remote places where the only thing that has shades of brown and olive is the tea you drink or the sofa you sit on.

Adriana stared back, watching in turn as the girl's fine hair did not seem to move in the wind, which was stronger and noticeably colder. She hugged her own body without taking her eyes off the girl who was now smiling at her, a smile she couldn't define for some reason. And she was startled when a voice, close to her ear, sang animatedly, but in a whisper:

*Ring around the rosies*



*A pocket full of posies  
Ashes! Ashes!  
We all fall down!*

Adriana gave Millie a gentle nudge on the shoulder and pressed her lips to her ear.

“God damn it, girl! You nearly gave me a heart attack!” She grumbled, feeling her throat beat so fast it gave the organ wings to escape through her mouth.

“I thought you wanted to know what they were singing about.” Millie remarked, laughing, obviously pleased with the effect of her performance. “Now leave the brats alone and let's go inside, I'm starving.”

Adriana followed her friend, still nervous from the shock, feeling the eyes of the little girl in the circle burning into her back and trying to remember where she had heard the same melody not so long ago.

THE NIGHT WAS RESTLESS, partly because Adriana could not shake the feeling that the house was trying to tell her a story, no matter how absurd such thoughts sounded in her own ears, and partly because Millie kept coughing in the bed next to hers.

Eventually sleep prevailed, but it was peopled with images of the mansion, the forest surrounding it, the distant willows, the living eyes of the statue in the courtyard, and girls playing in a circle.

AFTER A BREAKFAST SHOWERED with instructions from the boss, who was unfortunately already getting ready to join them, the girls set off to finish the decorations, thankfully with the help of a team of

workers that the company had agreed to pay, but not without taking a percentage of their bonus.

Leaving the inn, Adriana involuntarily searched the courtyard for the girls dancing to a nursery rhyme on a much colder than desired day, but just as the previous night had suggested. Fortunately, she was unsuccessful. With a great sense of relief, though she did not know why, she returned to Rosestone Manor.

## II



The concept of the ball created by the girls was simple but precise. It consisted of each room having a theme and a specific color, both in its decoration and in its glass.

For example, the room with purple carpets, furniture, vases and flowers had purple stickers on all the windows. From the outside, each of the themed rooms would be illuminated by spotlights, which would then tint each room with the desired color.

The same was repeated with green, purple, blue, gold, orange, except for the black room, which had red stickers on it, making it look more like a murderer's trophy room than a brothel, as Millie had intended.

AFTER LUNCH, they sat on the back porch drinking coffee; Adriana facing the statue and Millie facing the willows, watching the mist rise and cover the lake like a bride's veil over her eyes.

Satisfied with the execution of their plans, they were still laughing when the redhead answered the phone, rolling her eyes and indicating to her friend that it was the boss on the other end.

“Almost done,” she said without even greeting him.

A change in Millie's expression alarmed Adriana, wondering what more trouble Phillip would bring now that they were so close to their goal of having the ball, finishing it, and returning to Berlin.

Millie put her cell phone on speaker. The boy's voice was metallic and angry.

“I don't know what it is.”, He continued. “Everyone's on alert here, talking about closing the airports. We have been on the phone all day telling investors to calm down. Imagine the mess!”

“But it's a virus, a bacteria?”, Millie asked, looking at Adriana as she drank her coffee.

“I don't know! You know how Germany is, they want to close everything as soon as possible. It's spreading fast in your area. You'd better stay inside until the party's over. Have you noticed any strange movements in the city? People coughing? Anything like that?”

Adriana's eyes widened. There were *a lot* of people coughing.

“I didn't notice.” Millie replied. “So, what do we do? Cancel and come back while we can still fly?”

“What? No!” He replied from the other side. “No way. This ball *has* to happen! Stay there. I'll send a doctor. Fuck, they don't even have a test for this shit yet.” The sound of a punch on the table came through the speakers.

Millie rolled her eyes.

There was silence for a moment.

“Go back to the guesthouse, get your stuff and go back to Rosestone. There's a room in the north wing with two beds. It's not really meant for guests, but you can find your things in the closet. Try not to contact anyone, this stuff seems to be highly contagious.”

He hung up, leaving Millie annoyed and Adriana suspicious.

“What's wrong?”

“You're coughing.” The girl said through her teeth.

“Because of all the *dust*, woman! I'm allergic; this house is five hundred years old!”

Adriana's right leg went up and down in rapid, short, nervous movements.

“Stop being paranoid.” Millie scolded, grabbing the cell phone from Millie's hands as she was about to search the Internet for more information about the disease. “Let's go. It's getting late, let's get our things and get this over with.”

They got up from the table, hearing the icy wind of early fall bring a familiar melody.

*Ring around the rosie...*

### III



Before long, news of the first casualties in the village reached the girls at the Manor. So did the confirmation that flights would be canceled and that the ball would indeed take place.

*“The corpses are being cremated quickly to contain the contagion, and the families are unable to hold funerals to say goodbye.”* Said the journalist's voice coming from Adriana's phone.

She was sitting on her bed, anxiously checking herself for signs of illness, when a shadow passed through the crack in the door and stretched into the room, across the carpet and furniture. Thinking it was Millie returning with the sandwiches, she opened the door to find an empty hallway. Looking to the right, she saw no one, but as she turned to the left, she saw the figure in the white dress turning the corner of the next wing and followed it.

*Ring around the rosie*

The female voice echoed through the long corridors, as if

coming from the walls, the floor, the paintings. Pulsating with each word, each verse.

*A pocket full of posies*

She followed the dress that folded the corridors of the dark house without ever revealing its inhabitant, felt the softness of the carpet against her bare feet, the sweet scent of crumbling flowers and the still water that drowned them.

*Ashes! Ashes!*

The dress stopped at a window overlooking the lake at the end of one of the corridors and disappeared.

Adriana approached the window to find girls playing ciranda in the courtyard below, more out of curiosity than fear. There was a repetition of the song outside, but it was so clear in her ears that it could have been the product of her own thoughts, and perhaps it was. She looked down.

*We all fall down!*

Several people, their faces covered with the red spots of the unknown disease, lay on the grass in the middle of the circle.

Red, no. Pink.

When the girl who was leading the game turned to look at Adriana, her face, which had seemed so pale to her, was now filled with reddish rashes, rapidly losing its texture until it turned into a decomposing corpse. And she let out an inhuman scream.

“What is it, Adriana?” Millie’s voice sounded uncharacteristically sweet, her green and now dull eyes looking at her with concern. “What was that dream, girl? You’re all sweaty.”

"That song, where did it come from?"

"Song? What song? Adriana, you're burning up!"

"No." She pushed her friend's arm, looking wild and lost in her own mind, calculating speculations. "The song of the girls in the square the other day. They were singing in my ear."

"Oh..." Millie's face lost the shadow of apprehension, but remained puzzled. She replied. "*Ring Around the Rosie?*"

"That one!"

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"Just tell me what it means." She exhaled, tucking thick strands of hair behind her ear. "Please."

"I don't know. It's just a nursery rhyme. Rumor has it that it originated during the Black Death in the Middle Ages, that the lyrics are about the victims and the reddish or pinkish color of their skin." Millie replied with a shrug.

"The Black Death?!"

Unconcerned, Millie nodded.

"We have to go!" Exclaimed Adriana, visibly worried and with a twinkle in her eye that indicated she had more to say than she actually did. "Now!"

Millie laughed.

"Not because of the urban legend, right? What have you been smoking that you haven't shared with me?" She tried to keep a joking tone, but Adriana's fear was serious. Then she lowered her voice and continued calmly. "Not a chance. There's a new alarm so that no one leaves the city, and the guests for the ball are already arriving. We'll leave immediately after the party; I've already spoken to Phillip. The flights themselves are canceled, but one can come back *home*. This is allowed."

Adriana sat on the bed, her eyes desolate, lost in the wall in front of her, her right leg shaking rapidly.

"You were shocked." Millie said, trying to calm her. "It's a pretty



grim story, this disease, I know, but are you showing any symptoms?”

Adriana just shook her head.

“Then try to relax. If we haven't been infected yet, we most likely won't be.”

The other one gave her a look of hope.

“Maybe.” Adriana whispered in agreement, watching the other's face closely. She had noticed red spots around her friend's eyes, which were even paler than usual, but preferred not say anything.

*Ring around the rosie...*

## IV



Contrary to what she had imagined, the mansion was full. Adriana had thought that they would have the good sense to call off the ball and reschedule it; but no. Wearing colorful costumes worthy of a grand Venetian masquerade ball, they came in droves. Static faces, white as wax, walked blankly through the now-lit corridors of the mansion.

On the cell phone in Adriana's hand, the bad news from the outside world kept coming. By the dozens, sometimes by the hundreds, people were falling victim to a nameless, colorless, faceless enemy.

She looked in the mirror and couldn't help smiling. Her dress was no less elegant or pompous than the women's, it too had an air of nobility and mystery; and though she admired her reflection, she could not cheer herself up for the celebration she had worked so hard for.

The clock struck at the entrance. The cursed object that had been broken when they arrived and that one of the workers had set to work. Each time it struck an hour, the whole house fell silent, as if it were heresy to speak or even breathe while it ticked. The low

sound carried through the walls and wood, sounding like a great cathedral bell announcing a celebration or a tragedy.

She chose not to pay any more attention to the clouded thoughts that were coming to visit her in her mind. Just a few more hours of entertaining investors, and in the morning she would return home and wait.... For what? The end of the world? That was another thought she preferred not to hear.

In her gala dress, makeup and mask, the idea of a plague in the mid-21st century now seemed like science fiction; and since Millie had not coughed during the day, she found enough animation in herself to calm down and enjoy the party.

The colorful rooms were a great success. By the dozens, the guests entered the rooms to enjoy the dancers, musicians, and actors who had been hired especially for the occasion.

Until the clock struck one o'clock. And the world lost its voice, as it echoed sovereignly through walls and souls.

Adriana saw her boss, greeted him and even danced with him, who seemed more relieved than excited about his ball. He had had promising conversations with possible investors and was excited about the future. At no point did he mention the disease that had wiped out the world.

The couples went from room to room, twirling, giggling, and drinking. Swimming in oceans of green and blue air, strolling through enchanted forests of lilac and purple, soaking in the golden dust of gold, romanticizing life in the sunset of an orange room. Only the black room remained unvisited.

Instruments lifted the spirits to their peak, muffling the last breaths of a world victimized by an unseen enemy.

And they laughed.

Until the clock struck and the music stopped, and the dancers became statues, and the whole place was plunged into the deepest, most oppressive silence.

. . .

AT THE STROKE OF MIDNIGHT, the clock was punctuated by a nursery rhyme.

*Ring around the rosie...*

Now, Adriana was no longer the only one to hear it.

The voices echoed as if from a dream, mingled with the gong, bringing the chill of unknown fear that paralyzed the people where they stood.

“Girls,” Phillip said with a nervous laugh, trying to keep his composure in front of the visibly uncomfortable guests. “You shouldn't have gone to such lengths. Tell whoever's doing this to stop fooling around.”

Adriana and Millie just nodded and took off their masks, revealing the frightened and confused looks of those who had no idea what was going on.

He swallowed hard.

“You!” He pointed at a tall person who no one had noticed before, wearing a mask that showed a wobbly face covered in red spots, “Your attempt to frighten my guests with this outrageous parody is in very poor taste! Take off your mask and show me who you are, and let's get this over with.”

*A pocket full of posies.*

The mysterious guest left the room and walked calmly through the corridors, visiting one room after another, followed by curious and suspicious looks that demanded action from Phillip.

The figure finally paused in the middle of the black room, allowing himself to be illuminated by the scarlet spotlight coming through the window. Sovereign and serene, he stared at them in his red cloak, his face hideous.

Only the gong of the clock moved.

Irritated and in need of a demonstration of control in front of future angels, Phillip broke the spell of the moment and walked briskly toward the static figure. But he fell halfway down, coughing blood and drawing screams from those present.

*Ashes! Ashes!*

The singing voices echoed, whispering, lulled by the beating of the bell.

“Enough!” Adriana said, pushing people along the path to get to the insolent one, ripping off her mask in one motion.

Revealing that there was no one behind it, only a black hole and a red cloak thrown to the ground as if blown.

All around her, she saw the guests falling to the ground one by one, her friend falling in fits of coughing that took her life as it took her air.

When Adriana lost her strength and collapsed with her hand over her mouth, she saw the corpse girl again. She was standing in front of the door of the black and red room.

She was smiling, just like the first day in front of the inn.

*We all fall down!*



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C. A. Saltoris writes beautiful and dark tales, like her soul.



