

Norah's Special Gifts



Story by Norah Rose Shirley MacDonald

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Cover and About the Author illustrations by Momma



ON THE DAY Norah was born Grammy gave her a rose bush.

“What an odd gift for a baby,” said Momma.

Grammy laughed her special laugh. “Norah will not be a baby forever. This gift will grow with her. You’ll see.”

Grammy was right. Norah grew taller and more beautiful with each passing year, and so too did her rose bush. By the time Norah turned eight years old, her rose bush was so tall she needed a stool to reach the blooms at the very top. The blooms had the texture and colour of dark red velvet, and each bloom sent off tendrils of scent more alluring than any perfume you could buy in a bottle.

Norah tended her rose bush with love. She made sure it had the right amount of water and good earth, and each autumn she watched the magnificent velvet blooms transform themselves into luscious red fruit called rose hips that Momma and Norah made into jam.



By the time Norah turned ten, she had grown as tall as her rose bush.

One special day, Momma told Norah she was old enough to walk to Grammy's by herself. Grammy lived alone in a tiny house on the far side of the meadow.

"You are a sensible child," said Momma. "I trust you won't do anything foolish."

Norah was always excited to visit Grammy and even more excited that she was grown up enough to walk to Grammy's house on her own.

"I will bring Grammy my best roses," said Norah. She reached up and carefully avoiding the thorns gently plucked six of the most spectacular and fragrant blooms that had assembled at the top of the bush.

Norah chose a simple vase into which she poured enough water to cover the cut stems so the blooms wouldn't be thirsty and wilt on the way.

Norah blew Momma a kiss and feeling quite independent set off for Grammy's house.

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WHEN SHE CAME to the meadow, Norah chose the path that followed the shallow creek that wound its way through thickets of yellow goldenrod and purple thistle and wild daisy. She hadn't gone far when she heard a sound she hadn't heard before. A small deer still carrying the white spots of childhood was calling to her.

her.

"Help me," said the deer.

Norah was startled, never dreaming that a deer could speak so plainly. "My name is Norah. How can I help you?" she asked.

"My name is Roxy and I've lost my mommy," replied the deer. "I am too young to be without her."

"Oh dear," said Norah. "Of course, I will help you." But in truth Norah was not at all sure she could help the small deer. What if a hunter had captured Roxy's mother?

"What were you doing when you lost your mommy?" Norah asked.

"We were very hungry so we were looking for breakfast," said Roxy. "Mommy tells me what is good to eat and what isn't. She tells me I must never eat daffodils, foxgloves and poppies because those flowers could make me sick."

Norah held out the vase she was carrying. "What about roses?" she asked.

Roxy feeling herself become brave took a step closer to Norah. The small deer lowered her wet brown nose into the roses and breathed deeply. "Ah," she said. "Mommy and I love roses the best, but your roses smell too wonderful to eat."

"I have an idea," said Norah. "Follow me."

Norah led Roxy down the meandering path that wound



through the meadow. She held the roses high above her head. "Perhaps the perfume of my roses will attract your mommy and she will follow the scent and come back to you."

Roxy followed Norah and her roses through the meadow until at last they saw the yellow tops of the goldenrod start to sway. "I smell my mommy!" said Roxy wagging her small white tail. She was very excited. Indeed, Roxy's mommy had followed the

scent of the roses exactly as Norah had predicted, and now reunited the small deer and her mommy were caressing each other.

Deeply satisfied with the happy outcome, Norah removed one of her roses from the vase. Shyly, she held it out to Roxy's mommy. "Please accept this gift. I know you and Roxy are especially fond of roses."

The two deer were very hungry and therefore grateful for Norah's gift. They savoured each velvet petal until all that remained was the stem. "Thank you for the yummy rose," said Roxy. "And thank you for finding my mommy."

Norah smiled and waved at Roxy and her mommy and then she continued on her way toward Grammy's house.

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WELL, IT WAS not long after that Norah came upon a solemn scene. In the verge beside the path, she saw that a small black squirrel was scratching out quite a large hole in a patch of dry earth. Beside the hole lay the still body of a grey squirrel and 12 perfectly shaped acorns.

Norah saw at once that the black squirrel was weeping as it swept the dirt from the hole with its small front paws. Not wishing to disturb the little creature Norah silently watched as the purpose for the hole became clear. When the squirrel was done digging (evidently satisfied with the size of the hole) it sat upon its haunch and turned its gaze toward the grey squirrel. The grey body might have been sleeping, but Norah knew in some part of her heart that it was not. She felt the moment had come to introduce herself.

"My name is Norah," she said and waited for the squirrel's response.

The black squirrel turned to Norah. "My name is Branch. Today is a sad day. I am burying Riry. She is my best and onry friend. I have known Riry all of my rife."

Though momentarily puzzled, Norah soon understood that the squirrel was afflicted with a minor speech impediment that prevented it from pronouncing the letter "L" and therefore used the letter "R" instead. Norah therefore knew that in fact

the squirrel's name was Blanche, her friend's name was Lily and that Lily had been Blanche's only friend all of her life.

"I am so sorry," said Norah. "It must be hard to say goodbye to a dear friend."

Blanche nodded then returned to her silent contemplation of quiet Lily.

Norah foresaw that Blanche would be unable to finish the task she had begun and so she herself undertook to complete the burial. She set down her vase of roses and cupping her hands around the small grey body lowered it into the earth. She turned to Blanche. "Shall I continue?"

Blanche nodded then turned her attention to Norah's roses. "Could we lay a rose beside Lily? It was her favorite flower."

"Oh yes," said Norah, then chose among the remaining five the rose with the deepest and most solemn red. She laid it between Lily's little grey paws as lovingly as if Lily had been her best friend too. She turned to Blanche. "Shall I bury your acorns as well?"

"No," said Blanche. She arose, bent her head to Lily one final time then filled the grave with earth. She brought each of the 12 acorns to the grave to form the headstone. Her work

complete, she said, "This marks the place where Lily sleeps."

Norah knelt a moment beside Blanche to share her grief. "Your acorns will grow into strong oaks that will shelter Lily forever," she said.

Blanche having never made the connection between acorns and the trees from which they fell was grateful for the knowledge, Norah's final gift to her and Lily.



Norah decided the time was right to continue on her way and so clutching her vase and four remaining roses she blew two kisses to one friend living and to another who would dream forever.

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SHE TOOK A little path that led to the creek and sat upon a flat stone under a tall red maple to watch the golden carp flicker beneath the crystal water. They rose from time to time, their mouths agape, to surprise the small black water gliders that skated across the surface.

Norah heard then a strange hoo-hooing and looked up expecting to see an owl. Instead, she saw clutching the trunk above her head a small brown bear looking down at her.

“Was that you hoo-hooing?” she asked the bear.

The bear nodded. “I am calling out to my lady love. She lives halfway down the trunk of the tallest pine in the meadow.”

Norah found herself confused by the bear’s explanation. “Is your lady love an owl?”

“Yes,” said the bear and then went back to hoo-hooing.

Norah cocked an ear in the direction the bear was facing and heard the answering call from the pine. The answer was melodic while the bear’s hoo-hooing sounded to Norah somewhat strained.

“I’m still practicing my hoo-hooing,” said the bear. “Hooty doesn’t seem to mind. She talks to me anyway.”

“I am sorry to keep interrupting, but is Hooty your lady love?” asked Norah.

Again, the bear nodded and then slowly descended until he was standing before her.

“Who are you?” he said.

“My name is Norah,” she said.

"I can't recall my name," replied the bear. "Hooty will know. She is very clever. She says I am forgetful. But I know with certainty and will never forget that I love her."

Norah could think of nothing to say but wondered if a bear and an owl could love each other. She imagined their future and quickly decided that it was not up to her to judge such matters.

She rose from the stone where she had been sitting and was about to return to the path that led to Grammy's house when the bear made an interesting request. "Would you consider delivering my proposal to Hooty? I want so much to share my cozy den with her for the rest of my life, but she is independent and therefore determined to continue living alone in her pine."

Norah was deeply curious to see how events might unfold and so she quickly agreed to be their matchmaker. "I would be glad to take your proposal to Hooty and to bring back her response."

The bear smiled and then looked nervously at Norah's vase. "May I have a rose to decorate my den? It might be just the thing to finally convince my beloved Hooty of my truest love."

Norah didn't hesitate to hand the lovestruck bear one of her roses. She admired his romantic heart.

The bear gave her precise directions to Hooty's pine, and so Norah strode off with her vase and three roses to make Hooty's acquaintance. When she arrived at the foot of the tall pine, she saw that Hooty was waiting for her and that the owl was the most beautiful owl Norah had ever seen. Hooty's round amber eyes and tiny perfect arched beak were surrounded by a corona of silver feathers that gave the owl a queenly appearance.

The owl greeted Norah warmly. "Welcome to my home."

Norah quickly got to the point. "I'm here to deliver a proposal of love from the bear who lives in the tall maple."

"You mean Choclet," said Hooty. "He always forgets his name, along with many other things."

"Well then," said Norah, "Perhaps you would consider living with him forever in his cozy den. You could remind him of the things he's forgotten."

Hooty remained silent for a moment but her round eyes had widened considerably which Norah took to mean the owl was at least considering the matter. "There's more to love than that," Hooty said at last. "I can't give up my independence to spend the rest of my life reminding Choclet of things he's forgotten. I must have another reason."

Norah who personally knew nothing of romantic love thought of all the books she had read that concerned people who loved each other. Then she realized she only had to think of her own parents who were to Norah's mind the most loving of couples. They affectionately shared the duties of daily life and most important to Norah they laughed together.

She quickly assembled all of this into a single speech that she hoped would do the trick. "Choclet is desperately in love with you. He has learned your language though even I can tell he is not fluent. He is decorating his den for you at this very moment and I know from what I have seen that he will share the duties of your partnership with honour and affection. You could find no better life partner, I am sure."

Long moments passed while Norah waited for the owl's decision. Hooty's eyes had widened further as if she had just put on a pair of spectacles. "Okay, I agree," she said with such exuberance that Norah was taken by surprise.

Then Hooty swiveled her face toward the vase that Norah carried and let her attention fall upon a particular rose. "I choose that rose for my wedding crown," she said to Norah. "You must help me attach it."

Norah stunned that her proposal had been so swiftly accepted agreed. She took the rose that Hooty had selected and

quickly wound the flower into a crown and used the thorns to secure it atop Hooty's head.

Thus satisfied, Hooty and Norah made their way back to the red maple where they found Choclet pacing back and forth in front of his den. He had stuck Norah's rose into the bark of the tree by the front entrance as a decoration. Norah saw that Hooty appreciated his effort for the effect was most enticing.



Choclet when he caught sight of Hooty was so bedazzled by her beauty made perfect by the rose crown that he kneeled before her and said in a voice unwavering, clear and strong, "My beloved Hooty, I, Choclet, a simple-minded brown bear, have many faults but the one true thing you will never have to remind me of is that I love you with all my heart."

It was not lost on either Hooty or Norah that in his desperation to capture Hooty's heart Choclet had remembered his name.

Then Norah seeing the couple evidently so happy and likely to remain so blew them each a kiss and turned to leave though by that time Choclet and his lady love were so entirely focused on each other and their common future they barely noticed her departure.

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BY NOW THE sun had crept higher taking with it all the shadows. Norah therefore saw clearly a large grey rabbit slumped against the knobby trunk of an old oak not far off the path. She judged from the slow rise and fall of its chest that the rabbit was sleeping. Its ears it had folded over its eyes to keep out the light. She

slowed her pace to tiptoe past so as not to disturb its slumber. But despite her efforts the rabbit suddenly swept its ears from its eyes and hopped to its feet. The rabbit appeared to Norah to be quite upset. "Has *she* sent you?" it demanded.

Norah was bewildered. "Has *who* sent me?" she asked.

"The mother of my 17 offspring, who else?" said the rabbit.

"She is always sending a messenger to fetch me back."

"Back where?" asked Norah. She felt herself being drawn into the rabbit's story.

"Back to that noisy and boisterous warren where so much is demanded of me. Little ones running about helter skelter. I must have my rest!" said the rabbit who was becoming quite hysterical.

It seemed to Norah that the mother of 17 little ones might be the one most in need of rest though she kept this thought to herself. Finding nothing useful to say about the rabbit's situation, and hoping to distract it from its distress, she introduced herself. "My name is Norah. I'm on my way to my Grammy's house."

"I'm Harry," replied the rabbit who now seemed to Norah a little less frantic.

"If you don't enjoy your children, why do you have so many?" asked Norah.

Harry looked puzzled. "It isn't up to me how many are running about loose and crazy getting into mischief and upsetting my peace. They just keep popping out of their mother and more on the way!"

Norah let moments pass while she thought about what to say. Norah herself had been shocked some years past to discover how young humans arrived in the world and she was certain that young rabbits arrived by a similar process. It occurred to her that perhaps Harry was unaware of the connection between himself, the mother rabbit and the 17 young rabbits, but decided it was not her business to explain such matters to him.

She therefore took a step forward preparing to be on her way and said, "Well, I hope you've had a good rest and that perhaps now you'll be kind enough to return home and help out with the children." But Harry didn't appear to be listening. He was staring at her vase and the two remaining roses.

He pointed at one of the roses. "May I have that one? For the mother of the 17. She will forget to be angry when I return if I give her a rose."



Norah thought a moment. Two roses left for Grammy but plenty of stories to replace the rest of the original bouquet.

"Okay," she said and handed the rose to Harry leaving one lone rose in the vase.

"Thanks," he replied, and then said rather giddily, "This rose will get me another few hours of sleep."

And with that, he plopped back down beside the trunk of the old oak, placed the rose between his teeth, pulled his ears back down over his eyes and instantly fell asleep.



GRAMMY'S HOUSE WAS just around the next curve in the path, and now Norah quickened her pace anxious to tell Grammy about the events of the morning. She looked down at her one rose remaining. Norah imagined it to be lonely missing the others or perhaps anxious itself to be of some use to some other

meadow creature. Just then Norah heard a squeak, then another. In the vivid light she could plainly see a pair of little field mouse making their way along the path ahead. One mouse appeared to be leaning against the other. When Norah drew closer (for the two mice were walking very slowly) she observed that the mouse who was leaning was tinier than the one who was being leaned against. The tiny mouse despite its tininess seemed to Norah to have a slightly larger belly, which Norah presumed carried unborn mice.

Norah cleared her throat to warn the mice of her approach and give them time to scamper off, but when the pair looked up at her she saw they were not frightened.

To put the little mice further at ease she introduced herself. "I'm Norah," she said.

"And I'm Squeak," said the tinier of the pair.

"And I'm Squeak Too," said the other.

Norah thought of how to open a conversation and decided the best way would be to congratulate them on their upcoming family. "I see you are about to become parents," she said.

Both Squeak and Squeak Too nodded, and then Squeak said, "We are looking for nesting material. It must be of the very finest quality for I am carrying our very first children and they deserve the best care."

Norah nodded approvingly. "May I help you? What kind of material are you looking for?"

"It must be soft," said Squeak.

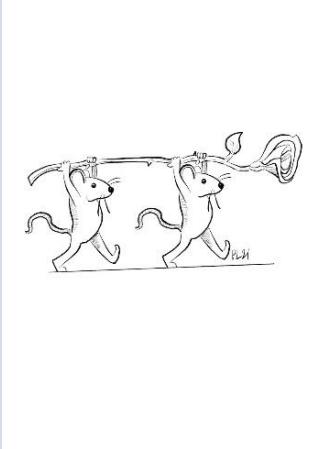
"It must be sweet smelling," said Squeak Too.

"It must be smooth and easy to clean," said Squeak.

"It must be beautiful," said Squeak Too.

"It must be large enough to hold our family," said Squeak.

"It must be red," said Squeak Too, who had had his eye fixed on Norah's one remaining rose the whole time.



Norah looked down at that one rose and knowing it to be a fitting ending for the entire bouquet presented it to the soon-to-be parents. "Would this do?" she asked with only the slightest of smiles so as not to interfere with the otherwise serious moment. "Please consider this rose my gift to your children."

The young couple were pleased to accept Norah's rose and carried it to their nest that lay hidden in the meadow grass beneath a small stand of field lilies. They gave Norah the honour of spreading out the petals to form a cozy hollow into which the little mice would be born.

Squeak and Squeak Too were delighted with Norah's generous gift. When she left them moments later, the two little mice were standing together again, one against the other, admiring their newly decorated nursery and imagining within it the children they already loved.

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IT WAS WELL after noon when Norah finally arrived at Grammy's little house. Grammy had been waiting for Norah, wondering what she had been doing all this time.

"My vase started off with six of my best roses but now it is full of rose stories instead," Norah explained. She spent the remainder of the afternoon sharing the stories with Grammy. Grammy paid close attention to every word. She laughed at lazy Harry and lovestruck Choclet, could see in her mind's eye the beautiful bride Hooty wearing her marvelous rose crown and wept to hear of Blanche and her beloved Lily

and was content that Norah had reunited a fawn with her mommy.

"That rose bush I gave you when you were a baby you have used to bring so much pleasure," said Grammy. "To me, you will always be *Norah Rose*."

Norah loved Grammy's idea and began to think of herself as *Norah Rose* though she knew most others would always call her *Norah*. She couldn't leave Grammy without giving her flowers and so she ran back to the meadow to gather Queen Anne's lace, Bachelor Buttons, Black Eyed Susans and Cosmos which she arranged into a fine bouquet.

"Thank you, *Norah Rose*," said Grammy placing extra weight on "Rose". "Your stories and your flowers. There can be no better gifts!" And she hugged her granddaughter close and sent her on her way.

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BY LATE SEPTEMBER Norah's roses had turned into rose hips. It was time for her and Momma to make jam. As she collected the fruit, Norah realized that for the first time in her life she was taller than her rose bush. She knew somehow that her rose bush would never grow taller. It had reached its full height. She noticed too that its leaves had begun to fray a little and that this year the hips were a little smaller than they had been last year. It made Norah sad to think of her dear rose bush getting old.

And so, this year she decided to keep seven of the rose hips for another purpose. She knew that buried within each was a promise from the mother bush that Norah was determined to carry out. She took one of the hips into the back yard and with a sharp knife sliced it open to reveal the seeds nestled inside. She dug several small holes in close proximity to her rose bush and tenderly placed a seed into each. *Now my rose bush will have family close by*, she thought.

She put the remaining six hips into a small watering can along with a digging spade and headed toward the meadow.

She was now a regular visitor there, and so when she arrived all her friends came to greet her. She showed them the rose hips and explained her project.

“Please choose where in the meadow you would like rose bushes,” she said.

And so Hooty and Choclet chose a sunny spot by their tall maple. Blanche chose a spot where Lily in her dreams could enjoy the roses. Lazy Harry chose a spot by the oak where he liked to nap so that when he came home late he would always have a ready supply of roses to appease the mother of his boisterous brood (which by now numbered 27). Squeak and Squeak Too chose a spot by their current nest so that it could always be refreshed with new roses as their family grew. And Roxy (who had grown a spotless new coat) chose the place where she had first met Norah.

Norah is older now, and her rose bush is surrounded by family just as she predicted, with the young bushes almost as tall and beautiful as their mother. In the meadow, Hooty is busy spreading rose seeds and the scarlet tanagers and goldfinches and barn swallows carry the seeds across vast continents and oceans.

So wherever in the world you may find a rose it could well be a special gift from Norah.

The End



About the Author

Norah Rose Shirley MacDonald currently lives with her little sister, Emma, and her Momma and Dadda in Ottawa. She is in third grade at her neighbourhood public school.



Stories have been part of Norah Rose's life since before she was born when Momma began reading to her every night.

Norah Rose's bedroom shelves are now full of books, and Norah Rose's imagination is full of story ideas. She also loves reading stories to Emma. Although Norah herself is a fluent reader, she prefers to fall asleep listening to her favorite audiobooks.

