



# A ROSE FOR EMILY

*William Faulkner*

RETOLD BY SARA SIMPSON

A Rose for Emily (1930)

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I.

When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral. The men went because they respected her and the time in history during which she lived. The women went because they were nosy and wanted to see the inside of her house; nobody except her old Negro manservant had been inside for at least ten years.

Miss Emily Grierson's house was big and square. The paint used to be white, but now it was old and gray. There were tall towers, large balconies--the type of fancy house design that had been popular in the 1870s. When the house was built, the street was one of the most expensive in town. But new technology and time came along, and all the people and things that used to be beautiful just looked old. People thought Miss Emily's house was ugly and embarrassing. Miss Emily was the last part of that time left in town, and now she was dead.

When she was alive, Miss Emily was a tradition and a responsibility for everyone in town. Back in 1894, Colonel Sartoris, the mayor, allowed Miss Emily to stop paying her taxes. He didn't want her to feel embarrassed about taking charity, so he made up a story about her father (who had died) loaning money to the county. Since the town owed *her* money, she didn't need to pay taxes. **Only a man** as old-fashioned as Colonel Sartoris **would have made up this lie, and only a woman could have believed it.** Back in those days, men thought that women were too delicate to deal with stressful things; they should leave that up to the men.

When Colonel Sartoris died and new leaders took over, they were not happy about Miss Emily not paying taxes. They mailed her a tax bill. There was no reply. Next, they wrote her a warning letter asking her to to to the sheriff's office to pay the tax bill. There was no reply. A week after that, the mayor wrote Miss Emily a letter; he said he would come over so she could pay the bill. Miss Emily wrote him back this time. The letter was on old, fancy paper. In the letter, she told him that she never went left her house. She sent back the tax bill in the same envelope as the letter. She still didn't pay the bill.

The leaders of the town called a special meeting. They sent a police officer to her house to get the tax money. The men went with him. The Negro servant man let them in. The hall was dark. The house smelled dusty, like the windows hadn't been opened in a long time. The servant took them to the living room. When the men sat down on the sofa, they could see the leather was dry and cracked. Dust puffed out when they sat down. There was a crayon picture of Miss Emily's father sitting on a shelf above the fireplace.

The men stood up when Miss Emily came into the room. She was a small, fat woman, dressed all in black. She leaned on a black cane with a tarnished, gold handle. Even though she was fat now, she used to be a tiny, thin woman when she was young. Her eyes **looked like two small pieces of coal pushed into a lump of dough.** The men told her they were there to collect the tax money. She just stared at them and didn't say anything.

Miss Emily told the men “I do not pay taxes to Jefferson county. Colonel Sartoris says so. You need to look at the city records.”

“We *have* looked at the records, Miss Emily,” the mayor said. “You *do* have to pay taxes. Didn’t you get the letter the sheriff sent you?”

“Yes, I got a letter,” Miss Emily said. “That man says he is the sheriff, but he isn’t. I do not pay taxes in Jefferson county.”

“There is no record saying you don’t have to pay taxes. We have to obey the law.”

“See Colonel Sartoris,” Miss Emily said. “I do not pay taxes in Jefferson county.”

“But, Miss Emily--”

“See Colonel Sartoris. I pay no taxes in Jefferson county. Toby, walk these men out!”

The Negro manservant came in and walked the men to the door. Colonel Sartoris had been dead for ten years.

II.

She threw them out exactly the same way she threw out their fathers thirty years before when they came to complain about the smell coming from her house. That was two years after her father died, right after her boyfriend--the man we all thought would marry her--left and didn’t come back. After her father died, Miss Emily almost never left the house. After her boyfriend went away, people barely even saw her. At first, a few ladies tried to stop by to visit, but the Negro man servant told them to go away. The only sign of life at the house was

the man servant going in and out with a basket for groceries.

“As if a man--any man--could properly take care of a house!” the ladies said. They were not surprised when a bad smell started coming from the house. The people in town felt a little bit smug that someone as like Emily Grierson had a bad smell coming from her house.

One of Miss Emily’s neighbors complained about the smell to the mayor, and old man named Judge Stevens.

“What am I supposed to do about it?” he asked.

“Send someone over and tell her to clean up whatever is causing the smell!” the woman said. “Isn’t there a law about this?”

“I don’t think we need to do that,” Judge Stevens said. “It’s probably just a dead snake or dead rat in the yard that **nigger** of hers didn’t clean up. I’ll talk to him about it.”

The next day, two more people complained about the smell. One of Miss Emily’s neighbors said, “I don’t want to upset Miss Emily, but we have to do something.” That night, the leaders of the town met. Three of the leaders were old men, and one was a young man.

“It’s easy enough,” the young man said. “Send her a letter telling her to clean up her house. Tell her how long she has to get it done. If she doesn’t get it cleaned up...”

“**Dammit, sir!**” Judge Stevens said to the young man. “**We can’t just accuse a lady of smelling bad!**”

Late that night, four men went to Miss Emily’s house. They were very quiet because they didn’t want

anyone--especially Miss Emily--to see them. The men sprinkled lime all around her house to make the smell go away. As the men were leaving, a light came on in Miss Emily's house. They could see her at the window. The men crept away quietly. After a week or two, the smell went away.

That was when the people in town started to feel sorry for Miss Emily. Miss Emily was getting old and still wasn't married. People thought she might be like her crazy great-aunt, Miss Wyatt. When Miss Emily was thirty years old and still wasn't married, people in town felt smug. They felt like it served her right for being a snob.

When her father died, everyone in town heard the rumor that the house was the only thing she had worth any money. Her father had died without leaving her any money. People felt sorry for Miss Emily. Now that she was poor and all alone, they could see her as a person and stop hating her for being better than them.

The day after her father died, the ladies in town went to the house to check on Miss Emily. This is something we do when someone has a death in the family. Miss Emily opened the door. She was dressed in her usual clothing instead of all black like most people do when someone dies. She didn't look sad at all. She told them her father *wasn't* dead. She did that for three days. People kept coming to the house to get her to let them take her father's body away to be buried. They were about to force her to do it when she broke down crying. They had a very quick funeral.

We did not say she was crazy when it happened. We knew grief could make a person do strange things. We knew her father had driven away any man who wanted to marry her, leaving her with only him for company. It

made sense to us that she would have a hard time accepting his death.

III.

After her father died, Miss Emily was sick for a long time. When we finally saw her again, she had cut her hair short. It made her look like a little girl.

The summer after her father's death, the city hired a man named Homer Barson from the North to oversee paving all the sidewalks in town. Homer Baron was a big man with a loud voice, light blue eyes, and dark hair. He was very outgoing, always laughing and talking to people. We started seeing Homer Baron and Miss Emily going for drives in his buggy on Sunday afternoons.

At first, we were happy for Miss Emily. She finally had a boyfriend, even if he was a Yankee. However, as things started to get more serious between them, we got worried. Miss Emily was a lady. It might be fun for a lady to go on a Sunday drive with a common workman, but a fine Southern lady from an important family shouldn't actually marry someone like that. "Poor Emily!" said the older people in town.

People started to gossip. They talked all the time about whether Miss Emily would or would not marry Homer Baron. They talked about all the time the two of them were spending alone and spread rumors that she might be ruined; in those days, if a woman had sex before she was married, it was a scandal. She knew people were talking about her, but she didn't care. Miss Emily was still a Grierson, so we had to respect her.

After a year of gossip, Miss Emily went to the drug store to buy rat poison.

"I want some rat poison," she told the druggist.

"Yes, Miss Emily," he said. "What kind?"

"Arsenic," Miss Emily said. "Is that a good one?"

"That could kill an elephant!" said the druggist. "What you probably want is--"

"I want arsenic."

The druggist looked at Miss Emily. "Of course," he said.

"But the law requires you to tell what you are going to use it for."

Miss Emily just stared at him until he looked away. He went away and wrapped some arsenic in a package. Miss Emily went home with the package. When she opened it up at home, she saw the druggist had written on the box, right under the skull and crossbones, "For rats."

#### IV.

By the next day, everyone in town had heard about how Miss Emily bought rat poison. "She will kill herself. That is probably the best thing for her to do since she is ruined," we all said.

When Miss Emily first started dating Homer Baron, he told some men he never wanted to get married. As time went on, people in town said "She will persuade him yet." The longer they dated without getting married, the more the ladies in town gossiped. Some of the ladies said Miss Emily was setting a bad example for the young people in town. The men did not want to get involved. After a while, the ladies forced the Baptist minister to go talk to Miss Emily about her behavior; her own minister at the Episcopal church wouldn't do it. The Baptist

minister would never tell anyone what happened during the visit, but he said he would never go back. The minister's wife wrote a letter to Miss Emily's cousins in Alabama, asking them to come handle the situation.

Miss Emily's cousins came. At first, nothing happened. Then, we were sure that Miss Emily and Homer Baron were going to get married. Miss Emily went to the jewelry store and bought a silver men's grooming set with a mirror, brush, and comb with the letters H.B. on them. Two days later, she ordered some men's clothing including a nightshirt, and we said "They *are* married." We were glad because it meant that Miss Emily's cousins (who nobody liked) would go back to Alabama.

We weren't surprised that Homer Baron left town after that. We thought he went back to his home up North to get everything ready for Miss Emily to join him. Three days after Miss Emily's cousins went home, Homer Baron was back. A neighbor saw the Negro man let him in the kitchen door. That was the last time we saw Homer Baron.

The Negro man went in and out the kitchen door, but the front door never opened. Once in a while, one of us would see Miss Emily pass by one of her windows, but for six months she never left the house.

When she finally came outside, she had gotten fat and her hair was turning gray. For the next few years, her hair turned more and more gray every time we saw her until, finally, it turned was all iron gray. That was the color it stayed for the rest of her life.

From then on, almost nobody was went inside her house. There was a period of six or seven years when she was about forty years old when she gave china-painting lessons to the daughters of rich people in

town. People mostly sent their daughters for painting lessons as a way of giving money to Miss Emily without making her feel like she was taking charity. Meanwhile, her taxes had been remitted so she legally didn't have to pay them.

As time went on, fewer and fewer people sent their daughters to get painting lessons. Painting china started to seem like an old-fashioned hobby nobody wanted to do. After that, nobody went inside at all. When the town got free mail delivery, Miss Emily was the only person who wouldn't put up a mailbox and numbers on her house. The leaders of the town tried to argue with her about it for a while, but they finally gave up.

Years went by. We watched the Negro servant's hair get more gray and his body start to stoop over with age. Now and then, we would see her looking out of one of the downstairs windows. We never saw her upstairs, so we knew she had closed off the top floor of the big house and was only living on the bottom floor.

**Generations of the town were born, grew up, and died.**

Miss Emily was always there, just a part of life for everyone in town.

Finally, she died. She got sick in her dusty old house with only the old Negro to take care of her. We didn't even know she had been sick. The old Negro never talked to anyone, and people had stopped trying to ask him about Miss Emily a long time ago.

She died in one of the downstairs rooms in a big bed. Her gray head was on an old pillow that was yellow and moldy from because no fresh air ever got into the house.

V.

The Negro met the first of the ladies from town at the front door and let them in. After that, he walked out the back door of the house and was never seen again.

The two cousins from Alabama came. There was a funeral two days later. Everyone in town came to the funeral to look at Miss Emily. The ladies were there to gossip. Some of the very old men who had fought in the Civil War came; they were confused and thought they remembered dancing with her and going on dates with her when they were young.

We knew that there was one room on the top floor that was locked. No one could find the key, so the door had to be broken down. The cousins waited until after the funeral to have some of the men open it.

When the room was opened, it was **like a tomb**. It smelled musty and old, like no windows had been opened in many years. There was dust on everything in the room. The room had been decorated for a wedding night with fabric with a pattern of pink roses on it. Everything in the room had been pink before it faded from age. On top of the dresser, they saw a man's silver toilet set, but it was so tarnished and dirty they couldn't read the initials engraved on them. A man's shirt and tie were there, too. A man's suit was hanging neatly on the back of a chair, and a man's shoes were sitting underneath the chair.

**The man himself lay in the bed.**

For a long time, we just stood there staring at the fleshless grin. A long time ago, the body had laid in bed as though it was hugging someone, but now it was so decayed that it just lay there. The body was wearing a nightshirt and had rotted so much it had become part of the mattress. Everything was covered in dust.

Then we noticed a second pillow next to the body. There was a dent in the pillow where someone had laid down their head. One of us lifted something from the pillow. It was a long strand of iron-gray hair.





