When I was in middle school what I wanted most was to fit in. That’s all anybody wants in middle school. In middle school, you’re suspicious of anyone who stands out for any reason. Derek stood out. We all avoided him.

My mom had always told us never to make fun of people, so I never did. I can’t say the same for my friends. Not that they were outright mean or anything, but they’d whisper behind their hands, and it was obvious who they were whispering about. I took no part in this, as I said, but I have to admit I steered clear of Derek like everyone else.

Despite my standoffishness, Derek started leaving me little gifts: every couple of days, something new—treasures out of a cereal box or a gum machine would turn up in my locker, in my desk, in the pocket of my jacket. I did not acknowledge these things, and immediately tossed them into the back of my closet when I got home. I guess I could have told my mother, but I didn’t. Sometimes you have to figure things out for yourself.

The weeks passed. I continued to ignore Derek, and made sure to stay out of his way. Still, the presents continued, a different one each time. I resented the fact that he spent so much time thinking up ways to get my attention. Didn’t he have better things to do?

My friends teased me. “Ooooh, Lila has a boyfriend! Lila has a boyfriend!” they sang out. It didn’t seem fair. I’d tried so hard to fit in, to fade into the woodwork, but here I was, being teased, the butt of a joke. The center of attention.

One day Derek strode up to me in the lunchroom and presented me with a dozen roses—red, long-stemmed, in a fluted paper wrapper with a note tucked inside: I know I’m not the coolest kid/But take these roses/You’ll be glad you did.
I should have been flattered, but I was good and angry. The fact that he stood there grinning lopsidedly, roses in hand, with that hopeful look in his eyes, made me even angrier. I wanted to squash him like a bug.

“Leave me alone,” I growled. “Don’t you get it? GO AWAY!”

“Oooottttttthhhhh!” sang the chorus of girls. I wanted to crawl under a rock. Derek looked as miserable as I did. And then—horrors!—I saw his bottom lip quiver. He looked like he was going to cry. He couldn’t cry! If he cried they’d call him a crybaby. Derek is a crybaby would follow him around for the rest of his life!

I decided I would not, could not let that happen. No one was going to make me. Not even my friends!

I took the roses. I carried them around all day.

I never did talk to Derek after that. We nodded politely to each other in the hallway, but I never pretended to like him, and he never gave me another present. Somehow we’d worked it out. I lost track of Derek when his family moved away.

I guess you could say this was the first time I did something I didn’t want to do just to protect someone else’s feelings from getting hurt. Maybe you could call this growth or maturity, I honestly don’t know.

Even though it happened a long time ago, I can picture myself on that day, striding through the corridor proudly, the dozen roses clenched tightly in my hand, walking tall, feeling like no one could touch me.

WORD NETWORK FOR RITES OF PASSAGE

Vocabulary A Word Network is a collection of words related to a topic. As you read the selections in this unit, identify interesting words related to the idea of rites of passage and add them to your Word Network. For example, you might begin by adding words from the Launch Text, such as acknowledge, attention and maturity. Continue to add words as you complete this unit.

Tool Kit
Word Network Model
Summary

Write a summary of “Red Roses.” A summary is a concise, complete, and accurate overview of a text. It should not include a statement of your opinion or an analysis of the text.

Launch Activity

Create a Timeline  Consider this statement: The journey into adulthood is marked by life-changing events and observations.

Work with your class to complete the following activity:

• With your classmates, brainstorm for and list milestones that many people experience. Milestones may include sports events, social or religious events, or academic or work-related events.

• After listing types of milestones, take turns with other students to put a star next to each of the five they deem most important.

• Work with the class to create a timeline of the chosen milestones. Are the milestones scattered, or do they seem to occur during a specific time of life?