

THE LAST ROSE

By Ellen L. Fitelson, *circa* 1980'S

Rose recalled her astonishment when she awoke that morning and saw the unopened bud against the stark, snow-covered landscape. Now, after she had cut the rose bud, a light snow began to swirl about her and she tenderly held the bud between the palms of her hands trying to shelter it from the cold. She stood on the frozen footpath, peering into her cupped hands as if expecting the bud to open fully and reveal its splendor and subtle fragrance instantly. Instead, the sound of tires crunching down frozen slush on the semi-cleared roadway jarred her back to the present, and she remembered that in just a few hours the family would be arriving to celebrate her seventieth birthday.

She had begged them not to make a fuss, insisting that she would much prefer a small and quiet family gathering. She feared the stress of a large party at the Knights of Columbus Hall. In the end, however, their wills prevailed. After all, they reasoned, she deserved the fuss and attention since she was the last surviving member of the Sachnow family.

With growing anxiety she raised her eyes and scanned the horizon, hoping, as she watched the ominous storm clouds thicken and blow across the sky that the storm would blow over. But the winds picked up and pelted her face with wet flakes as she walked up the winding pathway leading to the kitchen. Pulling the almost threadbare coat closer to her body in an effort to shield the fragile bud, she was pleased that she had rescued this last rose from the impending storm.

Once inside the warm and cheery kitchen, she searched her cupboard until she found a slender crystal vase, filled it with water, and placed the bud in it. Then, walking into the bathroom, she began to fill the tub. As it filled, she ever so carefully counted out and dropped three pearl-like pellets into the water. The water began to steam, forming clouds of mist and transforming the room into a paradise as the air filled with a hint of roses and gardenias.

She padded into her bedroom, gathered a big, fluffy white towel and robe, then walked back into the bathroom and turned off the faucets. Standing beside the ancient tub, she held onto a side rail, then, with a slight tremor of her hand, shed the faded and yellowing white flannel nightgown and gently slid into the water as if she did not wish to intrude upon its serenity. She breathed in the fragrance of the room, and then loosened the thick braid of her silver-blue hair. The steam caused little ringlets to dot her forehead, and for an instant she looked almost

young again--perhaps even beautiful.

She took a washcloth and lathered as much of her body as she could, then soaked for a few more minutes before arising like a goddess from the now-chilled water. After patting herself dry, she wrapped the white chenille robe about her, so as not to catch a chill, slipped her feet into her mules, and, before turning out the light, inhaled the almost ethereal fragrance one last time.

In the kitchen her hand shook as she set a half-filled kettle on the burner and, as she waited for it to whistle, she reluctantly settled for a chipped teacup sitting in the drain-board. Then, with some hesitation, she walked into the living room and set a place for herself on the little scarred, mahogany table. In its center, she placed the vase with the rose and marveled that it had already begun to open. Hearing the shrill sounds of the whistling teakettle, she shuffled back into the kitchen and poured the steaming water over the teabag. As the steam rose it dampened her face and cast a pink blush upon her translucent skin. Spilling only a little tea, she slowly walked into the living room and set the cup down on the table.

Then, with a sigh, she lowered herself into the rocking chair. Finding the tea too hot to sip, she closed her eyes and began to rock back and forth, keeping time with the rhythmic ticking of the clock. The clock, which sat on the mantle, ticked ever louder, yet she was not at all aware of its sound.

After a time, she opened her eyes, and, every now and then, as she rocked, she glanced at the fully opened rose. Feeling the need to examine the rose more closely, she put on her bifocals and noticed three petals had fallen to the table top. With a sigh of resignation and acceptance, she removed her bifocals, placed them next to the cup, and again closed her eyes.

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"I can't understand why she doesn't answer the door," said Anna, as Martha, the next door neighbor, used the spare key to open the kitchen door.

"She's expecting all of us. You know we're celebrating her-seventieth birthday today."

"Rose-?"

Anna's voice echoed through the quiet, rose-scented air.