

The Roses not Given

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It's interesting how one remembers events from childhood. Take me, for example. I can't remember what I wore to church last Sunday, yet how well I can recall games I used to play, clothes I used to wear, or friends I used to have over fifty years ago. Most especially do I remember the stories I was told. Let me recount for you one that is especially close to my heart, perhaps for the fondness I have always felt for its author.

As a young boy I was very close to my Uncle Franz. Every day after school I would walk to his house and spend the afternoon with the old man. Sometimes he would tell me fantastical tales, or we would play chess together, but some days I would simply look at the wonderful treasures he had collected from the many places he had visited in his younger days. On this particular day, however, I was not fingering ancient compasses or beautiful carved statues, but rather gazing at a large bouquet of white roses which sat on a small table in his living room.

Every day, as far back as I could remember, there had always sat a large vase of these white roses placed on this table. I had become so used to this centerpiece that I had never even given it a second thought. But as time went on and I grew steadily both older and more mature, I began to wonder about it. Why would Uncle Franz, an elderly man who had long been widowed and had no housekeeper or cook, love these roses so much that they were never absent from his house?

"Uncle Franz," I said, determined to finally ask him.

"Hmm?" he muttered drowsily, stirring from his customary doze by the fire.

"Are these your favorite flowers?" I pointed to the large white blossoms.

He had a strange look in his eye, which seemed both distant and sorrowful. "Well," he said slowly, "They certainly are quite beautiful, but with their beauty comes many painful memories."

"Then why do you always put them in your house? There are plenty of other pretty flowers you could have."

His answer was long in coming, and he looked as if he was thinking of something either very far away or very long ago. "No, Derek, that is *why* I have those flowers. I never want to forget those memories."

Uncle Franz could see that my young boyish mind was not able to comprehend this. He smiled. "Perhaps you would understand better if I told you a story. Would you like to hear those memories?"

I eagerly scrambled onto his knee; my usual seat when there was a story to be heard.

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My tale begins, said my Uncle, many years ago in Austria, where I was born and spent a great deal of my life. We lived in Kufstein, a small town located in the Tyrolian Alps.

One day, round about the middle of June, I was in the the small village store. I was buying, if I remember correctly, flour for my mother, and I had just purchased it and was about to leave, when a stranger entered the store.

It was his expression which puzzled me and caused me to pause, but it was his question to the old storekeeper which completely bewildered me. His expression was quite miserable and dejected, but his question was this: “Do you know where any roses are?”

The storekeeper scratched his head. “Ehh? Roses?”

The man nodded. “Yes. White ones.”

“Well I can’t say I’ve seen too many of those growing in Kufstein. There are some pretty yellow and orange wild flowers growing near—”

But the stranger seemed to be wholly disinterested in wild flowers. He thanked the storekeeper shortly and left the store.

For the next few weeks the strange man with his equally strange question frequented Kufstein almost every day. When he was not inquiring about the whereabouts of the rose he sought for, he was seen walking through meadows, fields, and valleys, always searching.

I never heard him confide to anyone his reason for wanting this flower, but a rumor, which I later found to be true, swept through Kufstein about “the rose man’s mission,” as it was called.

The stranger, whose name was Christoph Van Staaten, was searching for the “Snow Blossom,” a beautiful but rare flower which grew only in Kufstein. His mother, whom he was very close with, grew up in Kufstein and dearly loved that rose. Her sudden and unexpected death, which happened when she was still quite young, caused the once cheerful and pleasant Christoph to become gloomy and depressed. Soon after she died, he vowed to travel to Kufstein and find his mother’s flower and plant it by her grave.

He arrived during its typical blooming season, but though asked everyone he met if they had seen the rose, he soon learned that only a few very old people in Kufstein had ever remembered seeing the Snow Blossom. Apparently it had not bloomed for over fifty years, and there was little hope, many assured him, of it ever doing so again.

It soon became clear that the rose was nowhere to be found, and as its blooming time had come to a close, he left for his own country. We soon forgot all about “the rose man,” but exactly a year later he returned to finish his unfulfilled quest.

But the rose did not make its appearance that year either, and so it was for the next twenty years. His annual visit to Kufstein went on for so long that the inhabitants became quite used to it. Every year Christoph would arrive, scour through every possible place where the rose could bloom, and then depart. He became so familiar in Kufstein that people did not even give him a second thought.

Now let us fast forward several years. By this time I was no longer a red-headed freckled lad, and I was then a handsome young man with a fiancée.

It was the day before my wedding. Greta, my wife-to-be, and I were in my house surveying the wedding preparations.

“Now let us look at the flowers,” said Greta, pointing to a table that was overflowing with bouquets of every kind. She pointed to a large bunch of colorful flowers. “This is my bouquet.”

“Ah, yes,” I replied, “It’s very nice.”

She clicked her tongue. “Yes, it’s very pretty, but I feel that something’s missing. What do you think, Brigitte?” she asked, turning to her maid. Brigitte came over to the table and surveyed the bouquet in question.

“It seems as if a few large blossoms would, in a sense, really pull it together, Fräulein.”

“Yes I think your right. Do you have any suggestions?”

“I think I remember seeing some beautiful ones near the spring down the road. I will go and see.”

And so it was that scarcely an hour later Brigitte brought her mistress several flowers which she proudly exclaimed were Snow Blossoms. As Greta had only moved to Kufstein a few months before and had never met or heard of Christoph she did not think anything strange in this name, but at Brigitte’s words my heart gave a little leap.

“Are—are you sure it’s a Snow Blossom?” I faltered.

“Yes, quite sure,” Brigitte exclaimed proudly, “I’ve seen sketches of it in books, and it looks just like the pictures. I’ve read that it only grows here in Kufstein. Frau Amelia said it hasn’t bloomed in over seventy years!”

Greta clapped her hands. “Oh how exciting, it bloomed just for our wedding! Here, Brigitte, help me make room for it in the bouquet.”

It was only late May, and as he usually waited until the beginning of June to come, Christoph had not yet made his appearance. It was thus quite a surprise

when, hearing a knock the day following this remarkable information, I beheld him standing at the door, as if the rose had beckoned to him.

He tipped his hat. "Good day, Herr Franz. My name is Christoph Van Staaten. I'm sorry to interrupt you, as I understand it near the day of your marriage, but I come on urgent business. I arrived in Kufstein a few days ago, but upon hearing a report that you are in possession of the Snow Blossom, I quickly made my way here. Is that story true?"

I was astonished. "Yes, it is."

"Please," he begged, "I have nothing to give you in return, but would you give me just one bloom? Many long years have I been searching, but never before have I heard reports that it has blossomed, until today. Would you spare me just one flower?" He looked at me pleadingly.

To this day I do not know what caused me to do what I did. I had little reason to refuse him his one wish, as we had several of the roses and I knew Gretta would not mind. So why did I feel a strange reluctance to grant his request? I have no excuse, and I had none then as well.

As I could think of no reason for refusing him, I invited him into the house and told him I would go get the rose. I made my way to the conservatory, where Gretta had left all the flowers the day before.

I approached the table upon which Brigitte had placed the Snow Blossom. As I chose one flower and picked up the scissors, my eye fell upon a bouquet with other white roses, a much more common type. I paused. Next to each other it was obvious that the two flowers were very different. The blooms of the Snow Blossom were larger and fuller, its petals felt very soft, and the rose gave off a much sweeter perfume than any other flower in the room. But would someone who had never seen the Snow Blossom in person be able to tell the difference?

I put down the bloom I had in my hand, selected one from the common roses and sheared it off. Before I could change my mind I hurried from the room with the blossom in my hand. As I presented the flower to Christoph his joy and excitement caused me a fleeting pang of guilt. With a valiant effort my conscience attempted to make me change my mind, but I did not back down from my selfish decision.

Christoph started his journey for home, carefully bringing what he believed to be the Snow Blossom with him. The day of the wedding came and went, Gretta and I settled down, and months passed.

I soon forgot about what I had done, as other serious matters occupied my life. Your dear Aunt Gretta, as you may have heard, died in a carriage accident only two years after our marriage. Life soon returned to normal, how it had been before our wedding, only Christoph never came. Year passed year, but never did

Christoph come to Kufstein. His absence, I knew, could mean only that he had never realized what I had done, and the memory of my deed now constantly plagued me.

I had always wondered if I should travel to his hometown and confess what I had done, but what I called business, tiredness, or sickliness (which in reality was simply pride), had always kept me away. Finally, however, 30 years since I had seen Christoph, I decided to go and find him. I knew which town he lived in, so I hoped my quest would be short, easy and successful.

I arrived in his village a few months after my resolution, and once I was shown the way to his house, I began searching for it. After traveling on the road which I had been directed to take for about three miles, I came in sight of a small cottage.

After many minutes of knocking on the door, hollering for Christoph, and peering through the windows, I deduced that not only was no one home, but no had been for quite some time. "Could I have made a wrong turn?" I wondered. It was unlikely, but certainly not impossible. As it was getting late, I decided to make my way back to the village, and to continue my search the next day.

I looked around at my surroundings. Not far from the cottage was a small church, and behind was the graveyard. I saw that to get back to the main road I could cut through the cemetery, instead of walking around it as I had done before.

I have always loved graveyards. I walked slowly, enjoying the quiet peacefulness, trying to decipher the faded names on the old graves, and imagining how the lives of all the people buried there might have been like. As I made my way around the graves, one stone in particular caught my eye, and as I read the header I gasped. Across the top of the grave was inscribed the name

"VANSTAATEN."

Glancing down I saw a small rose bush growing in front of it. "My roses," I whispered, "They're here." Brushing away the roses from the grave I read the inscriptions.

Aadelheide. 1867
Georg. 1893
Eckbert. 1922
Hedwig 1935

As I finished scanning over the names I breathed a sigh of relief, until I noticed there was one more name. Brushing back the rose blossoms which had been blocking it, I read the final engraving.

Christoph 1962

My eyes filled with tears. “He.....died,” I choked, “Only a year ago. Now he’ll never know what I did.”

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My Uncle paused, and for a long time sat staring into the fire. Then, with a long sigh, he took me off his lap and stood up. I looked up in surprise.

“Is that the end?” I asked in amazement. “But what happened after?”

“Just one more thing,” he replied. “Christoph was dead, and there was nothing I could do then, so I returned home to Kufstien. A few years later the Snow Blossom bloomed again in Kufstein. Once again I traveled to Christoph’s home town, and beside the rose bush he had put there I planted the Snow Blossom.”

I ran after him as he began to walk away. “But why do you always have those roses in your house? Why do you want to remember what happened?”

Uncle Franz turned and looked at me. “Because I must, Derek, I must remember. The painful reminiscence of what I did, the memory of which wounds more than anything else, must forever remain engraved deeply in my heart.”

With that he left me, pausing only to light stroke one of the roses as he passed the Snow Blossoms.