

"Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming"

by

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The old man's hand moved suddenly. He didn't want it to, but it did anyway. Several pieces of the small square rigger sailing ship model he had been building scattered onto the floor. He cursed silently, sighed, and bent over in his chair to pick them up. This seemed to happen a lot these days, making even the simple and enjoyable activities frustrating. As he bent over, his reading glasses slipped down his nose, hanging by one ear, preventing him from seeing the floor clearly. He cursed again, this time out loud, bringing a response from the nurse's aid just entering the room.

"Mr. Johnson! Shame on you! You got no business sayin' such a thing!"

"Well, Mabel" he replied "What'n hell would you know! Just you wait 'til you're my age 'n then tell me I got no business!"

"Well! Don'chu start cussin' at me, you dirty ole man!" She turned and stomped out of the room. He did not enjoy a cordial relationship with the staff.

The old man fumbled with his glasses until he could see again, then looked for the pieces on the gray vinyl floor. He found them, picked them up one-by-one, then carefully placed them back on his small beige painted table. He had asked for a bigger table, but the administrator had told him he was only entitled to this small one - unless his family was willing to pay higher rent and move him to a larger room, that is.

He set about arranging the pieces as they had been before the accident. Just then, a cart rumbled to a stop outside the door. The attendant picked up a tray of food from the cart, carried it briskly into the room, saw the condition of the table, abruptly swept the pieces to one side, and plunked the dinner tray down. The old man said "Hey! Can't you see I'm working on a project here? Can't you ask before you do that?"

"You got a watch, ain't you?" was the reply. "We got rules here, in case you forgot. You're spose to be ready for dinner at six sharp." She turned and marched out, shouting back at him, "Ain't my fault you still got a mess on your table." The cart rumbled away.

The old man sighed again, then picked the cover up off his plate, revealing a congealed mass of macaroni and cheese, some overboiled lima beans - which he hated - a piece of rhubarb pie - which he REALLY hated - and a half-pint carton of milk. "Oh, crud!" he mumbled to himself. "For the money they charge, you'd think they could give us sumpin better than this!" He picked at his food for awhile, then shoved his chair away from the table and went to the bathroom. Afterward, he figured he might as well go to the Dayroom and fight with the other residents ("inmates" he secretly called them) about what TV show to watch. The old women there all wanted to watch an equally old rerun of Lawrence Welk - another thing he hated. When he had had enough, he went back to his

room, with its dull green painted walls, went to the bathroom again, then carefully crawled into bed, ready for yet another fitful night's sleep.

In the morning, he ate his breakfast of oatmeal – still another thing he hated – and some canned fruit slices. After the attendant had taken his tray away, he set about arranging his model pieces the way he wanted them, then began working on his project. Once again, his hand refused to behave itself, jerking suddenly, scattering pieces off the table onto the floor. This was just too much for him, so he uttered a loud and pithy oath. The little old woman who had been slowly walking by his door at that moment, stopped in her tracks. She looked in at him, saying nothing, and he looked back at her. “Well?” he challenged, daring her to chastise him. Instead, she turned, walked into the room, saw the pieces on the floor, bent over, and began picking them up. He watched her silently, noting her tiny frame, sparse gray hair, and brightly colored print dress. She placed the pieces on the table, smiled at him, and asked cheerily, “Is this how you want them?”

“Well, yeah. That’s OK.” He paused, then as an afterthought, mumbled, “Uh, thanks.”

She continued standing next to his table, looking at his project. “That’s a pretty boat you’re building.”

“Ship, not boat,” he shot back. Finally, the thought came to him maybe he should apologize, so he said, “Guess I should say I’m sorry for the cussin. Didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Listen, my late husband could put you to shame. I always knew it when he hit his thumb with the hammer out in the garage. You could cut the blue air with a knife!” She smiled at the memory. “I’m new here,” she continued. “You’re the first person I’ve met so far. My name is Melinda. Melinda Wilson. May I ask your name?”

Her outgoing manner left the old man disarmed and without anything to complain about, so instead he went ahead and introduced himself. “Walter Johnson. You can call me Walt, though.”

“Well, Walt. It’s real nice to meet a man who does things. I always admired my husband because he was a builder. He had lots of tools, and knew how to use them. Except when he hit his thumb, that is.” She chuckled at herself. Walt couldn’t help but chuckle too.

“Well, my wife would have said about the same thing about me, I guess. While she was alive, she put up with me spending lots of hours in my shop building stuff. Once in awhile, I’d pull a bonehead and mash somethin’ real good too. I guess I turned the air pretty blue then.” They both laughed out loud at his confession.

Melinda walked to Walt’s window and looked out. “My! Those roses are simply gorgeous, aren’t they?”

Walt's reply surprised her. "What roses?"

"You mean to say you never looked outside your window? There's a rose garden out there. I'd love to go out and smell them, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah. I guess so." He stood slowly, shuffled carefully over to a curtain, pulled it back, and grabbed the handles of a walker he kept hidden there. Embarrassed, he said, "They make me use this damn thing whenever I leave my room. Not that I really need it, ya know."

"Oh, I know how these places are, Walt. Always covering their own behinds, aren't they? Afraid somebody will have an accident and the family will sue them for negligence or something." He nodded.

The pair walked down the hall, out the door to the patio, and doubled back to the rose garden outside Walt's window. "Funny I never noticed this before," he said. "Guess I should look around a bit. I've only been here a month myself. Hate the place. Guess you could tell, huh?"

"Have you made any new friends here, Walt?" she asked.

"You kiddin? Around here? No way! My son and that wife of his put me here, just to get me out of their hair. I didn't know anybody here before I got here, and I don't want to know anybody." She said nothing, instead bending over a particularly large and fragrant Mister Lincoln rose, breathing deeply of its rich perfume, and admiring its intense red color. Then, somewhat sheepishly, he added, "Except for you, of course. You're OK."

She flashed a quick little smile at him. Then, after a brief hesitation, she impulsively reached out her hand and folded it lightly over his on the handle of the walker. The old man was taken by surprise at the gesture, at first wanting to pull away. But, he gradually became aware of a feeling he had been missing for a long time – the feeling of being connected to another human being, however tentatively. So, he left his hand where it was as they smelled the roses and she talked about how she used to grow them.

After enjoying the roses together for a while, they turned and began walking slowly back to the patio door, talking amiably about whatever came to mind, her hand still resting lightly on his.

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