



THE SNAIL AND THE ROSE TREE

Once upon a time, there was a garden surrounded by a row of hazel trees that bore a rich crop of hazelnuts every year. Outside the garden, there were fields and meadows where sheep and cattle grazed, large tin cowbells clanging around their necks. When the shepherd took his animals to the pasture, everyone would hear the bells and know what time it was.

Right in the middle of the garden, there was a lovely blooming rose bush. Just at the foot of the bush, you could often spot a small snail named Louis, who was rather snooty and spent every day doing nothing but loaf around. He pronounced his name the French way – Louis! – and any time anybody came by he could be seen showing off and boasting about how great he was.

“Just you wait,” he would say to the roses. “When my time comes, I’ll do so much more than bloom like you, or make hazelnuts like the trees, or give milk like the cattle and the sheep.”

“I hope I’ll be there to witness all the great things you do,” the roses would reply, wearily. “But when do you think that time will come, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll surely live to see it.” Louis would retort. “I’m just taking my time. Why are you so impatient, anyway? Why is everyone in such a hurry?”

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This conversation happened almost every day for a year, and the roses found it hard to believe that Louis would ever stop lounging around long enough to do something great.

One bright summer day, Louis was lying in on his favourite sunny spot under the rose bush. The bush was dotted with little buds, some of them already opening into wonderful new flowers. Every now and then, he could hear the buzz of a bee coming to the bush to admire the beautiful, sweet-smelling blossoms, and the lovely chiming voices of the roses saying hello to their winged friends.

The snail poked his eyes out of his shell, looked around and wearily remarked: “Once again, there’s nothing new. Everything is just like it’s always been! Not the slightest change, no sign of any progress. The rose bush is just happy to be blooming again. That’s all it can do.” He glared at the happy roses, the pleasant bees, the new blooms, and thought about how one day he would do great things. Summer passed and turned into a windy, rainy autumn. Louis began to feel cold, but the rose bush still had flowers. When winter came, the wind got colder and snowflakes fluttered in the air. Winter can be cruel, and the rose bush bowed down to the ground under the weight of the snow and the snail burrowed underground, his shell shut tight.

They waited out the winter like this, curled in on themselves, dreaming of warmer days. After what felt like a very long time, the snows melted and the sun came out. Joyfully, the rose bush woke up and burst into beautiful flowers. The winter had been long for the snail, though, and he crouched in his shell and resented the roses for being happy.

When he poked his head out of his shell, the roses were happy to see him.

“Hello, old friend!” they chimed. “Isn’t it a beautiful day?” Louis glared at them, angry that they were still so happy after such a long winter.

“You’re an old shrub now, you know,” he said, spitefully. “Soon you’ll get too old and die and all you’ll be is bare, dry wood. You gave the world everything you had, but was it any good? Clearly you haven’t done anything to improve yourself – otherwise you could have done so much more.”

“Why would you say that?” the roses said, hurt. “Aren’t our blooms beautiful, and

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good? Isn't blooming what we're meant to do?"

Louis didn't like this answer, and decided to make the roses feel as bad as he felt. "Haven't you ever wondered why you bloom at all?" he asked, pompously puffing himself up. "Why is everything the way it is? And why couldn't it be another way? What is your purpose?"

"No," said the rose bush firmly. "We've spent our life blooming happily and merrily because that is what roses do. The sun warmed us with its rays, wind blew through our leaves, and every morning we drank fresh morning dew and raindrops. We've breathed and we've lived! We've made friends with the bees and the butterflies! The earth and the air gave us strength and energy. We felt happiness inside – it was different each time but always so strong and vast that we had to bloom. We wouldn't want to live any other way." The roses were happy with this answer, even though Louis had upset them.

"Well, you lived a very comfortable life, indeed," said Louis, snootily. "But it sounds like an empty life to me, if all you did was bloom and sit in the sun." He looked out the fields beyond the hazelnut trees and watched a goat chew contentedly on an apple without a worry in the entire world. Louis disliked that goat, he decided.

"We're happy with our lives," the rose said. "But you don't seem content. You have also spent your life sitting in the sun and enjoying the earth, but you're not happy."

"I'm not like you," protested the snail, "One day I'll accomplish big things. I won't just sit in the sun all day and do nothing!"

"Shouldn't we all strive to be happy with ourselves?" the roses asked. "We may not do anything but bloom, but you have spent your life wanting to do more and never being happy with where you are in the moment."

"Why should I listen to you? I was meant to do great things, not have an empty life! You don't know anything. I don't care what you do anymore. Keep on blooming, if you want, you won't be doing it much longer anyway," Louis said, cruelly. "Let the hazelnut trees make hazelnuts and the cows give milk. I don't care! I'll lock myself in my house and let everyone do as they please." And with that, Louis

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retreated into his shell and, had he had a door, he would have slammed it.

“Oh, this is so sad,” thought the roses. Then, out loud, they chimed, “Louis, please come out.” But Louis would not.

The roses were bothered by what the snail had said to them, but they began to remember the happy things that had happened to them over the years. Once, the wind lifted their petals high into the air and they had seen a person dance with joy. Another time, they had watched as a man pressed a blossom in his book and a girl wove roses into her hair. The roses had been delighted every time they had fed a bee or made a person smile. “It has been a good life,” thought the roses. “Even if Louis is right and we’re going to die, we have been happy!”

And so the kind-hearted rose kept on blooming and the angry snail stayed sleeping in his shell, paying no attention to the world outside.

But the roses did not die. What Louis didn’t know was that roses never really die, because as they grow old their seeds fall to the ground and they are reborn. And so, long after Louis’ time, there were still roses in the garden, and there was still laughter and beauty and, every now and then, a new snail to have a conversation with.