

Roses on the Doorstep

by Scott Cimarusti

The first time I found a rose on my doorstep was almost a year after Susan and I had moved into the house on New Haven Street.

I had just taken my first step out the door on my way to work when I stopped in my tracks, almost tripping myself up as my still sleep-fogged brain struggled to place into some logical context the flower I had almost crushed beneath one scuffed brown loafer. In fact, it wasn't even until after I had unconsciously picked it up, placed it on the passenger seat next to me, and driven about halfway to work when the implication of a rose left on my doorstep finally occurred to me.

I remember resisting the urge to slam my office door (that would have drawn more attention than I wanted or needed), the knob clenched in one fist as I called upon every ounce of restraint of which I was capable before my morning coffee. Then I jerked the phone receiver from its cradle and stabbed Susan's work number, cursing under my breath when I got the "unable to complete your call" tone and speech because, in my fury, I had forgotten to dial "9" to get an outside line.

The voice that had become just as familiar as my own the past seven years I'd known her greeted me in a surprisingly perky sing-song tone for so early in the morning—even for a Friday morning.

"Susan Harris."

"Hello," was all I could mutter through clenched teeth.

"Kevin?"

The notion that she didn't recognize my voice immediately made me seethe even more. "Yes..."

"Kevin, what's wrong? You sound weird."

I cleared my throat to give me an extra second or two to try to maintain by best effort at an even tone. "I found a curious item on our doorstep this morning as I left for work..."

"Oh? What was it?"

I had to bite my lower lip to keep from shouting. "A rose, Susan, a single red rose. Any idea who it might be from?"

There was a slight pause as she deliberated. "A rose? Why would someone..." Then she must have realized why my tone had been different, and hers became as flinty as mine. "Are you suggesting it was for me?"

"Well, who the hell else would it be for?"

Her words now hissed through clenched teeth. “Are you implying that I am involved in some sort of extramarital activities that would somehow merit a token of affection like a rose?”

“What else am I supposed to think?”

An exasperated sigh. “Kevin, even if I were foolish enough to engage in such indiscretions, do you think I would be careless enough to risk getting caught by encouraging such behavior?”

I held the rose up to the sunlight streaming in between the industrial gray blinds of my office window. For some reason, the more I actually inspected this mysterious rose, the less suspicious I became. Maybe reason was finally penetrating the thick fog of morning sleepiness that usually only coffee can dispel. I think Susan sensed my ire dissipating.

“Kevin, I am not having an affair, if that is what you’re implying...”

Feeling sheepish, I tried to stammer out an excuse for my accusing behavior. “I know, it’s just that...” I sighed in exasperation. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

To my relief, she chuckled. “I guess it’s kind of flattering, actually, to still be able to arouse such passion after five years of marriage...”

I felt myself blush. “Sorry I bothered you at work...I’ll see you at dinner tonight.”

I could hear her smiling. “All right. I’ll just grab a pizza or something on my way home from my secret lover’s house—if I have the strength.”

I’d never hear the end of this now. At least she was good-humored about it. “Yeah, you do that,” I shot back with a snort. “Bye.”

I hung up and opened my office door, the rose still in hand as I headed for the breakroom and my much-needed dose of coffee, pausing only to place the flower on the desk of Louise, my sixty-year old secretary, who had just celebrated her fortieth wedding anniversary. She looked up at me questioningly. “What’s this for?”

I shrugged. “Something to make Ed jealous.” Ed was her husband.

Louise waved me off. “Honey, those days are long gone. After forty years of marriage, we don’t have the energy to waste on jealousy anymore. We barely have enough to throw dinner in the microwave...”

And with that, the rose on my doorstep passed out of my memory until a year later when I found another.

I discovered the second rose on a Saturday afternoon while I was mowing the lawn. I was just finishing up the area by the front walk when I spotted it in about the same spot on the front step where I had found the one a year before. I cut the lawnmower’s engine and walked over to it, a strange sense of déjà-vu descending upon me. I picked up the rose and stared at it

for several minutes like a monkey contemplating a cell phone before I brought it in the house to show Susan. She was at the kitchen table, typing away on her laptop, her delicate wire-framed glasses perched on the tip of her pert nose. I could tell she was getting frustrated with whatever she was working on because she kept brushing her chestnut hair off her forehead in quick, annoyed gestures. So I figured she might not mind the temporary distraction.

“Look what I found.”

She took a sip of her coffee before looking up. Her eyes widened. “Again?” Then her brow furrowed. “You’re not going to get all suspicious again, are you?”

I smiled. “No. But it is weird, isn’t it? Wasn’t it about this time last year when I found the first one?”

Susan nodded. “I think so.” Then her eyes widened again, as if an idea had suddenly come to her. “Hang on a second, I can tell you exactly when you found the rose last year...” She began clicking and opening windows, scrolling through her calendar. She must have found what she was looking for because she leaned back in the chair and removed her glasses.

“Today’s the eleventh, isn’t it?”

I nodded.

“Wow, that’s really weird. It was exactly a year ago—to the date.”

“How do you know that?”

She gestured at the screen with her glasses. “I remember that day because it was the day we found out we got the Lieberman account at work. Remember? I brought home a bottle of champagne to celebrate that night—and we didn’t have to get up for work the next morning because it was the weekend.”

“Wow—you have a good memory.” My attention returned to the rose in my hand. “A rose on our doorstep two years in a row—to the date. There must be some significance...I wonder who’s leaving them?”

Susan chuckled, replacing her glasses and returning to her work. “I guess you’ll have to wait until next year and patrol the front porch.”

I joined her in a chuckle before turning and heading back outside to finish mowing the lawn before the ballgame started. Though by the time I got to the lawnmower and started it up, Susan’s idea of a midnight stakeout was starting to sound a little less laughable.

The next August eleventh was a Sunday; so the Friday before, I intentionally left some unfinished work for me to do over the weekend, so I had an excuse to stay up late Saturday night—not just as an explanation for Susan, in case she asked, but also as a rationale for myself.

The desk in our front room has a pretty good view of the front step, so with my trusty

laptop in front of me, and a freshly brewed cup of coffee in my favorite Dilbert mug, my surveillance post was complete. At about 11:30, I heard Susan's slippered footsteps shoosh-shooshing up behind me, followed the gentle pressure of her hands on my shoulders and her chin resting on my head. She must have just gotten out of the shower, because the scent of her shampoo was very strong.

"What are you up to?"

I leaned back in my chair to gratefully accept a brief neck rub. "I gotta finish up these reports by Monday. I won't be long..."

"Why don't you wait until tomorrow night, then?" The neck massage was becoming a little too relaxing.

"I wish I could. I'll probably be up late with these, and I don't want to put it off until tomorrow."

"Why are you working in the dark?" she asked, reaching for the green-hooded desk lamp to my right.

I gently nudged her hand away before she could switch it on. "I get less eye-strain this way." It was a tiny white lie, but I couldn't very well reveal the real reason for my working in the dark: any lights would be reflected in the window in front of me, obscuring my view of the front doorstep. Plus, the darkness of the room prevented me from being seen from the outside.

She patted my shoulders and planted a quick peck on the top of my head. "Suit yourself. G'night."

Thankfully, she hadn't surmised the real reason for my late-night vigil—because I don't think I had the resolve to withstand her teasing, however good-natured it may be.

I actually wound up getting a lot of work done—not only did I finish the report I had deliberately left unfinished, but I also sorted through about a month's worth of back-burner e-mails and did a lot of other "housecleaning" that I ordinarily don't have time for at the office. In fact, it was just after I had poured my third cup of coffee when I took a moment to check the time: 2:16. No sign of the mysterious rose-bearer yet.

Despite letting the time get away from me, I had kept a constant eye on the front doorstep—no matter how immersed I had been in my work—and my trips to the kitchen for more coffee had been extremely brief. The idea that the rose-bearer wouldn't make an appearance never even crossed my mind, for my curiosity had gotten the better of me.

Unfortunately, fatigue trumped even that.

I don't remember when I dozed off. The last thing I recall was leaning back in my chair to mull over the wording of a potentially inflammatory memo. The next thing I knew, I felt myself jerk awake. Silently cursing myself, I glanced at my laptop screen to see what time it was

—but it was on screensaver. I slid my index finger across the touchpad to wake the system up.
4:22.

I craned my neck over my computer to get a better view of the doorstep.

There, in the amber pool of light cast by the front porch light, lay a single red rose.

I sprang from my chair and ran to the foyer, threw open the front door, and stepped out into the early morning darkness. Somehow I knew my quarry was long gone, but that didn't stop me from scanning the shadows anyway. But the suburban street was a ghost town, the only sounds being the murmur of crickets and the occasional barking of someone's insomniac dog.

I had waited a whole year to try to find out the source of these mysterious roses, only to blow it.

And as I stood there regarding the newest rose in my growing collection, the early morning breeze tousling my hair, the concrete rough and cool on my bare feet, I vowed I would not fall asleep next year.

The following August 11th fell on a Tuesday because of the leap year and found me alone in the house with Susan in New York on business that whole week.

I had seen her off that Monday morning at 6am when the limo came to pick her up and take her to the airport. The Sunday before she left, over a shared cup of coffee, she teasingly interrogated me about my planned activities while she was gone; to which I listed a fabricated itinerary involving strip clubs, brothels, and other unsavory locales. She responded with a playful biting of my lip when I kissed her goodbye.

What I didn't tell her was that my real plan for the week included calling in sick both the 10th and the 11th so I could get the sleep I needed before and after my midnight vigil to discover once and for all the identity of whoever was making the annual delivery of a single red rose on our doorstep.

After Susan's taxi disappeared around the corner, I made a quick breakfast and scanned the latest headlines on the internet before I made a call in to the office. Louise sounded really busy when I called, so when I told her that I wasn't coming in to work, she wished me well and hung up quickly. That done, I headed back to bed. My plan was to sleep a few hours in the morning, then take another long nap in the evening so I would be wide awake that night.

I woke up around lunchtime, wolfing down a sandwich while I checked my e-mail. Then I worked for a few hours to help tire me out so I would sleep better during my evening nap. I still wasn't sleepy when I finished, so I settled onto the living room couch and flipped on the TV. Daytime TV being the barren wasteland it is, I wound up settling for a bad 1980's horror movie, falling asleep within minutes.

I woke up to the phone ringing several hours later, and I jerked awake in a panic, fumbling for the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Kevin?”

“Hey, honey....” My eyes roved the darkened living room—lit only by the bluish flickering from the TV—while my sleep-fogged brain tried to place things into the correct context. Then, like a tidal wave, it hit me. I had taken a nap to prepare for my all-night stakeout. My pulse quickened as panic scampered through my brain—what if I had overslept and missed my chance? I’d have to wait *another* year. I strained my eyes to make out the time on the clock on the fireplace mantel.

8:23.

I still had plenty of time—and now plenty of sleep—to prepare for tonight’s stakeout of the front porch. All this time while I was collecting my thoughts, Susan’s voice squawked at me through the phone.

“Kevin, hello? Are you there?”

I allowed myself a sigh of relief. “Yeah, honey, I’m here.”

“Are you OK?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I tried calling you at work from Philadelphia during my layover, but there was no answer. I left a voice-mail but you never called me back. When I called again and dialed the receptionist, Louise told me that you called in sick. Are you all right?”

I winced. I completely forgot to plan for Susan calling me at work.

“Yeah, I’ll be OK... Right after you left, my stomach started feeling kind of weird, so I called in and went back to bed. I woke up again around lunchtime and sat in front of the TV. I must have fallen asleep...”

“Oh, I’m sorry...I didn’t mean to wake you...”

Now I was starting to feel like a jerk for lying to my wife about not feeling well—especially since her voice practically dripped with genuine sympathy—but I couldn’t very well divulge to her the real reason I had called in sick. So I decided to volley the conversation back to her before I buckled under my increasing guilt.

“How was your flight?”

She gave me a brief synopsis of her thankfully uneventful flight, the meetings she’d endured so far, and the dinner and cocktail party she had just left—including the guy at the bar who got a little too “hands-on” with her. I quickly doused the spark of protective jealousy at hearing about this because I know Susan can handle herself in those kinds of situations. Even

with such progress made in gender equality, professional women still had to suffer such advances from time to time. I trusted Susan completely—which made me feel even more like a heel for being so sneaky about my plans for the night, innocent though they were.

Susan yawned. “I think I’m going to get out of this dress, climb into bed, and veg in front of the TV until I fall asleep. It’s been a long day.”

I felt a tug in my chest—I wished I could be there with her. “I miss you...”

I could hear her smiling. “I miss you, too. I hope you feel better—you should get some rest.”

“I will.”

We exchanged “I love you”s, then bade each other goodnight before hanging up. I managed to ease my nagging conscience with the reminder that I wasn’t being deceptive to Susan out of concealing any wrongdoing on my part; I was merely trying to avoid ridicule over an attempt to satisfy my obsessive curiosity.

My internal debate was quickly interrupted by my rumbling stomach. Realizing that I had missed dinner, I headed to the kitchen. A frozen pizza and a cold beer in front of the TV would be a good way to kill some time before I began my late-night vigil.

I waited until midnight before I headed outside to the surveillance post I had scouted out over the weekend while mowing the lawn. I discovered the southeast corner of the house offered a good vantage point of the front porch, and if I hid behind the hedges that grew under the living room window, I would have a clear view of the front doorstep while being well concealed by the bushes—especially at night.

That was where I headed now, armed with a flashlight, a thermos of coffee, and my Louisville Slugger—just in case.

Despite my marathon nap earlier in the evening, it was difficult to stay alert as the hours ticked by. I had nothing to occupy my mind while I sat there, crouched in the shadows, so the time dragged almost intolerably. As I watched and waited, I could almost see Susan’s face in the living room window, shaking her head disapprovingly at me.

I started to feel like Linus from *Peanuts*, waiting faithfully—and foolishly—in the pumpkin patch on Halloween night for the arrival of the elusive Great Pumpkin. And as the night wore on, these feelings of foolishness began to transform into frustrated impatience; so much so, that it took all of what little remained of my self-control to not scream out in anger every time I heard a dog bark somewhere. Even the hum of the crickets—which I usually found to be soothing—was beginning to sound like fingernails on a blackboard.

It was around 3am when I arrived at my quandary. It was then that I realized that with

each minute that continued to pass uneventfully, the odds of encountering the mysterious rose-bearer decreased dramatically. But, if I gave up and abandoned my post, only to find a rose on the doorstep the next morning, I would have wasted all the time leading up to that point. In the end, it was this stubborn refusal to admit that my efforts were futile—not patience, I wish I could say—that compelled me to remain at my post when logic and common sense should have won out.

Then it happened.

At 4:13am, I spotted movement near the garage.

A lone figure emerged from the velvet shadows, creeping up the front walk, a long, slender object clasped in one hand.

My heart started to race in my chest. I couldn't believe it. I all began to seem like a bizarre dream: the roses, my foolish midnight vigil—all of it. Now that my quarry actually materialized, I was paralyzed by disbelief as I watched the dark silhouette step into the pale amber circle of the front porch light and bend down on one knee.

Without thinking, or even knowing why—or what I would do next—I sprang from the bushes.

“Hey!”

At the sound of my voice, the figure bolted upright.

I had the bat on one hand and the flashlight in the other, and I brandished both threateningly as I marched toward the front step. I was still unable to get a good look at the stranger's face, but even from where I stood, I recognized the unmistakable look of uncertainty in the eyes that regarded me from over one shoulder.

As I closed the distance between us, the figure finally turned to face me, hands upraised in a gesture of surrender.

My flashlight revealed a man about my age with medium-length shaggy blonde hair and a narrow, angular face framed by a well-groomed beard. Eyes that I could only describe as haunted regarded me warily. He was dressed all in black: t-shirt, jeans, and a trenchcoat. And in one hand was a single blood-red rose.

Lowering neither my bat nor my flashlight, I continued to size up the man standing on my doorstep at four in the morning, barraging him with questions as quickly as they flashed into my mind. “Who the hell are you? What are you doing here at this hour?” I hoped that my voice sounded more in control than I felt.

“I didn't mean to trespass,” the stranger began, “I just wanted to leave this.” He gestured to the rose he still held.

Even though I knew the answer, for some reason I still asked the obvious question: “So

you're the one that's been leaving those here?"

He nodded.

My eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"I didn't mean any harm..."

As I mentioned earlier, I had worn through my patience already, and I must confess, I was now starting to feel a little cocky at having "caught" the "perpetrator", so I wielded what little authority I thought I might have. "Look, unless you want me to call the police..." I was bluffing: I had left my cell phone in the house, and we both knew that he could be long gone in the time it took me to get to the phone inside. "...You're going to tell me why you're trespassing on my property in the middle of the night."

The stranger continued to meet my eyes for several more seconds until he uttered a weary sigh of defeat.

"Fine. I owe you that, at least."

"You're damn right." Right after I said it, I wished I hadn't; it was a bit too much bravado.

He lowered himself slowly onto my front step, like a man that has just returned from a long journey. He sat with his elbows on his knees, slowly twirling the rose in his fingers.

"I used to spend a lot of time at this house—before it was your house, of course—many years ago. I used to live about a half-mile from here, back when I was a kid up until I went away to college.

"My first girlfriend used to live in this house. We dated for almost two years toward the end of high school. That seems like a blink of an eye now, but back then it was a lifetime."

His gaze wandered over to a small rectangle of landscaping between the front walk and the house where a squat little evergreen bush grew. "I can still almost smell the lilacs..." His voice trailed off; the distant look in his eyes hinted that he was beholding a vision from the past. While he was momentarily lost in a memory, I remembered: I had pulled out a dying lilac bush from that very spot the spring after we had moved in, replacing it with the little evergreen. Then the stranger continued, his voice a little more wistful now.

"Then she and I both went off to college—I stayed in the Midwest, but she went out east. Neither of us knew how much the distance would take its toll on our relationship. We were so young and naïve..." His voice trailed off before continuing. "The last time I saw her was when I stopped by to see her while we were both home for the winter holiday break. I figured it was my last chance to reconcile things between us. We wound up talking outside for almost an hour... That's when we broke up officially."

He blinked as if he had just woken from a dream. "Like I said, I used to spend a lot of

time with her here. Happy times—happier than I’d ever been, and happier than I’ve been since, in fact. Nothing’s ever come close to the feelings of contentment and acceptance that I still associate with that time and this place. I came close once, when I was first married, but that, too, tarnished much too quickly.” He held up the rose, his eyes welling up slightly. “I used to bring her a rose every now and then, just for the hell of it. After my divorce four years ago, when things seemed at their most bleak and hopeless, I found myself driving here one night around two in the morning. I hadn’t planned on coming here, it was almost as if my subconscious had taken over and steered the car. I didn’t even know who lived here anymore—I didn’t even care. I think I just needed to be someplace that I could still associate with happiness—even from the past.

“On my way, I stopped at a convenience store for a coffee. On impulse, I bought one of the cheap roses wrapped in cellophane they sell at the counter. Then when I found myself here, I got out of my car and walked up your front walk—like when I used to walk her to the door after we’d been out at a movie or whatever. Where we used to kiss goodnight.” He glanced back over his shoulder presumably to the spot where those memories had once taken place. “I don’t know how long I stood there reminiscing—it could have been hours, for all I can remember. Then I left the rose on your doorstep—for no real reason except maybe to see if the ritual of being here with a rose again could somehow conjure up the magic that I once found here.” His eyes became distant again, his voice barely above a whisper. “That’s what it was...magic.”

As his voice trailed off, I became aware of two things. First, of just how quiet the early morning hours really are. And second, a complete stranger had just unburdened his soul to me. He must have sensed the awkward silence, because for the first time since he began his tale, his eyes met mine, and I saw a spark of embarrassment flare. He stood up quickly, averting his gaze and tossing the rose on my doorstep abruptly. “I have to go. I won’t bother you any more. I’m sorry.” Then he rushed past me, his trenchcoat billowing behind him like bat wings.

“Wait,” I called after him.

He stopped, still facing away from me, his shoulders hunched slightly, as if bracing for a physical blow from behind.

It was several heartbeats before I found the words. “If leaving a rose on my doorstep helps you find some solace in memories of past happiness...” His story must have touched me more than I realized, because my voice was beginning to tremble slightly. “...Who am I to deny you that?”

The stranger remained where he stood, his back still facing me. “Yeah, well, maybe I need to quit living in the past.”

I shrugged. “Well, until you’re ready to let go of those memories, you’re welcome to

continue leaving your roses here.”

He remained silent for several minutes before he finally responded. “Thank you.”

And with that, he vanished into the early morning darkness.

I wound up staying awake to see the sunrise. Something about the stranger’s story made sleep elusive. It could have all been the delusional ravings of someone on the verge of a nervous breakdown, but there had been such sincerity to his tone that I didn’t question it.

I called in sick to work again later that morning, as I had planned. After breakfast, I sat down to check my e-mail and do some work, but I couldn’t stay focused—something kept nagging at me. So I got in the car and drove around for awhile with no particular destination in mind, just to clear my head. On my way home, I stopped and bought a small lilac bush. I never really liked that evergreen by the front doorstep, anyway—it seemed better suited to the backyard. After I finished placing the new lilac bush in the spot once occupied by its predecessor, I realized that it seemed more “right” there.

I didn’t tell Susan about my encounter with the rose-bearing stranger when she got back that Friday—in fact, I’ve never told her about it; it was the first and only secret I’ve ever kept from her in all the time we’ve known each other. I came close every year as we found a new rose in the customary spot, but something always held my tongue. Even though the man was still a complete stranger—even after baring his soul to me—I still couldn’t bring myself to betray his confidence. I’ve never repeated his story to anyone, in fact, until now. Something about his tale touched me so much that I had to write it down—with the names changed, of course.

Once a year, for eight years straight, a rose appeared on our doorstep.

Until this year.

It’s been several months now, and I still haven’t found one. I don’t know why he skipped this year—I’ll probably never know. I like to think that it’s because he’s finally found someone else to give a rose to instead of a ghost from his past. But in case he’s stopped because he no longer has the means to, I’ve taken appropriate measures to make sure a rose will always be there for him.

Yesterday, in the rectangle of landscaping, between the house and the front walk, right next to the lilac bush...

I planted a rosebush.

Just in case.