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# Smell of Roses at Night

Delia De Santis

The old lady awakens to the insistent need of her bladder. The house is silent. A quietness so deep it penetrates to the bones. That's all there is to her these days, bones. Her face is gaunt. She has seen it in the same little square of mirror that her husband puts on the windowsill when he shaves his withered old cheeks, the jowly chin. His skin hangs, hers recedes; hers attaches to the skeleton of her features.

Her lean nose makes her think of those pencils her grandson sharpens with his pocket knife.

Her smart grandson, good in school, and for what? He'll have to work the land like his father, like all the other fathers before him. That's the way it is; there are the rich and there are the poor. They belong to the poor; not the needy for food but, nevertheless, the poor.

The urgency of her bladder has passed, the discomfort somehow almost gone. As if to say, "Okay, I'll give you a little more time." Even her bladder knows she's no longer quick to move, sudden to action. She could try to go back to sleep—it might be only two or three hours before daylight will break into the house, sharp and clear as the river water where she washes her clothes early in the morning.

How she wishes she could be like the daylight, passing through closed windows and bolted doors, without being heard. She hates to be "the old lady" getting up in middle of the night, trudging through rooms, awakening her son and daughter-in-law.

Oh yes, her daughter-in-law. A good woman for her son, but forever so practical and wise. How she never stops telling her, "Old Woman, you must learn to use the chamber pot. It's under your bed, did you forget again?"

"No Daughter, I didn't forget," Anna always answers.

I never forget. It's not that, Anna thinks now with a sigh that slowly empties into the silence, like soft flowing water. Then in one resolute movement, she brings herself to a sitting position to the edge of the corn husk mattress that never fails to rustle, never fails to make her husband stir. But no more than that—just a tiny ripple of current through slack muscles, and perhaps a momentary halt to his dreams. He is so old now. People said Giuseppe was old when she married him, and that was a long time ago.

What does he dream? she wonders. She can't imagine him dreaming anything more than just watching the rabbits eat the grass he brings to them or the animals in the barn resting. He doesn't do any work anymore, just a few simple chores. But he has always lived his life in an innocent state of bliss. Even when terrible things were happening in their lives.

Suddenly she feels anger, such that it makes her pummel his shoulder twice. "Eh," he mumbles in response. That is all. What would it take to awaken him? Thunder has never made his eyes open at night. "Did you hear the thunder last night?" she would ask, and he always replied, "What thunder?"

The anger remains, twists her insides. She had married a man who had Sleep for his lover. That had been enough for him. Sleep solved all his problems, day and night. Sleep took care of all his needs. He lived for his naps, especially the afternoon ones. He lusted for Sleep. *She'd* had a real lover once... but a lot of good that had done her. Anyway, bladders and lovers don't make for a good tale to tell, so why put her effort into it. No need to tell the story of her life. No need. It would just complicate things in her mind. Remembering the forbidden moments brings her pain. So much pain. Antonio, the man who had been her lover, is now dead and she will never get to see him again, except in the mirror of her memory. And now that too is going—the memory. Every day bits of her past slip away to dissolve into a hopeless void... and she has been left with this sack of yellowed and smelling flesh that rests at her side every night.

Poor Antonio, rest his soul. Sin or no sin, she knows he's not in the fire of hell—she could swear to it. Not that anyone wants to know, that anyone would care about such things. Antonio, her Antonio. She knows he confessed everything—he was a man of repentance. And a man who repents gets absolution. Oh, how she trembled when she saw the priest, black hassock blowing about him like the flag of death itself, as he sped on his Vespa to get to Antonio's house in time, before the poor man took his last breath. Yes, Antonio got his absolution and Last Rights. That's the good thing about living up on a hill: the open view. Not missing anything that goes on, who goes to whose house, who leaves. Who is coming and who is going, to and from, the road below.

Oh, how Antonio must have confessed it all, to that priest who himself was so muddled with sins—father of his housekeeper's children, and saviour of the old maids of the valley, who would not have felt the joys of the flesh had not been for Padre Giovanni's lust.

How will a priest at the time of his death confess his lewdness to another priest, Anna wonders. Or does a priest not even have to mention the particulars of his adventures into the sinful world, because the confessor can already guess? Yes, most likely the penitent would murmur, "Father, forgive my sins, you already know which ones," and just like that he'd receive his blessing.

Anna will never confess her sins. Why should she when the priest of her parish is twice the sinner she is. He had begotten two children out of his sins, she only one. Oh Santa Lucia, how does she come up with such weird thoughts? No excuse, she is starting to slip into the world of crazy people. But who wouldn't go crazy with a nagging bladder like hers? Sometimes she wonders if there are drowning mice rasping at the inner walls of her piss vessel, mice trying to get out. Her bladder will be what will kill her for sure.

*Slippers, where are they?* Her right foot circles the cement floor to find them. She locates them, as her husband gives a little snore. Thank God, he's not a real snorer. He makes little sucking-in sounds, that is all. This man will certainly not make a big noise when he's about to die. One of these days he'll just pass on without making a fuss. For he's that kind of man—he couldn't be bothered. Why should he change in the last moment of his life? He's never bothered with anything since she can remember. He's always been eternally placid. They should have nicknamed him Don Placido.

And how will she go? Well, she has already told herself that she's not going to confess her sins, so that's that. So she might as well do something else that would be meaningful when death starts to step a little closer. Something to occupy her mind right to the very end. She has to come up with a weighty subject. Something important perhaps. But she can't *think*, and the only thought that comes into her mind is about her daughter-in-law, Elvira: Will she, Anna, at the moment of her dying, try to figure out why she has been calling Elvira "Daughter" since her son married her? Anna could at last admit to herself, for who else would want to know, that she's been dishonest; she knows there are no mother-daughter feelings between herself and Elvira. Not because she is of the blood of another family, but because there are certain feelings the woman would never be capable of understanding, like why an old woman can still be suffering the death of a man who had been her lover in the past... a man she had been forced to give up because of impossible circumstances.

*There.* She has managed to get out into the garden at the front of

the house without awakening her son and his wife. With her bony hands, Anna hikes up her long nightgown—for years she hasn't worn underpants. She's not going to squat, she'll do it standing and be damned if her legs get squirted. After all, the urine that will splash her is coming from her own body.

She has spoken too soon. Elvira is opening the window, and it isn't to smell the beautiful roses underneath it. It would do her good if she were to do just that, but that's not in her.

"Old Woman, what are you doing out there?"

Strange, Elvira has not mentioned that blessed chamber pot. Surprised, Anna lets go of her night gown and feels the cotton material slide down her skinny legs. "And now what?" she thinks. She hasn't pissed yet.

"Did you hear? What are you doing?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"Did you drink the chamomile tea I put beside your bed?"

"No, I let the old man drink it."

"The old man has a name ..."

"He's Giuseppe — the carpenter, The Virgin's husband."

"You're nasty. Why do you have to be like that? You get worse every day."

"If you don't want an answer, go back to bed... go back to your man... go keep him happy."

"My man is happy. If it weren't for all the troubles we have with you."

Anna feels the urine squirting all the way down to her ankles. She hadn't even given it a thought, it just came without her doing anything about it. She felt good, she felt relieved. She had held it for too long.

"There," she says to Elvira. "I am all done. Are you happy now?"

"You're not just nasty, you're spiteful and vicious. Now get back up here, I don't want to have to come down and get you again, like the other night."

"I like it here. I like the smell of roses at night."

"Never mind the roses. Do what you're told for once."

Anna is so proud of her roses. *Centofoglie*. Each bloom has a hundred petals. She had planted those roses years ago, when they first moved to the farm. Three plants, close to each other, but over the years they had grown into one thick woody braid going up the old block wall. "The Holy Trinity," she thinks. "Herself, Antonio, and Giuseppe."

"Elvira, are you faithful to my son?"

"You think I would be like you!?"

"Uh, that's what I thought."

"Don't mumble old lady. Do you ever think about the shame you've brought to your family? Maybe you should stay out there all night and do some repenting. God knows you should do a lot of that."

"I'll stay out here, but I'll leave the repenting for those who have worse sins."

"Worse than what you've done?"

And with that Elvira shuts the window.

Couldn't she have banged the window, thought Anna. Couldn't she? A little spark would have been satisfying for both of them. Just a little spark that would have made Anna feel that the blood in their veins wasn't that different after all.

But no, Elvira's only wickedness was in her choice of reproachful words, for the rest she was as cold as a marble altar.

Breathing the perfumed night air, Anna slowly makes her way up the outside steps of the house and back to the second floor, to resume sleep with her husband.