

Roses

by Neil Scotten

The side door slammed with force, dislodging flakes of loose paint from the door frame and depositing them on the dusty concrete step. Charles Nelloy stumped through the passage between garage and house and into his rose garden. The front garden was one of the largest in 'Paradise Road', and when the Nelloys had moved there fifteen years ago Mr. Nelloy had begun to plant roses. He had started with a modest side bed running between his lawn and that of Mr. Deentonct next door. That year his novice enthusiasm had got the better of him and the roses had withered, starved by the needs of his neighbour's crab-apple tree which grew nearby. Undeterred he had gone to the library near where he worked and read manuals and handbooks pertaining to rosecraft with titles like *The Joy of Roses* and *The Amateur Rosarian*. Very soon his lunchtimes were spent pondering the problems of blackspot, cuckoospit and the rose aphid had become a necessary escape from his otherwise burdensome routine.

Over fifteen years the garden had steadily progressed, become even celebrated. On a fine Sunday families out walking would linger as they went past the technicolour extravaganza and visiting grandparents would stop and admire, nodding sagely, then proceed quickly past the ranks of newly washed cars parked in front of houses with straggly and unkempt lawns.

It was a habit with Mr. Deentonct to keep his wife informed of the latest



Nelloy. He had not seen them together for several years.

As time went on and the Nelloys grew further apart, the rose garden had got increasingly luxurious. The unsuccessful side beds had been grassed over and replaced with a large circular one, embraced by four quarter circle beds like a diagram for a traffic circle. Commonplace reds, pinks, and yellows had given way to blooms of a more exotic hue, their petals intricately arranged.

This Sunday morning Charles Nelloy stood in the narrow highway of lawn that ran between the centre and side beds. He was flushed and breathing heavily and his spectacles had slid down to the end of his nose. He stood for five minutes engulfed in his rose bushes, looking into the centre bed, the colors muted by the still rising light. He bent down to pick up a few salmon coloured petals that had become detached and rubbed them absently between his fingers. The rough seam of his trouser pocket chafed against his leg. He removed a blue handkerchief from his pocket, cleaned his spectacles and pulled the pocked inside out, so it would not rub. Refixing his eyes on the roses he intoned to himself, "*Rosa gallica officinalis*, *Rosa banksiae*, *Rosa eglanteria*, *Rosa macrophylla rubricaulis*."

Greenfly were making a fresh assault on Princess Chichibu, burrowing into the pink streaks of the opening buds. Mr. Nelloy addressed the bush: "Little buggers. Bred to honour a Japanese princess, a lovely little rose." He left his sanctuary and went into the garage, returning with a blue and white milkjug that had been a wedding present, and a brass spraygun. He filled the gun from the chipped jug and proceeded to spray Princess Chichibu with a passion. "Ladybirds would have been better." For good measure he also treated Celestial and Sweet Promise. He examined the pink, orange-edged petals now dog-eared, "too cold for you," and made a mental note to replace them with a hardier variety.

Mr. Nelloy watched as the tiny black insects shrivelled and dropped to the ground. The spectacle of death, albeit in miniature, made him think of Mr. Tranty. Mr. Tranty was his oppressor. Life for Mr. Tranty fell roughly within the same parameters advocated by Mr. Deentonct, except that as an Executive Officer at Deedand, Ringbo and Smith, he was able to put into practice his disapproval of Mr.

Nelloy.

Charles Nelloy had worked at 'DRS Insurance' for seventeen years. He had begun as an Administrative Assistant and an Administrative Assistant he remained. The hope of the early years had dwindled into resignation and at DRS he had become something of a standing joke. The younger

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element considered him 'creepy' and referred to him, without much concern whether he was present or not, as "bottle bottoms" on account of his powerful spectacles. Despite efforts at invisibility he was widely known in the company as the least promoted member of staff and on one occasion his name had been mentioned at a Board Meeting as a stern lesson to the up-and-coming young bucks.

Mr. Nelloy had committed what at DRS were considered major sins. With a lifelong aversion to sport he had neglected to join the badminton ladder despite numerous appeals to his blood pressure. He subscribed neither to the social club nor to the 'Merry Christmas Savings Plan'. He had contributed only twenty pence towards Betty Rawlings' leaving present. He did not wash his coffee mug.

More aphids succumbed to the lethal chemical. Charles Nelloy remembered last Thursday. It had been four-thirty and he had just managed to close Macmillan's *History of the Rose* before Tranty saw it. Tranty had breezed into his cubicle and plonked at least a dozen files on top of his hastily closed book. "See to those before you go will you," he had said, looking at him as if he were a gob of spit in the gutter. What with the traffic he had not got home until near seven, too late to plant the new Margaret Merrill which had arrived the day before. He looked at the dry, sickly leaves of the new bush and resumed spraying with fury.

His anger spent, he began to feel calmer. Such was Mr. Nelloy's stature that in this position the exuberant foliage of the bushes hid him from view. He delved in the pockets of his jacket and extracted a pair of secateurs and a whetstone. The red secateurs, now worn through on the handles to the black underneath, had been a present from his wife. He had given up trying to convert her to his enthusiasm many years ago. As Mr. Nelloy opened the handles the coiled centre spring squeaked faithfully. Gently he began to rub the blades against the translucent grey stone, moistening it with spit. Satisfied, he flexed the blades in practice then carefully pruned a diseased shoot from Celestial, cutting at a precise forty-five degrees so the rain would run off and not rot the wound.

He began to run his fingers along the slender stems, stopping to test and admire the sharpness of the brittle thorns. "A lovely little rose." He drew the vivid leaves through thumb and forefinger and felt the contrast between the waxy coolness of the top surface and the roughness of the bottom. Then, with one hand the rose gardener cupped a bloom of Sweet Promise. The salmon and orange petals were comforting, delicate, smooth as skin. He stood for a while like this. Here, failure receded into the background; his marriage and the unbearable office routine. The calm of late evening transmitted the unmistakable scent of Margaret Merrill and he felt hopeful for the new arrival. He thought how appropriate was the name "Stargazer" to the array of yellow-eyed blooms pointed at the sky. The light diminished over 'Paradise Road' and Mr. Nelloy remained, now invisible with his rose garden.

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improvements at "Charlisa". He was a dahlia man but had long ago given up his own efforts, embarrassed by the increasing expertise of Mr. Nelloy. The house name, "Charlisa", had been a whim of Mrs. Nelloy's when they had moved to Paradise Road. Her husband had thought it mawkish but had refrained from protest. Mr. Charles and Lisa Nelloy; thus "Charlisa". This innovation had not caught on and the wooden lacquered sign now neglected and barely readable hung incongruously between rows of houses evenly numbered in flat black figures.

A cloud hung over the Nelloys. They were not neighbourly. Pristine though the garden was, Mr. Nelloy was seen only rarely. He confined his digging and pruning activities to early morning or late evening, retreating into the garage or the back yard if any admirers should appear. Early forays into neighbourliness by Mr. Deentonct had been met by a vacant stare shrunken by the powerful lenses of Mr. Nelloy's spectacles, or at best, a short, unencouraging reply. At first Walter Deentonct had been angered. He could not fit the Nelloys into his conception of the world and complained about them in a heated voice to his placid wife who listened and made occasional noises of agreement and sympathy. When the Deentonct dutifully produced two children and the Nelloys remained unreasonably childless, this produced another dent in his world picture.

Mr. Deentonct had long given up on his neighbours, merely noticing their furtive movements. Mrs. Nelloy would leave for work at seven, her husband at eight. By the time Mr. Nelloy returned his wife had been and gone. Mr. Deentonct did not know where Lisa Nelloy went, he just knew it was never in the company of Mr.

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Music trivia: Grant and Lloyd return next Thursday