

The Wilted Petal

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Edna lifted the wilted wild rose petal from the dusty, little table and looked at it carefully as if it were some lovely, cherished thing. She turned slightly as she heard the uneven step of her father on the porch, and then she smiled slowly.

"Pa, come. The rose petal is dying."

The old man limped across the living room as the screen door squeaked slowly shut, and frowned. Then he put his gnarled, rough hands on her shoulders and looked at the brown petal in her palm.

"... Fourteen years with my daughter an' she's the wilted thing in my palm.... or is it just the opposite? ..."

He let his hands drop heavily to his sides and limped to the old secretary where his pipes were thrown in musty confusion. After selecting a stained corn cob with the end bitten almost through, he looked at Edna again.

"Eddie, the fog's in from the lake. You like it — the fog, an' we kin walk down the beach a piece before dinner. Go git your coat and we kin walk in the fog."

Edna stared at his mouth for a moment and then she smoothed back her straggly blond hair with one quick movement. She ran from the room, dropping the brown rose petal on the worn carpet.

When she came back, holding a plaid jacket in her hand, the old man was crouched before the sputtering fire in the wood stove, lighting his pipe with a straw. He straightened up slowly and put her coat over her shoulders. The slight, prickly sound of the wood rubbing over his calloused hands was the only sound in the

room except for the sputtering fire and the gentle tick of the little German clock on the mantle.

As they walked down the broken, wooden porch steps leading to the lake path, the old man pulled his coat collar up with a jerk.

"This is the most cold it's bin here in July for twenty-five years, ain't it?"

Edna gazed into the layers of wet fog; and they faded into the folds, as they tramped down the weed-clogged path to the lake.

"It's as thick as bread dough down here by the water — be careful not to go off into the lake. Cain't tell the difference from sand and water — both the same color."

The old man talked incessantly like a small child who had suddenly found that he was being noticed. But he knew he wasn't talking to Edna, but to the fog and the water and whatever lay out beyond the dismal silent blankness.

"Ain't never been out beyond there, but maybe someday we'll take a boat an' go to see what it's like. Maybe it's like in that there book your Ma had 'bout poetry and that Nathaniel Hawthorne feller when he said the people were mean and good at the same time. Maybe we know all that and don't realize it, Eddie. Nobody never comes up here to the crag, but maybe that's not so bad."

Edna stopped suddenly and whimpered like a frightened puppy. The old man looked hard into the fog, which was coming in from the water in white puffs now.

The sharp bow of a sailboat nudged into the wet, gray sand, came out of the fog like an illusion, and beside it stood a tall man in slacks and a leather jacket.

"Hallo there!"

The old man stood quietly a few feet from the boat and looked intently at the bow as if he had never seen a sailboat before. The small, blue top sail was almost blotted out in the fog, but the old man could see that it hung limp, waiting for a breath of air to push it out.

The tall man laughed and the richness of it was like a strange, wonderful music in the old man's ears.

"I guess I'm in the horse latitudes. You see, my boat's in the Parlane Downs boat race, and when this fog set in I lost my way. It looks as if I'll be here until the wind blows it off. Do you think I'll have to wait long?"

The old man pulled his stained corn cob pipe from his pocket and felt along the bottom of the lining for a match. His rough finger scratched against a hole and he knew that the match had gone through.

"Ya got a match, mister?"

"Sure here," and the tall man pushed a chromium lighter near the bowl of the corn cob pipe.

Edna, who had been watching from behind her father's shoulder, jumped a little as the flame flicked in and out of the bowl, and then walked shyly to the boat and stepped onto the deck. The tall man watched her curiously.

"I see that your girl likes boats. She should see some of the big yachts down at White Harbor, they are really beautiful."

The old man puffed slowly on his pipe. "We ain't never been outside the crag here, so I don't reckon it's likely she'll see none."

The tall man's eyes widened and then he looked at the crouched figure in the boat. He walked to the bow and began to climb aboard.

Edna wheeled around, and when she saw that he was coming nearer, she ran to the edge of the boat, lost her footing, and fell into the mucky water. She was so frightened that she knelt in the shallow water like a broken statue. Both men waded out to her and carried her ashore; and when she was on her feet again, she ran into the fog that was now clearing away before a cold, northern wind.

The old man looked at the tall man with angry eyes and began to shout.

"You kin take your boat out now. The wind's up. An' don't come back. We're better off alone here on the crag."

He turned to limp away after Edna.

When he found her she was sitting in the sand, trembling; her wet clothes clung to her straight, thin body, and she was crying. He picked her up in his arms and carried her to the top of the hill and they walked back to the old farm house together.

When Edna stumbled into the living room, she saw the rose petal, which had become dry and hard on the worn carpet before the wood stove. She stooped to pick it up, and as she lifted it from the floor it crumbled like ash-logs in a November wind. Edna turned to the old man and tears began to rise in her eyes.

"Pa . . . the rose petal is dead."