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Who Needs Flowers?

by Sue Hitchcock

“Who needs flowers when they’re dead?”

“Who’s dead, Mummy?”

“The lady who lived here.”

We had been passing Mrs Rollins’ house every day since Annabel started school. We used to see her sometimes, picking a few flowers from her front garden, a tiny, old lady, as frail looking as can be. Once she even asked me to get some shopping on the way back from school, only a few potatoes and some eggs, but she put a few pound coins in my hand along with a string bag, then squeezing my hand with her bony, arthritic fingers to thank me. We hadn’t seen her there for ages and the only time I saw anyone at the house, I was surprised it was a fat, middle-aged man in a navy suit. He looked official, but there were no clues to his purpose. He had no clip board, or medical bag. Nothing, not even a briefcase. I came to the conclusion that she must have died. Did an ambulance come some time when I was out?

“Why don’t we take some. She would like someone to enjoy them.”

“Look at that amazing sunflower! Can we have that?”

“No, I think it would be too big. Why don’t we just start by tidying the weeds. You can’t even get to the front door.”

The houses were all terraced in their street, but Mrs Rollins' house seemed smaller than the others and its porch was sheltered by a round arch, instead of square sided like theirs. Now it was obscured by a curtain of woodbine.

"They call this Granny Nightcap. The white flowers are pretty, but it grows too quickly. Even if we break it off, it will come up again next year."

Annabel pulled it down and twirled it around herself, then while I continued clearing the porch, she moved on to the front window.

"Mum, mum, I saw a ghost!"

I laughed, but she insisted, pulling me by the hand, so I went to see.

The windows were dirty, long hidden behind the weeds, so I had to put my face to the glass.

I gasped, then backed away, shocked and embarrassed. Mrs Rollins was standing at the window. She waved and pointed to the front door.

"It's not a ghost, Mrs Rollins is there. Hold my hand, we'll have to say sorry."

When the old lady finally arrived at the door, struggling with the latch, which she hadn't opened for so long, I had decided what excuses I would make, but she had no idea of our intention to take her flowers.

She smiled and before I could speak, she was thanking me for letting the light in and inviting us in.

Behind the door, the passage, quite bare, ran the length of the house and I could see her back door was open. She led us through and a wonderland of flowers was revealed in the garden beyond.

"I do my best out here, but I can't manage the front as well."

"But who looks after you?"

"Oh, my son calls in with food, but he works in town and it is always late. Did you think there was nobody here?"

"Well, yes."

"Look, I've got some seeds here you can have," and she gave Annabel some small envelopes with seeds from her plants.

“These are snap dragons and this one is called Love-in-the-mist. Do you like the names?”

Then looking at me, “please call round again. It is so kind of you.”