

The Christmas Rose

*a new short story
by Rus VanWestervelt
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"The Christmas Rose"

by Rus VanWestervelt

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Dedication:

*To Patrick and Sandra, whose sons Ryan and Danny, respectively,
passed away far too early in their young lives.
May their spirits, and their love,
live on forever
in the hearts of all who loved them – and you.*

1.

Dear Alice and Anna:

It is very early Christmas morning. You are both still asleep, and I have just returned from what was (I am fairly certain) my final journey to and from the Big Hill. The two white roses that will go in your stockings are next to me, along with two gifts wrapped in white paper adorned with small, hand-painted roses. They are beautiful, as always.

Tonight, though, they have even greater meaning. Last Christmas, for the first time, you asked me about those white roses and the gifts wrapped in the pretty white paper. Do you remember? I smiled, and I told you to simply enjoy their beauty and that, someday, I would tell you the full story when you are ready. At that time, I thought that I had plenty of time to wait for you to get a little older.

I was wrong.

I don't think you are old enough yet to understand any of this, and I certainly don't think I could just sit down and tell you (I am sure that my tears would get in the way far too much, and it would take away from the beautiful story of the Christmas rose and its legacy that is bigger than any of us). So, I think I'm going to do my best here on these blank pages and write it all down for you. It's time that I do this now anyway. I can't trust my memory for too much longer. Things seem to be progressing pretty fast now and, well -

No. I think I'll just stick with the story behind the beautiful Christmas roses. Like I said already, none of this is about me, any-

way.

This town has changed very little since I was your age. Old Emily's Estate on the Big Hill (at least that's what we used to call it when we were kids) is as beautiful as ever, and although our house is part of a newer development here in Luther's Village, the rest of the town has remained true to its good, traditional feel. Your great-grandparents (that would be my Grams and Pop Pop) were the original owners of what is now our home, and your bedroom was the very same room I stayed in when we would come to visit them every Easter and Christmas.

The view from your window is the same, too. I could see Old Emily's Estate lit up at night, just like you can now. Funny how that name has held up, even long after she passed away. Those single white candles in each window mean a lot more to me now than they did then. Believe me. One day, they will seem even more beautiful to you, too, as you will see them from a very different perspective.

I'll get to that soon enough, though.

Old Emily was legendary to us while she was still alive. She died about a week before we arrived that Christmas when I turned 17. For years, all of the kids had believed the tales that had been spread about her. Emily Starling, lone inhabitant to the mansion that rested on the highest point here in Luther's Village, was a wealthy, lonely old woman. For 364 days every year, those big iron gates that separated us from the winding driveway to her home stayed shut—locked tight for so long that we believed they would rust themselves shut forever. But on that one day, December 24, she would open those black, rusty gates and allow a select few to enter on foot.

On that night before each Christmas, a handful of town elders would make the mile-long pilgrimage up the winding driveway to her house. As kids, we would watch them from a distance as we made snowmen along the wooded ridge (when we were fortunate enough to have snow on the ground). Each elder brought a single wrapped gift (they were all quite small) and homemade, aged spirits (your great grandparents would always take their own *Quarant Quatre*). Once, I saw them return just after midnight, and their arms were filled with so much more.

We never knew exactly what they took up, and we definitely never knew what they brought back. All we could ever see were single white flowers peeking out of the bags they brought down. My Pop Pop was an elder, and he would make the trek every year, though we never spoke of it. Nobody did. That's just how it was.

The rumors among us kids were wild. Some swore that the elders brought offerings, like sacrifices, to Old Emily. (I'm not going to go into too much detail about that here, though. You girls are just too young to hear about that.) Others believed that she was older than the town itself, and that she would never die. Every Christmas Eve, she would receive something from the elders that made her live another year.

I'm sure that, in time, you will be able to imagine what that was. But like I said before, I'm not going to be the one to talk to you about any of that.

In that year when I was 17 and Old Emily had finally passed on, everything was different here at Grams and Pop Pop's house. They were sad, for sure, and very reflective, as if they had lost one of their own relatives. They both hugged me more than they had ever done before (and since, for that matter, until the year when they died themselves long before you were born).

My parents and I had arrived on the 23rd of December that year, like always. When we pulled into the driveway, many from the town were walking back from the graveyard. They had just laid Emily Starling to rest, and there sure were a lot of quiet people milling about the streets. It looked more like the third week in a hard Winter's January than just a few days before Christmas. Their sadness was just too heavy, I guess. They wore their grief like a heavy wool blanket, unable to shake the bitter chill of the winter air.

When my Grams and Pop Pop returned to the house, they both did their best to put on a smile for us. Your grandparents hugged them as I stood awkwardly by. Soon enough, we were all ushered into the house, and a sense of routine seemed to return. At least for a few moments.

Just after the sun had set and the fire in the living room had brought some warm comfort to me, your Great Grams called me into the kitchen. She was a round, fastidious woman who was always

happy about the food she was cooking, and she was preparing a feast that smelled just delicious.

“Andrew,” she said, “I decided that this year, on the occasion of you turning 17, I would make you two of those pecan pies you love so much.” And she held up two fingers crippled with arthritis, and danced them in the air like crooked sticks.

I gave her the gentlest of hugs (she seemed so fragile then – but compared to who she had become the year she died, I guess she was okay back in the day).

“Thank you, Grams,” I offered, but the smile she offered turned to concern very quickly.

“There has been a lot of change around here this year with Miss Emily passing on,” she said. “But you’ve changed a little too since we saw you in March. You are growing up too quickly, Andrew, and I can tell that you are itching to get out of high school and move on to bigger things.”

Grams could always get right to the point with me. I liked that.

“I am ready. You’re right,” I replied. “I just don’t know what that means. Where we live in Solomon’s is beautiful, but I’ve never felt any real affinity for the place since we moved down there. Something’s missing.”

“Most people feel that way at your age. Don’t fight it,” she smiled. “But don’t let it consume you, either.”

I hugged her again, and I could feel her fragile fingers wrapped around me, fighting for just another second before finally letting go. When she did, she held me at her thin arms’ length and looked directly into my eyes.

The hazel hue in her own eyes captured colors that I never even knew existed.

“There’s something else, Andrew, about this Christmas Eve that we haven’t shared with you yet,” she said. “Pop Pop and your father will explain everything to you – what they can, at least.”

And here is where everything changed for me.

“It looks like you have been invited to join them tomorrow night up to the Big Hill.”

Immediately, I could hear the fears, the resistance, formulating in my mind.

Me? To the Big Hill? Why? And why is anybody going up there at all? She's dead now, right? -Gosh, that sounds so cold. I didn't mean it like that. But if she's not there anymore, why does anybody need to go back up there?

"Your grandfather will explain most of it to you, along with your father. The rest of it, though? Good luck, Andrew. I don't think they even know what to expect."

That night, stuffed with pecan pie and Grams' classic steamers made with pure vanilla, I sat on the edge of my bed and looked out of my window, staring at Emily's home atop Big Hill. The single white lights were in each window, as they had always been, but every window on every floor had now been draped shut. No additional light. No movement. Nothing.

The house itself looked as if it had been in mourning for Emily's passing, if not dead itself.

There's nothing more we can do, Luther. The house - all of it - is no more. I am so sorry. We did our best. . . .

Of course I didn't believe any of it. I knew that somebody had to be in that house, someone who probably had a lot to do with whatever was going to happen tomorrow night.

How much will I be allowed to know? I wondered.

I tucked myself under the covers, and as I drifted off to sleep, I was sure that a single curtain in one of Emily's windows had been pushed aside, and a woman dressed in white watched over me as I dreamed of the next night's journey: a Christmas Eve tradition of secrecy that I was about to join on the hallowed grounds of Emily Starling's estate.



2.

The air on that Christmas Eve was heavy, a cold and saturated gray that hovered over all of us as we made our final preparations for Christmas day. Your grandmother had some last-minute shopping to do, and I was glad to go with her to Hutzlers and Hoschild Kohn's, where the decorations were always so beautiful throughout the store. We stopped by Woolworth's for stocking stuffers and peppermint sundaes, our little gift to ourselves for making it through the crazy crowds.

By the time we got home, Grams had cooked another big meal, and we sat together largely in silence, passing the mashed potatoes and sliced ham, the string beans and the cranberry sauce, as the sounds of silverware on Grams' finest China plates replaced our words.

When we finished, I noticed that Pop Pop gave a nod to Grams. She brought out fresh black coffee to him, my father, and me. That had never happened before, and at first I thought it was some kind of mistake. She and mom went into the kitchen, and I then realized that this was it; the time had come. They were going to reveal the secret of Emily and the annual trek up to the highest peak in Luther's Village.

"Andrew," my father began, "when we finish our coffee, it will be just about time to join the other elders in the community and head up to Miss Starling's home. I know that you and your friends have heard - and have probably created yourselves - a lot of rumors about her and the big house on top of the hill."

I nodded, but didn't say a word.

"I have heard most of them," he continued, "and none of

them are true. Mrs. Starling was a normal person like you and me. There were no rituals or ceremonies, and she certainly wasn't some super human who was outliving all of us, although there were qualities about her that seemed to be timeless."

"I never believed any of those rumors anyway, Dad," I offered, but he could tell I was lying.

He smiled, then continued. "Your grandfather and I both agree that it is time you joined us. A few other teens will be heading up with us, too. Jake Bearing is going up with his dad, and Steven Sayers is going in place of his father, who is just too sick to make the trip this year."

"But they are both 18, right?" I asked.

"That's right, Andrew, a year older than you. And they've lived here all their lives. You will be the youngest, and the only person joining us who doesn't live in Luther's Village."

The mug was warm in my hands, and I raised it to take a sip, buying myself a few extra seconds to figure out how to ask what I was thinking.

Finally, I just said it, trying not to sound ungrateful. "Then why am I going if I don't live here? Isn't it some kind of rule that you have to be living in Luther's Village to be a part of your group that gets to go up?"

Your great grandfather smiled and leaned toward me from the other side of the table. "What matters more than anything else," he offered, "is that those who make the annual journey are sincere; they must make a promise to carry on certain traditions."

He then turned to my father, who nodded as if giving him permission to continue.

"Andrew, your father and I have been talking about this for a few years now. Someday, you will inherit this house. Along with it comes the responsibility to carry out Miss Starling's traditions."

It was all too much for me to take in at that age (which is why I guess I am writing this down for you now instead of telling you in person). I just nodded in response, took another sip of my coffee, and looked at my father.

"Don't you want this house, Dad?"

"We are too settled in Solomon's Island, Andrew. Besides—"

He paused for a long time, and I began to worry that I had said something wrong or disrespectful. He finished his coffee, wiped his mouth with the decorative Christmas linen, and turned to me with a grim smile.

“She wanted you. Not me.”

Before I could respond, Grams came through the kitchen door with the *Quarant Quatre* in a handcrafted bottle, the cork sealed in wax.

“Do you have the other package taken care of?” she asked Pop Pop. He nodded, finished his coffee, and pushed away from the table.

“It’s time,” my father said. “Get your scarf and gloves, Andrew. It’s colder up there on The Hill.”



3.

There were 23 of us outside the tired, heavy gate that remained shut. We huddled close, shared warm greetings, and I nodded without saying too much when some of the other elders welcomed me to the gathering. I knew most of them; few people around Luther's Village remained indoors, especially during Christmas. Our group that had gathered outside of Emily's gates seemed to represent the core of what this town has meant to many of us for a long time.

Pop Pop stood by the gate and called for our attention. His voice was no louder than it had been just minutes before as we sat around the dining room table, drinking hot coffee and talking about this very moment.

"Tonight signifies the end of one era, and the beginning of another," he said, as puffs of white air followed his words and quickly dissipated in the cold night. "The death of Emily Starling provides us all with an opportunity to carry on her legacy and pass down the traditions that have mattered so much to the children and their families here in Luther's Village for nearly 150 years."

Many of the elders nodded, and a few whispered words in agreement. I looked around and tried to understand what traditions he was talking about.

"Joining us tonight are some new friends who will help us in carrying on that tradition. We welcome Jake Bearing and Steven Sayers, as well as my own grandson, Andrew. Gentlemen, we are grateful to have you with us this evening."

The 20 men who surrounded us tucked their packages under their arms and offered a muffled round of applause. I looked at

Jake and Steven, and it seemed like they were just as curious as I was about these traditions and legacies.

One of the elders, Ben Steward, stepped forward and walked to the gate. He held up a key and spoke to us, as if he were reciting a passage he memorized long ago.

“Once a year, we are granted permission to unlock these gates and join Miss Emily Starling for an evening of gratitude and charity.” Mr. Steward bowed his head, as if realizing that the speech he had delivered for so many years no longer applied with the passing of Emily.

“Tonight, however, we have been granted permission, posthumously by Miss Starling, to return to her estate on Christmas Eve. None of us here has any idea what to expect. So tonight, we are all together, new and old, in our journey.”

Ben Steward raised the key high in the air and said, “In your name, Miss Emily Starling, we carry on your tradition.”

Ben turned, unlocked the gate, and pulled the heavy doors open. A whisper of cold air rushed past us as we stood in front of the long driveway.

For the next 20 minutes, I don’t remember any of us speaking as we walked the narrow and winding path that led us to the top of the Big Hill. I did my best to stay in the middle of the pack as the older men led with a slow but consistent stride, though in my youth I wanted to sprint to the top and see what waited for us. Charity? Tradition? Legacy? I racked my brain trying to make sense of it all, and in the process, I nearly missed the fact that it had begun to snow.

By the time we hit our last little switchback in the winding driveway, the greens that lined the side of the road were dusted with snow. Somehow, the purity of the snowflakes seemed to make the green leaves more vibrant. In fact, everything seemed more alive as we approached the house. Born out of my anxiety to see the late Emily Starling’s estate was an unexpected energy, a surge of life and color and light.

The house was magnificent. As many times as I had seen the home through my tiny bedroom window back at our own house, I never imagined it would be so beautiful close up. We stepped

through two towering, all-glass doors and stood in an oversized atrium, a beautifully decorated space with polished hardwood floors. Several freshly cut Christmas trees stood tall in and around the room, all but one adorned with handmade ornaments and bright, colorful lights. Pine roping lined the banisters and railings, and potted poinsettias splashed the glossy floors with green, white, and red reflections. The entire room felt like some Hollywood-designed set for a big-budget TV Christmas Special. I would not have been surprised to see Amy Grant, or even Bing Crosby, emerge from one of the many decorated doorways and begin singing “White Christmas” personally to us.

In fact, though, just the opposite happened, and I could tell by the faces of the elders that the absence of Emily Starling was now very real to all of them.

After a moment of unexpected silence, where a few did their best to check their emotions, a few of the elders whispered short instructions to carry on what must have been their longstanding traditions. On one table near an 8-foot tree decorated with white doves and cobalt blue lights, they left their homemade wines and spirits. And on another table on the opposite side of the room, next to a bare tree with simple white lights, they placed their small, wrapped boxes.

As Ben Steward and another elder started serving the liqueur (even I received a few ounces of Pop Pop’s *Quarant Quatre* in a small dessert wine glass), three others (your grandfather, along with Jake Bearing’s dad and his brother) started unwrapping the boxes at the other table. In each was a single, handmade ornament, a uniquely crafted red rose, that was tied to a thin gold string.

I didn’t wait to be told what to do. Steven, Jake, and I joined them. Together, we decorated the tree as some of the other elders began humming “Silent Night.” The room was filled with music, light, and something more.

I wasn’t sure if it was the *Quarant Quatre*, acting like some kind of elixir that heightened the magic of Christmas Eve, but I found myself in a space caught between my own reality and some ethereal, spiritual place. I had never met Emily Starling, but I felt her with us in that moment – and for the rest of the night – as we

brought the town's love, ornament by ornament, into her home – a place from which she watched over all of us in that long, white gown for so many years.

Ever since that night, I have carried with me the spiritual beauty of those moments, a beauty that I am doing my best to pass on to you now.

We finished decorating the tree, and the rest of the elders gathered around us as we joined hands; some quietly wept. I was so caught up in the experience, the mixture of melancholy and joy that made me realize the spirit of Christmas was much bigger than any one of us. I was surrounded by members of my community who understood something deeper, something that reached far beyond them. And, especially on this night, in the wake of the passing of Emily Starling, that something transcended our own existence here on earth.

After the tears slowed and our hands fell by our sides, Pop Pop moved to the center of the great room.

“Andrew, Jake, Steven. Please join me.”

I turned to look at the other elders, expecting one of them to step forward. Surely there was another member of Luther's Village named Andrew. But nobody joined Jake and Steven as they approached Pop Pop. Instead, they all looked at me with gentle smiles of encouragement and, I think, gratitude.

I looked into my father's eyes, and he placed a hand on my shoulder.

“It is okay, son,” he said. “Like I said earlier, this is what Emily wanted.”

I turned toward Pop Pop and joined him, along with the other two young men, in the center of the room. Together, we faced the others. The warm ambiance of the room seemed to hold us together as the echo of “Silent Night” continued to resonate within me. Among the tenor and bass notes of the elders, I sensed the subtle tones of a lovely alto, and I wondered if Emily had, at times, sung with them.

“As most of you know,” began Pop Pop, “our work here is not yet done. In a few moments, Andrew, Jake, and Steven will lead us through these doors behind us, and we will follow the path of the

lovely Christmas roses that Emily had planted so many years ago. As is our tradition, please find a few select roses to clip and carry with you as we make our way to Emily's Christmas Chateau. I think our number this year is just a little over 150, so each of you needs to select about 7 roses."

Collectively, the elders raised their glasses.

"But before we leave, you also know that we are commissioned to take care of some important business – a ritual that happens only once or twice in our lifetimes."

Pop Pop put his arm around my shoulder, brought me close to his side, and raised his own glass. I looked at him as he spoke.

"The passing of Emily Starling has left us with a vacancy, and it has been the tradition since the founding of Luther's Village in 1852 that the keeper of this estate, if he or she is in good mind to do so, shall determine who inherits its land atop Big Hill and the responsibilities that come with it. In previous generations, the inheritor has always been a child of the deceased. This year, however, is different, as Miss Emily had no children. As a result, she made her choice clear to us several years ago."

I turned to the elders to see who that might be, but when I did, they were all looking directly at us, with glasses raised, now in our own direction.

"Gentlemen," Pop Pop continued, now looking at the three of us. "I am not certain that you remember this, but seven years ago, when you were on the verge of becoming teenagers, you took it upon yourselves during that early Spring vacation to breathe new life into our Town Square. Andrew, do you remember? You spent the whole week with us that March."

I nodded, as Jake and Steven cracked smiles. "Oh, I remember, Pop Pop," I said. "We set out to own that acre of land if it killed us."

"And own it you did, Andrew. By mid-June, many of the flowers you planted exploded with summer color, and it became the epicenter of beauty for Luther's Village." Pop Pop took a step toward the towering windows by the front entrance. "Gentlemen, follow me please."

We did, of course, and when we stepped up to the window,

we could see a clear view of that acre of land in the Town Square. The lights lining the gazebo in the center of the square cast a radiant white light in all directions. It captured the hues of the red, yellow, and white winter flowers we planted along the pathways leading to and from the small open structure.

“The work that you did, gentlemen, brought much happiness to Miss Emily. In a moment, you will understand why. Without any pushing or prodding, the three of you made the decision to make this town a better place for everyone, whether you knew them or not. That mattered a great deal to her. It is something that she never forgot.”

Jake draped his arms around Steven and me, never taking his eyes off of the gazebo. “We never intended it to have such a big impact. We just wanted it to look better for everyone, at any time. That was it.”

“Well,” said Pop Pop, “Sometimes that’s all it takes: the desire to make things better.”

I turned to face him and the others. “What does any of this have to do with Miss Starling and her decision for us to inherit her estate?”

I will tell you, girls, that just saying that out loud was staggering to my mind that the three of us had just been gifted the golden jewel of Luther’s Village. It all seemed too surreal to even mutter out loud.

Your great grandfather turned and walked all the way to the other end of the great room. He stood before two large glass doors, identical to the ones we had entered when we had arrived at the estate.

He looked over his shoulder in our direction, but never looked directly at us.

“I think the answer you seek is on the other side of these doors.”

I looked at Jake and Steven, and together we walked toward Pop Pop. The other elders filed in behind us.

I squinted out the glass door but saw nothing. It was as dark as the night.

“I’m sorry, Pop Pop,” I offered, “but I don’t see anything.

Everything is black.”

He just smiled, moved his glance to the right of the doors, and locked in on a single switch that was on the wall.

“Andrew, why don’t you flip that little switch and spread some light for all of us.”

I walked to the wall bathed in decorative light from the trees, placed my thumb on the switch, and pushed it up.

At first, I thought that I did something wrong, as nothing changed outside. It was still pitch black. But within a few seconds, I saw the beginning of the transformation. Lights closest to the glass doors began to warm, illuminating a stone path lined with red and white Christmas roses.

Pair by pair, each set of lights along the path turned on, and the stone walkway wound its way around decorated trees that lit up as well. Each tree had its own theme, much like the trees inside the great room.

The path worked its way up another hill I never knew existed, and it stopped in front of a beautiful white chateau, a small cottage now beaming with the brilliance of a thousand white lights. Under its light were red and white Christmas roses, all in full bloom, dusted with a light snow.

“It’s absolutely beautiful,” I said. “And these roses. I always marveled at them each Christmas morning. Looking at them now, though, I don’t think they look like any flower I have ever seen before.”

“That is another miracle of Christmas that Emily Starling spent her whole life working on,” said Pop Pop. “You can’t see it from here, but to the right, about another 100 yards into the woods, is a rather large greenhouse that Emily had built back in the early ‘60s. These ‘roses’ that line this path are a variation of Camellias that she cultivated for decades until she was able to have the bloom beautifully in December, just in time for Christmas. There are no other flowers quite like these.”

The flowers stretched nearly two feet in the air along the stone path. “I just thought that they were the real Christmas roses, like the ones from the story about the roses growing from the tears of a young girl who had no gift to give Christ.”

“Those roses,” he replied, “are highly poisonous. Emily would have never allowed them to be shared with the children on Christmas morning.”

I opened the glass doors, and the fragrance of the flowers found us immediately.

“They smell wonderful, don’t they? Most Camellias carry no fragrance,” said Pop Pop. “Emily, once again, found a way to make them the most beautifully scented flower throughout Luther’s Village.”

I felt hypnotized by the beauty and the scent of everything I believed Christmas to be.

Pop Pop gestured to the path. “Well, then. Shall we all take a little walk? It is getting late, after all. And it is Christmas Eve. There is still much work to do.”



4.

As Pop Pop had mentioned, he allowed Jake, Steven, and me to lead the way to the chateau. This time, though, unlike our walk up to the estate, I took the time to take in the beauty of the flowers and the view from the Big Hill. Below us, Luther's Village loomed, a glowing beacon that represented everything Christmas was supposed to be about. There was nothing big about our town. We never pushed a population over 500. But tonight? We looked as if we were the brightest light in the entire land.

From here, where Emily Starling, a voluntary recluse, spent many years watching over us, our little village was a timeless reminder of what is always possible for each of us, and for all of us.

We reached the chateau, and I noticed that the elders kept their distance behind us along the path. As Jake, Steven, and I stepped on to the wraparound porch and approached the simple wooden door, we could hear the whispers of "Silent Night" fill the air once again.

It was the second most beautiful moment we shared that night, as the elders' voices filled the night with an indescribable reverence.

I gripped the brass handle, pushed it toward the porch floor, and felt the door open on its own.

A warm light of soft yellows and greens spilled on to the three of us as we peered inside. What we saw left us breathless. In our silence, the sweet song of the elders filled our hearts with the miracle of Christmas all around us.

In the back of the room stood the most magnificent tree that we had seen all evening. It was easily 15 feet high and decorated with

ornaments made by children – some even by our own hands – from as far back as the mid 1800’s.

Under the tree, and covering nearly every inch of space in the chateau, were hand-wrapped gifts of all different sizes. Roses of different shapes and sizes were painted on the plain white paper covering each gift.

Attached to each gift – there were 157 to be exact – was the name of a child in Luther’s Village.

We each looked toward the other, in complete disbelief, as we recalled the gifts wrapped similarly that we had received as young children.

I looked back at my father, at Pop Pop, and the other elders. They continued to sing, but some were now shedding tears.

I remembered the Christmas globe I received the year we filled the Town Square with flowers. Inside the beautiful glass orb was a cottage surrounded by flowers. When I gave it a quick twist upside down, the snow would fall gently on rose petals, just like the ones we had planted.

It was then I remembered that it was wrapped in plain white paper, decorated with small red roses.

Jake turned to the elders. “This is where all those “mystery” gifts came from when I was a kid? What is this place? Was Miss Emily some kind of Mrs. Claus or something?”

As the elders continued to sing, Pop Pop stepped forward and joined us on the porch.

“I guess you could say that, Jake. But this is much bigger than Miss Emily. As it is much bigger than you, Steven, and Andrew.”

We all looked at him, waiting for him to continue.

“This is merely the fulfillment of Jeremy Luther’s wish to hold on to the spirit of Christmas in our small village. More than 150 years ago, he pulled together a small group of town elders, just like us, and shared his vision to provide selflessly for the children in the darkest hours of the year: Christmas time. He wanted them to know love, to be the recipient of kindness, so that when they became older, they felt compelled to give to others what they had received.”

Pop Pop offered a wide smile to us all.

"The original inhabitants of our little village were not rich, by any standard. Luther, on the other hand, was one of the most wealthy members throughout Maryland. He established a charitable fund that would supply gifts to the children of his village for hundreds of years to come."

We looked back at the gifts, overwhelmed with the beauty of such anonymity, of such kindness.

"The three of you are evidence that Luther's vision is, indeed, timeless. No technological breakthroughs, no war, no act of terror can ever threaten the genuine goodness of humanity. What you did for Luther's Village warmed all of our hearts, and Miss Emily's especially. She knew that you would be the perfect successors to carry on Jeremy Luther's vision of bringing joy to all of the young children in our town."

Steven picked up one of the gifts and read the tag.

"To Danielle, the sweetest ballerina the town has ever seen."

"Hey," he offered. "I know this girl! She's not even 10 yet and she is already doing things on that stage that most dancers only dream of accomplishing!"

Jake found a long, thin package and held it in his hands like a fishing rod. He read the tag and smiled. "I think this is going to make Josiah a very, very happy fisherman."

I blurted out a battery of questions to my grandfather. *How does she know what gifts to buy? Where did the money come from? When did she buy them? Why don't we ever see her in town? Who wrapped all of them?*

He answered none of them and, instead, smiled.

"So many questions, my grandson. If you simply believe in the spirit of Christmas, you will realize that the answers are immaterial to what matters more than anything else."

My father joined us inside the chateau and looked at his watch. "What we can't ignore, everyone, is the time. We really must get going."

The rest of the elders joined us in the chateau and began collecting gifts. They seemed to be organized by street.

I looked at him incredulously. "You mean we deliver them? Tonight?"

“Not only do we deliver them, Andrew. We share the spirit of the Christmas rose with all of the children as well.”

Jake, Steven, and I rolled the stems of the flowers between our fingers and inhaled deeply their unique fragrance. I remembered receiving them in my stocking as a child, putting them in water even before breakfast, and savoring their scent among the aromas of the fresh pine and Grams’ cooking.

“We held on to them as long as we could,” I reminisced. “And when they started to turn, Grams and I would press them between the heaviest books we could find. When I would come back for Spring vacation, she would share the dried flower with me. I could still smell Christmas between the pressed petals. It made me think that the spirit of Christmas was always with me.”

“Luther’s vision,” said Ben Steward. “We all have similar memories, and they are similar to the memories of the children – now grown and gone – that have lived here since Franklin Pierce was our president.”

“And it is the hope of all of us,” said Pop Pop, “that the children of Luther’s Village 150 years from now have similar memories of Christmas and kindness.”

We wept as we nodded; Jake, Steven, and I agreed to carry on the wishes of the elders, of Emily Starling, and of all who preceded her.

Without any more hesitation, the elders distributed large sacks to each of us, and we began to fill our bags with presents. We clutched the handful of picked Christmas roses and began our descent back in to town. We knew that the new sunrise would be breaking the horizon in just a few hours. It was time to begin our final work for the night.



5.

When we finished delivering the gifts and Christmas roses just before dawn, Jake, Steven, and I headed back to the gazebo in the Town Square. Most of the winter flowers we planted were now in full bloom. The light snow now falling all around us had dusted them with white, and I felt like everywhere I might go, now, could feel like it did just hours ago on the Big Hill. I looked up toward the estate; the chateau was nowhere to be seen.

“Not exactly what I planned for in my life,” Steven said. “I’ve been spending so much time here with Dad being sick. I guess I just wanted to get out of here for awhile, you know?”

“I don’t think you should fight that,” I replied. “There’s three of us here. We can take turns, right? I mean, there aren’t any rules about how the three of us do this.”

“And who knows anyway,” Jake added. “Maybe Miss Emily was planning on that. Maybe we don’t just do this here in the Village. Maybe we spread it out, you know? God knows we need more of this stuff happening all over the place.”

Steven nodded, and we fell silent. None of us wanted this night to end.

As light continued to spill over the horizon, Jake stood up, walked over to the Christmas roses, and brushed off the dusting of snow.

“So I guess this is all hush-hush then, right?” He asked. “No one can ever know about this?”

“That’s right, Jake,” I replied. “Even if they guess it right; it has to remain our little secret. For always.”

“But when will we know when the time is right to pass along

the legacy?”

I looked at the estate, and Emily’s candles still burned in the windows.

“We will know when it is the right time, just as Miss Emily had known it was the right time to pass the responsibility along to us. Until then, all we can do is what has been asked of us. Right?”

We all agreed, and for many years we never thought of successors or ending our run on bringing joy and kindness to so many of our own children. Steven settled his family in Hunter’s Valley and started some new traditions of his own in that small town. Jake and I stayed. We never looked back since that Christmas Eve when I was just 17.

But just like for Miss Emily, there comes a time when things change. And here we are today, on the verge of that transition that happens just once or twice in our lifetimes.

Yes. The time has come to pass along the legacy to the two of you far earlier than I had ever wished. Although you are too young now to read these words, your guardian angels, Mr. Jake and Mr. Steven as well, will know when the time is right.

As for me, I hope that I don’t have to give you this letter for a long time. The doctors are trying some new medicine with me that they’ve never used before, and if it works, —

It is late, and it is time to finish this letter. I guess what I want the two of you to know is that every one of us is given the chance to change the world. We don’t always expect that chance when it comes by, and sometimes we don’t even recognize it immediately. But it’s there. And when that opportunity comes your way, seize it. Embrace it. Because when you do, the change you make for yourselves, for your village, even for your world, means something so much greater than any of us can ever imagine.

The light in the room darkens, and I look up from the page.

“Daddy?”

Little Alice’s silhouette fills the doorframe to our family room. Her white nightgown is painted in the colorful hues of the Christmas tree lights.

“Alice. It is too early for you to be awake.”

"I saw the woman in one of the windows of that big house on the hill again. She was beautiful, Daddy, and she was looking right at me. She was all dressed in pretty white, too."

I take her in my arms and hold her tightly.

"I'm sure it was just the long gingham drapes blowing in the wind, sweetheart. They fool me sometimes, too."

"No. It was the beautiful woman in white. I'm sure."

She looks at the stack of handwritten pages on my desk and sees her name.

"Are you writing me a letter, Daddy?"

"Yes, Alice. It is for both you and Anna."

"Can I read it?"

"Not just yet. There will be a time for that, but not now."

She picks up one of the Christmas roses, twirls it between her fingers, and smells it. A smile fills her face as the lights from the tree find their way into her eyes, a glistening prism of Christmas that reminds me of her great grandmother.

"Why did you take these out of our stockings, Daddy?"

"I guess I just wanted to smell them too, Alice. They really are beautiful, aren't they?"

Alice giggles. "Of course they are, Daddy. They are Christmas roses! They are what Christmas is all about. They last forever, even after they die."

I pull her into my arms again, kiss her gently on the top of her head, and push a giggle from the deepest part of my heart.

"Yes, Alice. Even after they die."

She kisses me back on the top of my own head and heads back to the stairs.

"You smell good like the roses, Daddy. Just like Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Alice," I whisper, twirling the Christmas rose between my fingers.

"Goodnight, Daddy, and Merry Christmas to you, too. I love you."

"I love you too, Angel."

I wait for her to climb the stairs, jump on her bed, and turn out the light.

I turn back to the letter.

“And that’s forever,” I whisper as I write, wiping the tears
from my tired eyes.

“Just like Christmas.”



The End.