

NICOLE

Long, long before you were born, there was a small village nestled in the hills. The people who lived there were farmers or earned their bread in the mill. They all knew each other's names and their children's names, whose cow had calved and whose grandmother was ill. Who was lonely and who was sad.

And in this village lived a man with a garden so lovely no one could ever walk by without looking in. There were campanulas white and blue, lavender and baby's breath, cinnamon-scented carnations, love-in-the-mist, hostas hiding in the shade, a purple clematis twining through the apple tree. And roses, roses everywhere.

Each rose the man knew by its name: Ghislaine de Féligonde, Madame Plantier, Compassion, Felicité et Perpetué, New Dawn and Swan Lake. He loved them all, but there was one he loved like a father loves his daughter - Nicole. The bud was the palest of greens, the edges flushed with pink and as she opened her silky petals one by one, they turned white like snowflakes. Deep in the center the filaments shone like a sun spun of honey-coloured threads.

Butterflies fluttered around Nicole, bees buzzed a kiss. Neighbours came, friends came, and they all begged for one blossom, just one blossom. The man was always glad to share her beauty and proud, so proud, because he knew no one with a rose like Nicole. Every year the bush grew stronger, every year there were more pale green buds, more white blossoms.

Then one day in July it rained - which was surprising because not a cloud darkened the afternoon sky. The men, the women and the many children of the village were all in the fields shaking and raking the hay. Suddenly, a sharp clap of thunder made the hot air tremble. Yet no cloud, no cloud darkened the pale blue sky. The summer breeze became a wind and the wind became a storm and the storm blew into the hay - the hay that had been raked so carefully into stacks. It blew and blew until the air was thick with dried summer grass and the sun had disappeared behind thick clouds of hay, and the sky was dark, as dark as night.

And then a flash of lightning like a shiny silver sword split the clouds and for a second was searching, searching for a tree to unload his force upon.

But the hay in the air confused the flash, and in his confusion he hit a rose - Nicole. When he saw what his raw and unbound strength had wrongly caused, he tried to pull back. But it was too late. Nicole's stems were burnt, her petals strewing the grass - like snowflakes in summer.

The flash of lightning was ashamed, so ashamed. How could he, the giant of the skies, hit a rose, a mere flower? He thundered his shame at the rain clouds valleys away "Come over at once and cover this village, these fields!" He could not bear to see the black and broken rose, nor the men and women running across the bare stubbles of grass, their arms stretched up to the sky. He could not bear to hear their weeping and wailing, their plaintive cries. "What, oh Lord, shall we feed our cattle through the winter? What, oh Lord, what?"

Slowly, the rain clouds drifted over and single drops began to fall. The farmers shouldered their rakes and picked up the empty hampers, the women gathered the children, and they all set off for home. The men were still cursing, the women lamenting, the children dragging behind.

Not very far down the road, in the bend by the mill, they nearly bumped into a man coming the opposite way. Not looking where he was going, he was stumbling along blindly - his back bent low, his eyes fixed on the road, tears were streaming down his face. The farmers hardly recognized him - it was the man with the garden, - so small, so old had he become. Now they stopped and asked what his grief was. And he told them about the deadly flash of lightning that had killed Nicole, the rose he had cared for like a father cares for a child, about the snowflakes on the summer grass.

The clouds by now had formed one thick grey mass. "Better heavy than never!" they hailed with glee and poured down tons and tons of sharp and icy pebbles. Quickly, the women grabbed their children, the farmers took the man by the arm and they all ran to the nearest tree to seek shelter.

There, under the ancient beech with branches as wide as a church, they sat down, in their midst, the man with the garden. They put their arms around him, and they all cried. They mourned the loss of Nicole, they mourned the loss of their hay. The afternoon grew into evening and the evening grew into night. And they cried and cried as everyone remembered having lost something dear, someone beloved. They held each other tightly, their closeness closing out some of the pain. Their grief was great, oh so great. When day dawned, the sky remained dark, which was surprising because not

a cloud darkened the morning sky.

A time passed that was neither short nor long. The man wandered through the village, the woods, the fields, day after day, week after week.

With the loss of Nicole he had lost his love for his garden, his love for life. He walked on and on, his head bent, his eyes fixed on the ground, without purpose, without hope. And so, one late afternoon, the sun already low, he came to the tree - the ancient beech under whose branches they had all gathered and cried. He sat down, leaning his tired back against the trunk, his hands blindly stroking the earth, his thoughts lost in the past. But then, his sleeve caught on the thorns of a twig, and he was forced to look. He could hardly trust his eyes. There, right at the trunk of the beech a tiny shoot of a rose! And what was more, right under a leaf, he could see a bud as fragile as a speck of hope.

Seeing this rose struggle for life in a place where there is no life for a rose, he forgot his own woes and remembered his love for his garden. And so he went home to fetch some tools. The people who saw him, bucket in one hand, spade in another, hurrying along the street were surprised for his head was high, his back straight. So they followed him to see for themselves.

Carefully - not to injure the plant,- the man pushed the spade into the ground. Carefully he lifted it out with plenty of soil around the delicate roots. Holding the clump with both hands, he placed it into his bucket. Almost smiling, he hurried home. Where would he plant it, he wondered. Then he remembered Nicole. Yes, that was the place. He dug a big hole, filled it with fresh earth and gently lowered the rose into the hole, stamped the ground firmly and watered the tiny plant.

The few leaves, the fine stem did not wilt, the rose began to grow. Sheltered from the northern wind, it grew stronger and taller every day.

What colour would the bloom be? The speck of hope became a tight round bud, first dark green, then turning paler and paler. The edges were flushed with pink. And as the bud unfolded petal after petal, the pink deepened and deepened until it was the colour of well-aged wine. Only the filaments, they were strangely clear - as clear as drops of dew in the rising sun.