

Eddie's Rose

It was Roger's fault. He was supposed to have remembered Great Uncle Eddie – and he didn't. Besides, it was Roger who was now making the fuss.

'We can't just leave him there,' he said worriedly, chewing the edge of his thumb – a habit that irked Marge no end.

'Well, he's not likely to notice.' Marge was blunt with pragmatism and she was right – Great Uncle Eddie wasn't likely to notice. Something to do with being dead and gone for the last twenty-two years.

'It's just not right,' continued Roger, 'it's not right to leave him with strangers. We'll have to get him back.'

Marge sighed. She knew from long experience that Roger would harp on and on about Eddie until the deed was done.

So they wrapped up and went to the house – Marge muttering with irritation, while Roger ignored her and worried his own worries. He had some vague hope that the buyers would, for some vague and unlikely reason, not have moved in yet. He was predictably wrong. The old face brick post-war house was clearly a hive of activity. A construction company had a sign up on the drive and there were piles of gravel and sand against the garden wall. Light streamed into the early evening from every window. Roger's anxiety increased. He chewed his thumb with a dogged, miserable determination.

'Well,' said Marge, 'go knock and tell them you need to dig up Eddie.'

Roger was appalled.

'I can't just go in there and tell them I have a dead relative in the garden! You're not supposed bury people in your garden!'

'Well, just go and ask for the rose bush then. It's not as if there's a body, for goodness sake!'

It was true. Eddie had been cremated all those years ago and his ashes had been lovingly placed under a rose bush by Great Aunt Joy, so that she could 'keep him close'. She had wanted a 'masculine' rose bush and had tried to find a blue flower, but in the end, the best she could do was a hybrid with an unusual lilac bloom. She had loved the bush, delighting in the way the pale flower always caught the first and last light. 'Like he's saying good morning and good night,' she had said to everyone and no-one in particular.

But, despite the rose bush's persistent greetings, everyone had effectively forgotten that Eddie was there, especially after Joy and her maiden sister had become frail. The needs of the living had superseded concerns for the ashes of the long dead.

But now Joy and her sister were gone – and Roger was worried for Eddie.

'Oh for goodness sake! Just knock!' Marge strode up to the door and rapped loudly. Roger hurried to her side and chewed his thumb.

The new homeowner, Ken Robinson, opened the door. Brief confusion clouded his rubicund features and then he beamed broadly.

‘Roger! Marge! How nice to see you. Have you come to check up on the house? Make sure it’s in safe hands?’

He hustled them inside, barely hearing Roger’s hesitant explanations of ‘seeing how you are settling in.’ He introduced them to his pretty, busy wife and shuffled them through the house, pointing out where walls were coming down, where new walls were going up, where windows were being remodelled.

‘We’re going to replace all the windows,’ he said cheerfully, ‘give us a month or two and you won’t recognise the old place!’

Roger looked vaguely mournful and tried to bring up the issue of Eddie’s rose bush.

‘Oh yes!’ said Ken enthusiastically, ‘Come and look outside – we have great plans!’

They were hustled onto the back patio where he spread his arms wide like a lord surveying his kingdom, and pronounced the landscaping, patio-laying, hot-tub-placing plans. Eddie’s rose bush and the others lurked in silent woodiness in the middle of the plans.

‘What about the roses?’ Roger ventured.

‘Oh, those. Well, they are clearly past their prime and really quite leggy now. I think they’ll just have to go.’ Ken pronounced cheerfully.

Roger shot Marge an alarmed look.

‘They really are quite old...’ he muttered, ‘sentimental. Um ...valuable.’

‘Yes. Old. They’ve really not been kept up,’ warbled Ken, waving away the words.

Roger gulped nervously. ‘No, really, there is quite a rare rose in amongst those. Um. A Blue Moon. It has a lilac flower – very unusual.’

Ken looked vaguely interested. ‘Really? Can’t say I’ve ever seen a lilac rose. Which one is it?’

Panic flooded Roger’s features as he scrutinised the dormant sticks of rose bush.

‘Um – third from left,’ he hazarded. ‘No, no, second. Yes. Fairly sure it’s the second.’ He grinned weakly.

Moving with a speed completely unexpected from a man of his size, Ken grabbed a dishtowel, tied it around the rose bush and announced loudly to his wife that ‘we’ll keep this one!’ And then, while Roger gawped helplessly and Marge glared at Roger, Ken expertly angled them back into the house. Before they really knew what was happening, they were positioned neatly on the doormat.

‘There you go!’ The new homeowner exclaimed jovially. ‘You can see that the house is in wonderful hands. Come back in the spring and have a good look at all we’ve done!’

The older couple mumbled their thanks and pulled smiles from somewhere as the door closed against them.

‘Well. That’s that,’ said Marge, stomping away without a backward glance.

But of course, it wasn’t.

Roger leapt out of bed shortly after one a.m. and rattled around noisily. Marge pushed herself up onto her elbows and glared. Roger was unfazed, bursting with excitement.

‘We’ll just have to go get Eddie back!’ he breathed, excitement at the proposed rescue mission oozing from every pore.

‘Oh for goodness sake!’ muttered Marge. But she watched from the upstairs window as Roger’s flashlight disappeared into the shed and he reappeared with a spade and a bucket.

And she was waiting when he returned an hour later, flushed and muddy with the dishcloth wrapped rose bush safely stowed in the bucket. There was a healthy chunk of earth attached to the roots.

‘I think I got all of him,’ said Roger, inspecting his work, ‘what’s left, of course, after 20 odd years.’ Marge smiled. There was a certain ridiculous magnificence to the feat.

Eddie’s rose loitered in the lounge overnight, the bucket leaving a round brown mark on the carpet.

In the morning, Roger dug a hole in a suitably sunny spot and planted out the rose bush, humming tunelessly the whole while. Marge watched, shook her head and smiled to herself.

The final weeks of winter crept by. There was nary a word from the Robinsons, although they must have been mystified at the loss of the rose. Needless to say, Marge and Roger found no need to go and inspect the improvements on the old house.

With the coming of spring, Eddie’s rose bush sprouted leaves and, eventually, some buds.

Early one morning when the blackbirds were communicating loudly from the garden edges, Marge noticed that the rose’s first bud was beginning to break out of its green calyx. She bent closer to inspect the flower and for a moment she thought her heart had stopped: the tightly furled petals were unmistakably orange.

For a moment Marge contemplated the rose bush, the emerging blossom in her hand. Then, with a quick look over her shoulder, she pinched off the bud and threw it into the groundcover.

It was several months later that Roger remarked over tea that Eddie’s rose bush was ‘very strange.’

‘It’s completely failed to bloom,’ he remarked in between sips of tea. ‘Maybe it really is too old. Or maybe the trauma of the move...?’

Marge smiled vaguely.

Eddie’s rose bush regarded them stoically from across the lawn.

