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**About the Roses**

Novel

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I was standing by the window and waiting for the sun to go down, because that was the rule:

if I didn't want any problems, I had to wait for the sun to go down.

At first, I wanted to count all the crosses, as I'd been planning for days, but I kept putting off my departure until twilight finally fell, so that every day, the counting of crosses had to be put off for the next day.

Now, however, I set off, I really set off, I remember that I'd already laced up my shoes when I realized that I should make myself a cup of tea first, so I went back into the kitchen, boiled water, poured it onto the mint leaves, and while the tea was brewing, I stepped over to the window and looked out, but when I looked at the window and I saw the setting sun, the rule immediately popped into my head, so that if I didn't want any problems, I had to stand by the window and wait for the sun to go down.

I don't know if other people are like this too, and if so, if there might be resemblances with my own situation, but I know that things have been this way with me for a long time, and sometimes these things just pop into my head.

For example I'm sitting on a bench looking around, or I'm outside on our land, pruning roses, or I'm walking somewhere in the street, because always or almost always, I have to go

somewhere and then suddenly a rule pops into my head, telling me I have to do this or that, or conversely, telling me that I may not do this or that thing until certain conditions materialize, or conversely, that I may not do such and such a thing until certain conditions cease materializing.

This is what happened as well when I stepped over to the window and looked out, because as soon as I saw the setting sun, a rule immediately appeared in my head — I must stay by the window until the sun went down — and, if I reckoned well, this would take at least one half-hour, which really wasn't too long, there were times when I had to wait longer because of other rules, so there was no problem with waiting, but there was a problem with the crosses, because if I stayed at the window for half an hour and waited for the sun to go down, I would have to put postpone counting the crosses yet again, as I couldn't count them in the dark.

Sometimes I feel a calling, or rather an obligation, to count certain things.

I have to count how many steps there are between two stories, how many birds fly past my window, how many slats there are on the bench where I'm sitting, in addition to many other things that I must count, so that at times I feel that I'm really just always counting, sometimes I count the iron bars on a fence, other times I count the electric poles between two street corners, and yet other times I count how many cars pass by until I get to the end of the street, and as for cars, I count them too in various ways, sometimes I count how many red or blue cars there are in a parking lot, other times I have to count how many license plates end in a certain number, and yet other times I have to count the spokes in a hubcap.

These are the counting tasks I complete, or tasks or ones similar to these, and they always have a meaning, that is, the results of the counting, the final total always has a meaning, various conclusions can be drawn from the final total concerning the most various kinds of things.

The reason why I wanted to count the crosses was because the doctor said I must drink a lot of liquids, lots of water and tea, and I took his advice, I began drinking quantities of water and tea, and because of that I had to urinate a lot, and on my way to the next checkup, I had to stop to take a leak, and while peeing I looked around everywhere, I looked at the cornfields to the right, I looked to see if a car was coming, I looked at the wheatfields to the left, I looked to see how high the birds were circling in the sky, because they were circling at various heights as if the sky had many different layers, and I remember that I looked at many other things as well, the bushes, the weeds, the acacia trees among the weeds, but in the end I only looked at a cross next to an acacia tree, because right then I noticed that I had stopped to urinate right by a wayside cross.

I looked at the cross's tin sheet with its four letters, I looked at the crown of thrones, its points broken off in many places, I looked at the nails, half-eaten by rust, driven into the cement beam, and I counted these nails many times over, because sometimes I have to count things many times over, here, for example, I only saw three nails: one in the middle of the tin sheet, one hammered into the grey feet, one nail pounded into the right hand, those were the only nails I saw, the left hand was missing, more precisely not only the hand, but the entire left arm was missing as if it'd been cut or sawed off, or at least this is what I inferred, looking at the regularly spaced cut marks.

After I finished peeing, I cut a path through the bushes and the weeds in order to look at the severed edge more closely, but when I saw wasps flying out of the aperture of the hollow body, a new rule immediately occurred to me: if I did not want to be mutilated by them, I would need to find another cross on the road on the way to Torniyos.

I turned around, walked to my car, and drove off, going very, very slowly, all the while watching the side of the road in case I saw another cross, but I strained my eyes in vain, I gawked in vain, for a long time I saw only bushes, weeds, and wild acacia trees, always the

same thing, bushes, weeds, and wild acacia trees, and after a while I was beginning to think that there would be problems as there seemed to be no more crosses on this road, when suddenly it occurred to me that I should stop, get out of the car, and continue my search on foot, keep on searching until I found something among the bushes and the weeds, a piece of wood, a clump of earth, a dried-out piece of dog shit, anything that could be called a cross, but I didn't stop, I kept the car moving along, all the while watching the side of the road for a cross, I passed the gas station and soon I would be in Tornyos, so I really was up shit's creek, suddenly I felt beetles climbing around in my head, but then at the next turn-off I noticed something in between the acacia trees, and as I got closer, I banged both hands on the steering wheel with joy, because this was really a cross, that is to say I breathed a sigh of relief and ceased my search, although it isn't always easy for me to leave off with these things, because in the centre of Tornyos I turned off to the right, and once again I was surveying the side of the road for a cross, only now I didn't have to wait too long: I had hardly left the village when, among the poppies and the elderberry, I saw the third cross.

Maybe it was from all the water and tea that I had drunk, or maybe it was from excitement, I don't know, but once again I felt that I had to urinate, so I pulled over, parked by the side of the road, then went in among the elderberry bushes, and while I was peeing I looked at the cross, the third cross, which was in an even worse state than the first one, because this one was not only missing one of its arms, but the entire body had been removed, and as far as that was concerned, even the cross itself was missing, so that altogether, from the pedestal, a concrete column, broken in two, rose up to the sky, which obviously could not really be called a cross, and yet I named it as one, so this, accordingly, was the third cross I found, although I did not want to think what connection this broken-off concrete column could have to my illness, and so as I finished peeing I began to focus my attention on a plastic water bottle, cut in half,

which had been placed before the concrete column, it was filled with flowers, completely filled with a bouquet of wildflowers, amongst which a few roses were wilting.

Once again I was thrown off by these roses; I couldn't decide if they meant something good or bad, but I didn't have much time to think about this as I was already late because I'd been counting the crosses, so I zipped up my pants, went back to my car, and stepped on the gas so as not to be late.

A few days later, or, to be fully precise, one week later, I was sitting at the window and waiting for the sun to go down, and once again I thought about those roses, because once again I was looking out the window to determine the position of the sun, and I saw that it hadn't even reached the tops of the trees, although the bottom half had already disappeared, vanished like the traces of a bruise, whereas the top half of the sun that could still be seen was a colour which could be designated as deep crimson shading into purple, just like the roses I'd seen in the chopped-off plastic water bottle.

When I thought of these roses, I also thought of the road to Tornyos, but now I wasn't seeing it as when I'd been driving along it, but I was recalling the road in during an earlier, much earlier time, when I still worked with my father, and twice a week, every Tuesday and Friday, I delivered the roses to the florists in Subotica.

This was the one thing that I liked in connection with the roses, because on these days I didn't have to work on our field, even though it was also hot in the car, and I sweated as much in the car as when I worked on our land, but during that period of my life I preferred sweating in the car as opposed to sweating while crouched among the roses.

Maybe that's why I became a deliveryman later on, and not a rose-grower, I don't know, in any event this was at least twenty years ago or so, during the war I was still working with my father, and we would always start harvesting the roses at twilight, after the heat had died

down, because if we gathered them before twilight they'd be wilted by the next day, but if we gathered them at twilight, and put them in cold water up to their heads overnight, they'd stay fresh for an entire week, a tried and tested method, and since after twilight it always grew dark very quickly we had to hurry to pick as many roses as we could, and my father really made an effort, I heard his scissors clattering at least twice as fast as usual as occasionally he called back to me: Get a move on, son, get a move on, but I wasn't trying very hard, because I knew that even if I did pick the roses more quickly, we would have to come out again the next day at dawn anyway, because at twilight we were never able to pick all of the roses we needed for the next day.

By the time it had grown completely dark, we stopped picking the roses, we placed them in full buckets of cold water, and we placed the buckets into a dilapidated deep-freeze which did not really cool anything down, but it was still good for keeping the roses cold until the next morning, and the next day at dawn we went out again to pick the rest of the roses, and of course we had to hurry as the sun was rising quickly, and after seven am it was already too hot to pick the roses, and I heard my father's scissors clattering quickly, but I wasn't really trying because I was already mentally getting ready for the drive to the florists', and when we were finished picking the roses, we had to sort them and load them, first we had to separate them according to their colours and lengths, then tie them together in bundles of one hundred, place the bundles in buckets of cold water, then the buckets had to be placed in the trunk of the car, and at the end my father threw a handful of ice into each bucket to keep the roses fresh, and when we were finished with all of this then I could finally set off, and for me this was the best part of the whole thing, when I could finally set off, for me it was the best when I took the roses to the florists in Subotica because I could tear along the road to Tornyos at 120 km an hour in my father's Golf, although of course even at that time, there were already rules in my head, and from time to time I had to count certain things.

Sometimes I counted the broken lines in the middle of the road, sometimes I counted the turns or traffic signs, other times I counted the tractors, cars or trucks that I passed along the way.

One time I had to count all the bicycles, because I wanted to know how long the war was going to last, and the rule was that the war would last for as many years as the number of bicycles I saw on the road to Tornyos; so I began observing the bicycles, the ones coming toward me and the ones travelling in the same direction as me, I had to count all of them, and of course I was driving slowly, because if I had one of these tasks I always focused on the task at hand and made sure to drive slowly, unless driving quickly was the task at hand, because sometimes I did have to drive as fast as 120 or 130 or even 140 kilometres per hour until I reached a certain traffic sign, a certain exit, or a certain intersection, but that wasn't the case right now — instead, I wanted to know how much longer the war was going to last, so therefore I had to drive slowly, and in the meantime keeping an eye out for bicycles, but I was watching in vain, I strained my eyes in vain, that morning I did not see a single bicycle; even though it was a summer's day with a clear sky and glittering sunshine, I did not see even one bicycle on the road to Tornyos.

While we were harvesting flowers, my father collected stones in his pockets, you could always find larger or smaller stones among the roses, and when we were hoeing, milling the soil, or ploughing, and more and more shards of crockery were turned out of the earth by the hoe, the plough, or the soil miller, my father would pick them up and put them in his pocket, so that while gathering the flowers, his coat was pulled down more and more by these shards of crockery and stones.

It was not only while harvesting the flowers that he picked up the stones, but when he watered the flowers as well; when we carried the long aluminum pipes onto our land from the shed.

We would hold two or three aluminum pipes, lift them up above our heads and lay them on our shoulders, then we would set off with them to the roses, but while we were walking, to make sure the tubes did not slip apart, we stretched out our arms and grabbed them firmly, carrying the long tubes on our shoulders, and we always knew in advance which rows we had to place them in so that the sprinklers would cover enough area.

Every second tube was equipped with a sprinkler which sprayed out water in rays, this jet of water itself caused a lever to start operating which, with the help of a spring mechanism, like a small hammer, kept striking the beam of water, and thanks to this continual striking mechanism the sprinkler periodically turned around its own axle, sprinkling the roses in every direction, but this had to be all worked out precisely in advance, including the rows where the long aluminum tubes should be placed, as well as where they should be placed the next day, which also depended on how the wind was blowing, because if the wind was blowing then the sprinklers would sprinkle more water in one direction, which also had to be taken into consideration.

Then we had to connect up the tubes lying in between the rows of flowers in such a way that the sprinklers were positioned vertically, and once we did that, we waited for the sun to go down, because my father was convinced that the roses didn't like to be watered during the heat of the day, and that is why we always turned on the pump only after twilight, then we watered the flowers again at dawn, also planning out in advance how many hours we had to water the flowers for them to get enough water, and the next afternoon, when the earth had dried out again, we pulled on our rubber boots, and we uncoupled the aluminum tubes, lukewarm water bubbling out of them, then, sinking into mud up to our ankles in the moist earth we carried them to the next place, and that night we watered the flowers again, we did the same thing on the third day, and so on, until we reached the end of the rose field, and while we were carrying the long aluminum tubes out of the shed, or when we were taking them from one row to another,



my father, so as not to be idle between shifting the tubes, gathered the stones in his pocket, so that as he was working, his coat became ever more weighed down by crockery shards and stones, and when no more stones would fit in his pockets, he scattered them into the potholes in the dirt road.

In this way, he ended up filling up many cavities and potholes with the stones, because he also collected them when we were doing other things, when pruning the roses, if we were grafting or pulling out weeds, because gathering the stones from the earth was also important to him, and he had the patience to use the stones later on to fill up the cavities and the potholes in the dirt road.

I don't remember the names of the florists' shops too well anymore, it's not as if these names could have been too complicated or fancy, because these florist shops were usually named after some flower or ornamental plant, or if they weren't named after some flower or an ornamental plant then they bore the name of some woman, so that you'd often find among these florists one called The Palm Tree, another called Olga, or yet another called Mimosa, but it's also possible that I have forgotten these names because they were so simple, namely that I always forget simple things more easily, although that also isn't entirely true, because starting from the time that I became a deliveryman, I slowly but surely began forgetting the names of the roses, although the names of roses are usually complicated, some of them resonating like the names of old, noble families, as, for example the Ilse Krohn Superior or the Scarlet Meillandécór, and there are many other examples, but no other names are coming to mind right now, respectively, two names come to my mind, but these are simple names, as among the names of roses there also simpler names, as, for example, the Cardinal or the Flamingo, which were named that way because of their colours, although perhaps neither of these designations are too precise because the colour of the Cardinal Rose is darker than a priest's robe, and the colour of the Flamingo rose is paler than the feathers of that malformed bird which gave the

rose its name; the colour of the Flamingo is as if a flamingo's feather was dissolved in a cup of milk.

Although it's not colours I wanted to talk about right now, but names, and I only wanted to say that as I was standing next to the window and waiting for the sun to go down, I strained my mind in vain, because I couldn't think of any more names of roses.

Of course, the situation would have been different if a rule would have popped up in my head, for example that I would have to pronounce this or that many rose names within a certain period of time, because then certainly a few names would have come to mind, and in any event, during that summer when I had to take the cut roses to the florists in Subotica twice weekly, I had to know the name of every rose off by heart, and these names are still there, these names filled with light are certainly still within me somewhere.

Before the war, the florists in Subotica did not need our flowers, because we only had our own field-grown roses, and because of that our flowers, marked by insects, storms, and the scorching sun were not as perfect as greenhouse roses.

Before the war, the florists only sold greenhouse roses, and not field-grown roses, but the truth is that before the war we weren't even trying to sell them our roses as during that time we still were only selling rosebushes, and not cut roses.

Our roses opened and blossomed and wilted on our land by the thousands, but we never picked them because we were working for the Germans who needed strong rosebushes, large rosebushes with thick branches, and so we almost never picked flowers, even for ourselves, and the roses were very strong before the war, large bushes with thick branches, so that every year, the Germans took everything, at the end of October at the beginning of November we turned them out of the soil, tying them up into bundles of twenty or fifty, then large black trucks came which we loaded up with the roses.

I would have liked to try driving one of these trucks, but I didn't have the right permit, and by the time I did, the war had started, and the Germans didn't come back.

The Germans didn't come back because there was an embargo, and it was not permitted to take anything out of the country, or at least in principle it wasn't permitted, and then we had big problems, because we weren't able to sell our rosebushes to anyone, namely, for a while we could still sell them to the Italians, because somehow, even during the embargo, they came and bought them, but then later on even the Italians weren't coming, so then we were really up shit's creek, the Serbs weren't in the habit of buying rosebushes, during that time the Serbs only wanted cut flowers, not rosebushes for planting, but during the embargo it was not only impossible to export anything, but to even import anything, or at least in principle it wasn't possible, so that the florists were also in trouble, because they were no longer getting any of the greenhouse roses from the Netherlands, so that they had no choice, and from that point on they were happy with our field-grown roses, even if marked by insects, storms, and the scorching sun.

It took only a few drops of dew, focusing the rays of sun like a lens, for splotches to form on the roses' leaves and petals, although these weren't so visible, and with time, they faded of their own accord; the marks left by insects, however, were more conspicuous, namely mites and beetles stabbed and sucked at the flowers and the petals, and these perforations never disappear, but this still wasn't the worst, because there are certain worms which crawl right into the centre of the rosebud and start chewing from inside, even before the flower opens, and as they eat, they hollow out paths, winding pathways in the rosebud, so that when the flower begins to open, along with the petals, these winding, curving paths also open, they open up wide like someone showing his wounds; during the war, though, the florists in Subotica didn't have too much of a choice, and from that point on our perforated, ragged, chewed-up roses were good enough for them, and it was only a problem if the plants were attacked by fungi,

because then the roses were covered by crimson and yellow splotches, the leaves becoming blistered, twisting up and falling, then the entire plant would begin to wither, and nothing could be done, just as when the roses were affected by a virus, because then the leaves and the flowers would at first blanch, then become disformed, stunted; they would wilt, the branches increasingly regressing, until finally the entire rosebush would dry up, keel over, cave in—a gutted, extinguished stump.