

# *Eighteen Roses*

*He gave her eighteen roses, promising to love her forever. She never knew his name.*

He gave her eighteen roses, promising to love her forever. They were beautiful, so beautiful, popcorn blossoms atop slender stems, the white and green a stark contrast on the gray cement. The petals were perfectly formed, long and ovular, and the leaves twitched faintly in the breeze, the tips barely covering the indentations where thorns had once been. In the hazy dawn, orange cream and bubblegum pink, they were a cream explosion on the dull doorstep.

He watched them. Standing at the gate, one leg casually bent, he watched the petals flutter gently in the morning breeze. As he stood there, the sun rose higher. The deep blue skulked away, brilliant fold taking its place. A silver cloud exploded into white.

Still, expression calm, body motionless, he watched. He stared at the doorway, his neck sweaty beneath his flannel, and he wondered how long it would be. He imagined her face, throwing open the door. He imagined the look of surprise and delight. She would glance up, instantly knowing that it had been him. Her pale hand would cross her chest, silently asking—“For me?”

He would nod. “Who else?”

“But why eighteen?”

“Because that’s how long I have loved you.”

“Eighteen years?”

He would nod again. “From the day, the moment, the hour that I was born.”

He remembered the first time that he had seen her. She had been walking to church, wearing a blue dress of the softest cotton. Her dark hair had been pulled back, partially covered with a black hat. Her feet had been encased in silken slippers. Even now, he remembered the slippers most of all, tiny things, silly things, completely impractical for the muddy road.

Walking behind her, also to church, he remembered thinking that. And how right he was! By the time that she arrived, her shoes were streaked with black earth and grime. Charley Village had no room for silk slippers. Save them for the city. In Charley, you walked smart, *boot* smart, or you walked not at all.

But to her, it must have mattered little. The next day, her family bought more.

He should have said something then! Seeing her, walking behind her, staring at the golden hair and slender neck, he should have grabbed a handful of daisies and made a bouquet. He should have found her after church, waited for her, handed her the yellow and white blossoms

“For me?” Her expression would have been surprised, pleased, flushed.

“Who else?” His words would have been calm, cool, sure.

“But why seven?”

“Because that’s how many minutes it took me to start loving you.”

“That long?”

Was that a smile? His gaze was intent on her. “Yes. One minute to decide.” A pause. “Six minutes to remember you breathe.”

Here, now, standing on the dusty road, he kicked his toe into the dirt. The sun was getting higher now, piercing the summer sky. Better to enjoy it now. In a week, perhaps less, he would be cool again. Across the fathomless sea, every evening in a cramped cabin, it would be cooler and damper. It would be so damp that his very trousers would start to mold. He knew this because he had been there. He had been there for six months, thin mattress on a narrow bunk, writing letter after letter.

Seeing this, the others had laughed at him. “Come here to be a writer?”

He just shrugged, starting another page. Maybe he had. Maybe he had flown ten thousand miles to remember how you talk.

To figure out what he might say.

“And is it working?”

He had nodded. Yes, it was. Here, far across the sea, a land where Charley was just a memory, finding words had become easy. They flew from his pen, skittering and dancing onto the page. They slipped and slid onto the blue lines, tumbling and chasing after each other like colts. The words came easily, hot molasses, a lullaby. And as they came, they burned.

“Why write them just to burn them?”

Easy as pie, the Bunsen burners turned ink to blue and orange flame. He watched them. When the letter was gone, a new one could begin.

The sky lightened. It was pale blue now, washed out like a faded sheet, now stretched thinly across the sky. He shifted slightly, leaning against the gate, and he dug his *other* toe into the ground. In moments, he had made a hole three inches deep.

“Who is she?”

This question had been on his lips, teenage lips, the day after the ruined shoes. He had asked anyone and everyone, helping his father sell tomatoes and cabbage and carrots.

“She’s the preacher’s daughter.”

“No.” A shake of the head. “Not what I heard.”

“What did you hear?”

“Her dad’s some sort of politician. A big shot, I think.”

“Oh. So is *that* why he’s never here?”

“Well, it’s part of it.”

“What’s the other part?”

Smirk. “You seen his wife?”

She was called the Ice Queen. Her hair was whitish blonde and her bun was always perfect, her skirts and blouses always immaculate. Seeing her and her daughter together, perhaps gathering some packages from the local boutique, they looked worlds apart, not related at all. One was pearls and eternal winter. One was sunshine.

Watching them, standing in the shadows and just watching them, he had wanted to tell her this, make her understand, rip her away. Hers was a world of laughter and singing and color. It was world of warmth and vivacity. He would show her the way there, using a single trail of white magnolias.

“Twelve? Why twelve?”

So she would ask, slight frown on her face, gathering another magnolia to her chest. By now, they formed a pink and white bouquet.

“One for every time that I saw you, walking through the corridors at school, and wanted to say something.”

“Why didn’t you?”

He would shrug. What did it matter? “I am now.”

The years had crept by. He had been twelve when he saw her first, a gangly lad with dirty ears. She had been eleven. With time, he became thirteen and fourteen and fifteen. Her bouncy curls had straightened out. Her flouncy dresses had turned into miniskirts, stuffed underneath cotton sweatshirts when went to the movies. Not with him. Never with him. He never asked.

“Why not?”

So his friends would ask, spying a poster for prom. By now they were seventeen. Graduation would happen soon.

“I will.”

The next day, he waited after school. Holding a monstrous bouquet of eighty daffodils, representing for every year that they would be married, he stayed after school. He waited for her. He kept waiting. And when he finally saw her, laughing to a friend, he put the bouquet down carefully. In the spring sunshine, the blossoms looked like a hideous growth, a fungus of yellow and white, bubbling from the wooden bench.

When the war came, perhaps a month before the year ended, her father made a big speech on the town green. He explained that the enemy was a Godless lot, the scourge of the Earth, evil. It was their duty, the duty of every citizen, to fight these heathens. Making his way to the signup sheet, his eyes had darted to hers. But she, more beautiful than ever in summer pink, was looking away, her gaze intent on football star Buddy Harrison.

That day, he was the fifteenth man to enlist, the fifteenth man to say that we would go fight. But watching her flirt with Buddy, nothing felt very special about fifteen.

At this point, the morning was no longer early. Maybe it was already afternoon. Was she home? Was she even there? He adjusted his collar, peeling it from his skin. So used to army camouflage, casual

clothes felt odd, alien, stiff. No that it would last much longer, twelve hours would be a stretch. When the sun set, he would be leaving again. The first leave that had had, it had been a short one, just a week. By tomorrow, he would be miles away.

Staring at the flowers, now looking wilted on her doorstep, he determinedly stepped forward. He took one step. Then another. Then another. Soon, whole face lined with sweat, he reached down and grabbed the flowers.

“For me?”

“Who else?”

“But why eighteen?”

“Because that’s how long I have loved you.”

He saw a curtain twitch. He could have sworn it. He raised a hand to knock. And *then*, just like that, he turned away.

Thirty minutes later, the front door swung open. She skipped outside, eager to finish buying what she needed for college. She already had the bedspread, the matching luggage and the fur overcoat. After all, Boston was supposed to be cold.

All the same, she was home that day in December, just five months later, the day that Joe Collins was laid to rest. At the ceremony, she threw a few flowers on his grave. Her dad, who had been supposed to address the small audience, had gotten delayed in the capitol.

“Tell everyone that our country admires his service.”

So he had said that she should say, filling in, addressing the mourners. “Say that we think him, *all* of us do, and we appreciate his sacrifice.”

She did. She told everyone, now shivering in the winter air, gray with impending rain. And then she dropped the flowers that she held, white roses that she had found at a nearby shop.

Her friends, seeing them, frowned slightly. “Nine. Why nine? That seems like an odd choice.”

For an instant, just an instant, she looked at the coffin, tried to remember the boy who now lay inside. What did he look like? Brown hair? Black hair? Blue eyes? Then she shook her head mutely, turning toward her car, now idling on the curb. “I have no idea.”