

## Flowers

The florist's shop had been open for 30 years and was situated on a little cobbled street in one of the less tourist-orientated sides of Paris. The sign hung out from the front of the building and swung gently in the mid-morning breeze, reading; '*Fleurs*' in simple cursive font at a slight angle above a painted rose. This had faded and looked like watercolour.

The old man who owned the shop and new Valentine's day was the busiest day of the year, decided to open early. As it was a lovely, bright and sunny day, the old man decorated the outside of the shop with potted flowers and hanging baskets.

The old man's wife, with whom he had ran the shop, had died the previous year, and her absence would be especially noticeable given the expected business and the occasion. However, the old man persisted, assuring himself that he had no need for assistance in selling flowers – 'I'm not so old yet!' he told himself.

The florist passed a few hours in silence before the first customer arrived. He was a man in his mid-30s dressed in rather professional attire. He opened the door with unnecessary force and the little bell rang loudly.

With a start, the florist got up from his seat behind the counter and greeted the man.

'Good morning, monsieur,' he said in a cheerful tone 'how may I help you today?'

The man bluntly pointed towards the roses and with a compliant nod from the shop keeper, clutched several in his fist, placed them upon the counter and paid quickly without collecting his change. He shouted his thanks to the florist as he left, and then jogged at a moderate pace on the cobbled street as he left.

Having worked so many Valentine's days over the course of his career, the Florist felt that he could now identify all the sorts of men-in-love who came into his shop on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February. He deduced his first customer to be a middle-class man of moderate social stature, who has recently begun an affair with a married woman older than himself. Despite his apparent expertise in such matters, the florist, who was a kind-hearted, benevolent man, felt it wrong to hold prejudices against these well-meaning lovers, and more importantly, customers.

A framed photograph of his wife rested on the counter at all times, and now had his attention. He held it in the light to observe it more carefully. His eyes followed the lines of his wife's face and stared into her motionless eyes. Although it was black and white, he remembered with astounding detail the colour of her irises; azure and hyacinth blue.

The first customer, who had seemingly just fallen in love, caused the shopkeeper to reflect upon the first months of his relationship with his wife. The tranquil days and nights spent together in idle discussion of their interests and opinions, sharing their secrets and describing their dreams. He remembered their first kiss in such detail that the experience of her tongue in his mouth came back to him. 'And oh, the sex!' he exclaimed internally. His heart raced as his thoughts turned towards all that they had revealed to one another. Feeling overcome by these thoughts he turned his mind to other things. He felt a certain guilt for these sexual memories of his dead wife. 'It can't be right,' he told himself, 'there was far more to our marriage than just the sex,' he asserted, and searched his memory for purer content.

The shop was flooded by dozens upon dozens of men throughout the day, all buying roses. Away from the homogeneity, the florist's attention was drawn to a single young girl, twiddling a pink Chrysanthemum between her thumb and index finger. He felt she was too slim and pretty to be a lesbian. He shook his head to dismiss this prejudice, which he blamed upon old age, and spoke to the girl.

'For a young boy, mademoiselle? Or maybe another young girl?' he asked inquiringly and with a comic air of sophistication.

She looked disconcerted by this at first, then smiled and replied, 'no monsieur, they're just for myself.'

The florist jokingly lifted himself up in mock surprise, much to the girl's amusement.

'A pretty young girl such as yourself shouldn't be buying flowers for herself on Valentine's day!' he exclaimed.

She shrugged her shoulders and chuckled, hiding her face behind the flower. She found the florist charming in a grandfatherly manner, which made him appear indescribably endearing, like a vessel of lively wisdom and earthly warmth.

'What can I say,' she replied, 'I saw the flowers, and I liked them. No need for a boyfriend to get them for me, I have more than enough money of my own.'

She didn't wish for this to sound as brash as it did, but smiled again to assure the shopkeeper that she meant no wrong.

'Well, I simply can't have a girl buy *herself* flowers on Valentine's day. Take as many as you like.'

'Are you sure?' said the young girl in excitement disguised as mannerly concern.

'Of course,' laughed the old man, '*From Maurice, your very special Valentine.*'

The girl kissed the old man on the cheeks and thanked him several times before skipping lightly out of the shop.

The message he had recited to the young girl had been written in all the cards he had given his wife on this date throughout the years, and this memory spurred his recollection. He soon found himself lost in furtive day dreams.

He hardly noticed the continual stream of customers he was serving, but rather floated calmly over the seas of his memory. His conscious convulsion gave rise to images of splendor. In these lapsing memories, he was filled with a greater adoration for his wife than he had ever expressed in his life. He clutched his chest momentarily in this regret. He closed his eyes and imagined her face, remembering every single freckle and indentation that couldn't be captured on camera. He believed the photograph had made her too perfect.

This ecstasy persisted for much of the rest of the day. Like a virgin's first love, the old man was overcome with inexplicable and indescribable love for his dead wife. For most of the day, it seems he had evaded the fact that his wife was now deceased. Upon realizing this, his rekindled love began to wane, but did not entirely extinguish, as if he hoped she would somehow return to him.

The last customer of the day, bought a technicolor bouquet with a deep, overtly sexual red in the center. The customer swore silently in frustration, unable to find his wallet in the labyrinth of his trenchcoat.

Laughing, the florist told him, 'never worry. Take them, my treat.'

The man gave an immense sigh of relief and shook the florist's hand in gratitude.

'You are a saint, monsieur, a saint! If it weren't for you, I would have been receiving trial by spouse this evening.'

The florist chuckled, 'Yes,' he said, 'I was often subjected to that punishment.'

While this was said in jest, as the man left the shopkeeper dwelled upon what he had said, and felt guilty that he had decried his wife, who had been so fair in appearance and character throughout his life.

Yet, he deliberated upon what he had said. 'Surely,' he asked himself, 'those were only rare instances, not reflective of the beautiful marriage we had together?'

On close inspection of the intricacies of his daily life with his wife, the florist became increasingly skeptical of the idyllic image his memory had painted for him during his love-filled bliss throughout the day.

He concentrated his memory upon all those instances in which she had, by her words, actions or attitudes, disrupted the tranquility of their life. In reflection, these were overwhelmingly abundant. Doubts rose as to whether the old man had truly enjoyed his marriage.

Immense guilt rose in him when looking at the picture of his wife, while simultaneously questioning the joy she supposedly brought him.

'How often', he thought, 'she scolded me undeservedly, berated me routinely, had me work like a slave to suffice her petty desires. Every penny I made went directly into her purse, to be dispensed with as though it had fallen from the sky.'

He remembered one instance in which a week's wages were spent on needless jewelry, and in the resultant uproar she had threatened divorce, and worse, abstinence.

'Did I love her?' the old man asked himself earnestly, 'Or was it simply for sex? After all, she was so beautiful, any man would have thought he was in love with her.'

Despite professing her to be so beautiful, he began to remember her as she had been in the latter years of marriage. How old and grey and wizened she had become. He was nearly repulsed by these thoughts, and more so by himself for having the audacity to think them.

He began internally, 'I spent 3 decades in the company of that woman, and it seems as though my recollection is confined to the first couple and last few years entirely. The former in which I loved her, and the latter in which I hated her. The years in between were merely the gradual devolvement of one into the other.'

'How little I have enjoyed this life, in retrospect. I convinced myself that all was well and that it had been for the best, but that's only a cowardly retreat from the obvious truth. I should never have married that woman. In the end, it seems I didn't love her - or at least, not for 30 years! I doubt that

would be possible for any man to endure. Love is for the young to enjoy and the old to scorn, and both are right.'

Having come to his epiphany, the old man felt reasonably contented in himself. He left his counter and turned the door-sign to 'Closed'.

The Florist went into the back room, quickly wrote a rudimentary note on the disappointment that his life had been, and hanged himself.