

THE MAN WHO LOVED FLOWERS

On an early evening in May of 1963, a young man with his hand in his pocket walked briskly up New York's Third Avenue. The air was soft and beautiful, the sky was darkening by slow degrees from blue to the calm and lovely violet of dusk. There are people who love the city, and this was one of the nights that made them love it. Everyone standing in the doorways of the delicatessens and dry-cleaning shops and restaurants seemed to be smiling. An old lady pushing two bags of groceries in an old baby pram grinned at the young man and hailed him: 'Hey, beautiful!' The young man gave her a half-smile and raised his hand in a wave.

She passed on her way, thinking: He's in love.

He had that look about him. He was dressed in a light grey suit, the narrow tie pulled down a little, his top collar button undone. His hair was dark and cut short. His complexion was fair, his eyes a light blue. Not an extraordinary face, but on this soft spring evening, on this avenue, in May of 1963, he *was* beautiful, and the old woman found herself thinking with a moment's sweet nostalgia that in spring anyone can be beautiful . . . if they're hurrying to meet the one of their dreams for dinner and maybe dancing after. Spring is the only season when nostalgia never seems to turn bitter, and she went on her way glad that she had spoken to him and glad he had returned the compliment by raising his hand in half-salute.

The young man crossed Sixty-third Street, walking with a bounce in his step and that same half-smile on his lips. Part way up the block, an old man stood beside a chipped green handcart filled with flowers - the predominant colour was yellow; a yellow fever of jonquils and late crocuses. The old man also had carnations and a few hothouse tea roses, mostly yellow and white. He was eating a pretzel and listening to a bulky transistor radio that was sitting kitty-corner on his handcart.

The radio poured out bad news that no one listened to: a hammer murderer was still on the loose; JFK had declared that the situation in a little Asian country called Vietnain ('Vite-num' the guy reading the news called it) would bear watching; an unidentified woman had been pulled from the East River; a grand jury had failed to indict a crime overlord in the current city administration's war on heroin; the Russians had exploded a nuclear device. None of it seemed real, none of it seemed to matter. The air was soft and sweet. Two men with beer bellies stood outside a bakery, pitching nickels and ribbing each other. Spring trembled on the edge of summer, and in the city, summer is the season of dreams.

The young man passed the flower-stand and the sound of the bad news faded. He hesitated, looked over his shoulder, and thought it over. He reached into his coat pocket and touched the something in there again. For a moment his face seemed puzzled, lonely, almost haunted, and then, as his hand left the pocket, it regained its former expression of eager expectation.

He turned back to the flower stand, smiling. He would bring her some flowers, that would please her. He loved to see her eyes light up with surprise and joy when he brought her a surprise - little things, because he was far from rich. A box of candy. A bracelet. Once only a bag of Valencia oranges, because he knew they were Norma's favourite.

'My young friend,' the flower vendor said, as the man in the grey suit came back, running his eyes over the stock in the handcart. The vendor was maybe sixty-eight, wearing a torn grey knitted sweater and a soft cap in spite of the warmth of the evening. His face was a map of wrinkles, his eyes were deep in pouches, and a cigarette jittered between his fingers. But he also remembered how it was to be young in the spring - young and so much in love that you practically zoomed everywhere. The vendor's face was normally sour, but now he smiled a little, just as the old woman pushing the groceries had, because this guy was such an obvious case. He brushed pretzel crumbs from the front of his baggy sweater and thought: If this kid were sick, they'd have him in intensive care right now.

'How much are your flowers?' the young man asked.

'I'll make you up a nice bouquet for a dollar. Those tea roses, they're hothouse. Cost a little more, seventy cents apiece. I sell you half a dozen for three dollars and fifty cents.'

'Expensive,' the young man said.

'Nothing good comes cheap, my young friend. Didn't your mother ever teach you that?'

The young man grinned. 'she might have mentioned it at that.'

'Sure. Sure she did. I give you half a dozen, two red, two yellow, two white. Can't do no better than that, can I? Put in some baby's breath - they love that - and fill it out with some fern. Nice. Or you can have the bouquet for a dollar.

'They?'

the young man asked, still smiling.

'My young friend,' the flower vendor said, flicking his cigarette butt into the gutter and returning the smile, 'no one buys flowers for themselves in May. It's like a national law, you understand what I mean?'

The young man thought of Norma, her happy, surprised eyes and her gentle smile, and he ducked his head a little. 'I guess I do at that,' he said.

'Sure you do. What do you say?'

'Well, what do *you* think?'

'I'm gonna tell you what I think. Hey! Advice is still free, isn't it?'

The young man smiled and said, 'I guess it's the only thing left that is.'

'You're damn tooting it is,' the flower vendor said. 'Okay, my young friend. If the flowers are for your mother, you get her the bouquet. A few jonquils, a few crocuses, some lily of the valley. She don't spoil it by saying, "Oh Junior I love them how much did they cost oh that's too much don't you know enough not to throw your money around?"'

The young man threw his head back and laughed.

The Vendor said, 'But if it's your girl, that's a different thing, my son, and you know it. You bring her the tea roses and she don't turn into an accountant, you take my meaning? Hey! she's gonna throw her arms around your neck -'

'I'll take the tea roses,' the young man said, and this time it was the flower vendor's turn to laugh. The two men pitching nickels glanced over, smiling.

'Hey, kid!' one of them called. 'You wanna buy a weddin' ring cheap? I'll sell you mine . . . I don't want it no more.'

The young man grinned and blushed to the roots of his dark hair.

The flower vendor picked out six tea roses, snipped the stems a little, spritzed them with water, and wrapped them in a large conical spill.

'Tonight's weather looks just the way you'd want it,' the radio said. 'Fair and mild, temps in the mid to upper sixties, perfect for a little rooftop stargazing, if you're the romantic type. Enjoy, Greater New York, enjoy!'

The flower vendor Scotch-taped the seam of the paper spill and advised the young man to tell his lady that a little sugar added to the water she put them in would preserve them longer.

'I'll tell her,' the young man said. He held out a five dollar bill. 'Thank you.'

'Just doing the job, my young friend,' the vendor said, giving him a dollar and two quarters. His smile grew a bit S- 'Give her a kiss for me.'

On the radio, the Four Seasons began singing 'Sherry'. The young man pocketed his change and went on up the street, eyes wide and alert and eager, looking not so much around him at the life ebbing and flowing up and down Third Avenue as inward and ahead, anticipating. But certain things did impinge: a mother pulling a baby in a wagon, the baby's face comically smeared with ice cream; a little girl jumping rope and singsonging out her rhyme: 'Betty and Henry up in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G! First comes love, then comes marriage, here comes Henry with a baby carriage!' Two women stood outside a washateria, smoking and comparing pregnancies. A group of men were looking in a hardware-store window at a gigantic colour TV with a four-figure price tag - a baseball game was on, and all the players' faces looked green. The playing field was a vague strawberry colour, and the New York Mets were leading the Phillies by a score of six to one in the top of the ninth.

He walked on, carrying the flowers, unaware that the two women outside the washateria had stopped talking for a moment and had watched him wistfully as he walked by with his paper of tea roses; their days of receiving flowers were long over. He was unaware of a young traffic cop who stopped the cars at the intersection of Third and Sixty-ninth with a blast on his whistle to let him cross; the cop was engaged himself and recognized the dreamy expression on the young man's face from his own shaving mirror, where he had often seen it lately. He was unaware of the two teen-aged girls who passed him going the other way and then clutched themselves and giggled.

At Seventy-third Street he stopped and turned right. This street was a little darker, lined with brownstones and walk-down restaurants with Italian names. Three blocks down, a stickball game was going on in the fading light. The young man did not go that far; half a block down he turned into a narrow lane.

Now the stars were out, gleaming softly, and the lane was dark and shadowy, lined with vague shape of garbage cans. The young man was alone now - no, not quite. A wavering yowl rose in the purple gloom, and the young man frowned. It was some tomcat's love song, and there was nothing pretty about *that*.

He walked more slowly, and glanced at his watch. It was quarter of eight and Norma should be just - Then he saw her, coming towards him from the courtyard, wearing dark blue slacks and a sailor blouse that made his heart ache. It was always a surprise seeing her for the first time, it was always a sweet shock - she looked so *young*.

Now his smile shone out - *radiated* out, and he walked faster.

'Norma!' he said.

She looked up and smiled. . . but as they drew together, the smile faded.

His own smile trembled a little, and he felt a moment's disquiet. Her face over the sailor blouse suddenly seemed blurred. It was getting darker now. . . could he have been mistaken? Surely not. It *was* Norma.

'I brought you flowers,' he said in a happy relief, and handed the paper spill to her.

She looked at them for a moment, smiled - and handed them back.

'Thank you, but you're mistaken,' she said. 'My name is -'Norma,' he whispered, and pulled the short-handled hammer out of his coat pocket where it had been all along. 'They're for you, Norma. . . it was always for you. . . all for you.'

She backed away, her face a round white blur, her mouth an opening black O of terror, and she wasn't Norma, Norma was dead, she had been dead for ten years, and it didn't matter because she was going to scream and he swung the hammer to stop the scream, to kill the scream, and he swung the hammer the spill of flowers fell out of his hand, the spill spilled and broke open, spilling red, white, and yellow tea roses beside the dented trash cans where the cats made alien love in the dark, screaming in love, screaming, screaming.

He swung the hammer and she didn't scream, but she might scream because she wasn't Norma, none of them were Norma, and he swung the hammer, swung the hammer, swung the hammer. She wasn't Norma and so he swung the hammer, as he had done five other times.

Some unknown time later he slipped the hammer back into his inner coat pocket and backed away from the dark shadow sprawled on the cobblestones, away from the litter of tea roses by the garbage cans. He turned and left the narrow lane. It was full dark now. The stickball players had gone in. If there were bloodstains on his suit, they wouldn't show, not in the dark, not in the soft late spring dark, and her name had not been Norma but he knew what his name was. It was. . . was

Love.

His name was love, and he walked these dark streets because Norma was waiting for him. And he would find her. Some day soon.

He began to smile. A bounce came into his step as he walked on down Seventy-third Street. A middle-aged married couple sitting on the steps of their building watched him go by, head cocked, eyes afar away, a half-smile on his lips. when he had passed by the woman said, 'How come *you* never look that way any more?'

'Huh?'

'Nothing,' she said, but she watched the young man in the grey suit disappear into the gloom of the encroaching night and thought that if there was anything more beautiful than springtime, it was young love.