

Roses

When Bill was let go from his position as marketing manager for a well-known chain of supermarkets he applied for the job he had coveted for many years and, to his delight, he got it. The following evening he was walking the streets, offering single roses to unattractive girls. He ignored the hand-holding couples and the pretty girls who had everything already and directed himself entirely towards those who looked a little unhappy with their lot, a trifle lonely, a smidgen unfulfilled.

At first he worked regular hours, handing out his flowers from nine to five, bringing surprise and happiness to strangers. One day a woman said '*you don't know how much I needed this*' and he stopped taking a lunch break. He began to work longer and longer hours; his wife saw less of him than before.

'You never bring me a rose,' she said, tiring of the perfume which pervaded a room whenever he entered it.

'You're happy,' he told her.

'Still,' she said.

One overcast morning, he distributed over three hundred roses before lunchtime, a new record. That same evening he heard a young man saying '*wait... please wait*' to a girl who was marching away from him before starting to cry unashamedly on the street and he went to him and offered him a rose too and the young man looked at it, confused, taking the stem because it was offered to him, but just staring at it, as if he had just realised the magnitude of his mistakes, the extent of his loss.

Bill set his clock for earlier and earlier each morning. He rose at eight, then seven thirty, then seven, then six, then five. He found himself waiting at the flower market for the deliveries before dawn and returning throughout the day to collect even more. He thrived on the smiles that came his way. Each one invigorated him, fed him, hydrated him.

The flowers came with a tag stapled around their stems, offering 20% off bunches and garlands if the tag was presented at the shop within twenty-four hours; his boss discovered that he had been snipping the tags off before distributing the flowers and was not happy.

'We're not a charity,' he told Bill. 'I have to let you go.'

'They give off a bad message,' said Bill.

'I have to let you go,' said the boss again.

Later, he stood on the street, wilting in the heat, alone and lost. A woman emerged from an office, looking stressed and upset. She was wiping a tear from her eye, although that might have been from the wind. Nearby he saw a flower-stall. The bouquets were expensively priced but very pretty. He took his wallet out and ran towards it, glancing back to make sure that she didn't disappear.