

# Nine Roses and Three

by David Rodeback  
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February 13

Dear Mary Beth,

I don't know whether they have the same holidays or even the same calendar where you are - or if time means anything there at all. I've heard that it doesn't. But it's Valentine's Day again here. Well, tomorrow is Valentine's Day.

I've been counting. It will be the sixth Valentine's Day since you left. I still love you, and I still miss you every day and every night.

I spent today making preparations. You can imagine how that goes at my age. What I could have done in half an hour before, without a second thought, took the whole day. It was exhausting, and there were some frustrations. But it was a good day, because I was doing it for you.

They don't send out as many ads with the newspaper any more, or in the mail, either. I guess everything is on the Internet now. Everyone is probably on the Internet too, except me. I'm too old to need an Internet. I'll be 87 in April, but you know that already. You'd have been a youthful 83 last month, but you know that, too.

Without ads, it would take me a week to go to seven different stores, to pick up ads or check prices. I could do two in a day, but I'd need a full day of rest between such strenuous days.

I never wanted to grow old without you. I grew old with you for a while. That is, I grew old, and you grew more beautiful. Then you went away. I know it's not forever. You've just gone ahead. But

I miss you. And most nights I go to sleep hoping to wake up where you are. Not that my life is bad. There are some joys. It's just that being here without you isn't one of them.

But I was telling you about my day. With no ads and no Internet, I spent the week collecting phone numbers for stores, which is not as easy as it used to be. My phone book is older than some of the stores. I probably should have kept one of the new ones they've left on the porch in the past few years, instead of recycling those and sticking with the old one. Or maybe I shouldn't have lost the list of stores and phone numbers I made last year. As it was, I ended up calling Information. Don't worry, though. I know it costs money, so I don't do it often.

This morning, I called all seven stores. I asked if they were selling bouquets of a dozen red roses and, if so, for how much. They all were. I wrote down each price on my list of stores.

One of the grocery stores wanted \$24.99. You're worth it, but I knew you would disapprove if I went there, when Walmart was selling them for \$15.99. That was the cheapest. So I went to Walmart.

I picked up a few other things, including a prescription, to save myself another exhausting trip. Then I spent a long time examining each bouquet of roses, to make sure I found the best, just like I did when I found you. They had 34 bouquets when I started choosing, but when I finished they were down to 29, including yours.

I won't say I was looking for flowers that were as beautiful as you, because they're just flowers. But I like them. I think you would like them. I hope they last at least a week. Do they ever let you come back for a few minutes and see things like that?

I made my purchases and was heading for the door, when my plastic shopping bag broke. It had everything in it but the flowers.

One of the things which crashed to the floor was a jar of pickles. I know pickles have too much salt for me, but I like to have one sometimes, and the truth is, you're not around to tell me not to. I'd rather have you than occasional pickles, but I don't. I'm not blaming you.

I was certain someone was about to get on the intercom and call someone to come clean up the mess an old klutz made, when he dropped his jar of pickles. I know they wouldn't say it that way, but they'd be thinking that.

Here is a happy thing. The jar of pickles did not break. I think I stared at it for at least thirty seconds, while it lay on the floor, just to be sure. Then, before I could start picking up my things, a young lady knelt down and began doing it for me. She was lovely, with brown hair like yours used to be. She must have been 25 or 30, not that I can tell such things. She had pretty eyes and a kind smile, but she looked tired. She was carrying a baby, and she also had an older girl, maybe four years old. I guess that explains looking tired.

When I saw them, I was glad that the worst thing I said when the bag broke was "Fiddlesticks!" I'm sure they heard me.

The mother and the older girl picked up my things and put them in a new bag. I was embarrassed. They shouldn't have to clean up after an old, pathetic stranger, when he spills his groceries all over the floor.

I thanked them for their kindness. The mother started to hand me my bag, but I asked her to hold it for me for a moment. Then I pulled three roses out of the bouquet. I hope you don't mind. I was clumsy, and my hands don't work very well any more, so it took a minute. Now that I think about it, I'm surprised I could do it without dropping the bouquet, but I managed.

I gave one rose to the older girl and told her it was for her, for helping me. Then I gave her another and told her it was for her baby sister. At least I hope the world hasn't changed so much that I can't assume a baby dressed in pink is a girl. Then I said to their mother, "I'm sure you have a charming husband to wish you happy valentine's Day and buy you flowers, but please accept this rose from an old but grateful stranger."

I wish you could have seen her smile, when she thanked me.

Then her older daughter said, "She has my daddy. He's in the navy. He won't be home for a month."

I'm a silly old man. I wanted to tell them thank you for their sacrifice and have them tell him thank you for his, but I was about to weep at the thought, and all I could do was nod and wish them good day. I turned away, and shuffled a few steps toward the door. Then I turned around. The three young ladies were on their way to the side of the store where the groceries are, not watching me, but still carrying their roses. I watched them for a moment, but then I figured I'd better get moving, before the new bag broke too.

On the way home I got honked at only twice for driving cautiously. I carried the flowers in, then rested, then carried the groceries in. Then I rested again. Then I put the groceries away.

I've put the roses in a vase on the dining room table, between my favorite pictures of you. There's the one I've always loved most from our wedding day, because your eyes and your smile . . . I don't know what to say about them. But you know the one. And there's the one from your last birthday, which you didn't like when I took it or when I framed it, because you said you looked so old. But you were still younger than me, and a great deal prettier.

I'm sitting at the table as I write this. It's a few minutes to midnight, because it takes me a long time to write anything. My hand shakes more than it used to, and I have to stop and think a lot

and try to remember how I was going to end a sentence or why I started it in the first place. Don't worry about the hour, though. I usually can't fall asleep for another two hours anyway.

I remember you without stopping to look at the photos in front of me every few minutes, but I stop and look anyway. I have to rest my hand a lot, and besides that, I like to look at them.

I will do as I always do, a little more slowly than last year, I suppose. I think I finished by 11:30 p.m. last year. When I'm done writing this letter, which I almost am, I'll put it in an envelope and write your name on it, and leave it by the flowers and the pictures. In a week or so, when the roses wilt, I'll throw them away. Then I'll put the letter in your top dresser drawer, with all the others, and I'll put your pictures back in their places in the living room, until next time.

There's room in your top drawer for another five years of letters, at least. I hope it won't be that long.

Have a happy Valentine's Day. I hope to spend one with you soon. I don't suppose it will be tomorrow, but that would be nice.

I'm sorry that your bouquet has only nine roses this year. I thought I should explain the reason, because, now that you know it, I'm sure you don't mind.

Tonight, when I pray for other things, I believe I shall pray that three young ladies' valentine will come home safely and soon. I'm glad I could make them smile today. That's more good than I accomplish most days.

It's been a very good day for me. Thank you for that and for many other things.

I wish you were here, or I were there.

All my love,

Henry