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Brianna Wolfson is part of the writing community in San Francisco and has published some stories online. *Rosie Coloured Glasses* is her first novel.

BRIANNA WOLFSON

ROSIE

COLOURED

GLASSES



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

and father to share a casual kiss on the lips when they thought their children weren't looking. For every picture frame around the house to display an image of a whole family: mother, father, and brother and sister tangled around one another.

But Willow didn't think about any of that.

She thought about her tough and serious father in one world, and her warm and glimmering mother in the other. And the three times a week when one world grated up against the other.

But that grating of worlds, all that friction and heat, was worth it for Willow whenever she could return to her mother's world.

Because in that world, her mother's love was magical and it was fierce. Willow felt this kind of love could crystallize inside of her and fortify her. That it could fulfill her in the truest, realest sense. That it could keep her safe and happy forever.

But Willow was wrong.

In her life there would soon be confusion and sadness and pain and loss. And her mother's manic love for her daughter could not protect Willow from any of these things. In fact, it might have even caused them.

1

Twelve Years Ago

At twenty-four, Rosie Collins believed that love was both specific and all-consuming. She believed that true love accessed the back of the earlobe as much as it accessed the heart. She believed that there was one, special, nuanced way one human being could love another human being. And she thought of those nuanced, invisible, loving forces whenever she saw lovers together in the park or the subway or on a bench. She imagined the names they called each other before bed. His favorite place to put his hand. Her favorite shirt of his to wear to bed. The silly thing she said that made him laugh and laugh. The ugly painting he bought for their apartment that she loved seeing on the living room wall.

Rosie took the job at Blooms Flower Shop on 22nd Street and 8th Avenue as soon as she moved to Manhattan in part for the money, in part because she liked the idea of someone named Rosie working in a flower shop. But mostly she took the job so she could gain access to those loving forces. Like all of her

other petty jobs, she would have to perform certain mundane tasks—this time, arranging flowers, manning the register and transcribing messages onto cards. But Rosie thought she might be able to keep this job for longer than the usual six weeks because at Blooms Flower Shop, she saw the greater meaning in her work.

She saw herself facilitating love. She fantasized about the thousands of love stories of which she would witness the tiniest glimpse, as patron after patron would call her up and share a little piece of themselves. They would tell her about their girlfriend's favorite flower. Their fiancée's favorite poem. How they wanted the perfect bouquet to show up at their wife's desk for her birthday. How they wanted the perfect arrangement to say Happy Anniversary. Or to send something just because.

She was so excited that she spent the entire Sunday before her first day of work practicing her calligraphy. Rosie wanted to ensure that each letter was original and ornate enough to reflect the beauty and originality of the love behind the note. She barely slept that first night with the anticipation of her access to the authentic, naked, unabashed voice of love. It was a voice she loved so much, even though it wasn't a part of her own life yet.

But Rosie's heart broke the first week at Blooms when, day after day, men called in requesting a dozen red roses be sent to their girlfriend or wife or lover with a card that simply read "Love, Jim" or "From Tom," or just "Harry."

Didn't some women prefer hydrangeas or chrysanthemums or lilies? Wouldn't some of these flowers go to women who preferred pink or white or a mix of colors? Didn't men in love know these sorts of things about their lovers? Hadn't they wanted to fill that tiny card accompanying the arrangement with the kindest, truest, most perfect words?

When you sent flowers to your wife, didn't you want it to mean "This is the way I still feel when I look into your eyes"?

When you loved someone, didn't you want to tell them in the most perfect, specific, unconcealed way? How did all of these men love women in the same twelve-red-roses-and-a—"Love, John" or "From Rob," or just plain "Colin" way?

It broke Rosie's heart to think that love could ever, ever, ever be that banal.

But Rosie was also not the type to sit around with a broken heart for long. Especially when it threatened her worldview. If the men of Manhattan could not express love properly, she would help them along. She would infuse their gestures with nuance and specificity whether it was authentic or not.

So Rosie took it upon herself to ensure that no card left Blooms Flower Shop with a generically and heartbreakingly boring signature. She replaced all requests for dull notes with ones she deemed more appropriate for a gesture of love. "You looked beautiful last night. Love, Alex." "I was just thinking about how charming you looked when you had that piece of food stuck in your teeth. Love, Ryan." "I'm better with you around. Love, Charlie." "I hope we hang out so many more times. Love, Ian." And she would smile wholly as she tied each card around a stem and sent it out the door.

These were the love stories Rosie wanted to be a part of. Even if they weren't real, Rosie still believed them in some way to be true.

For weeks and weeks no one ever mentioned her love nudges. No one until Rex Thorpe called and requested that a dozen red roses be sent to his girlfriend at 934 Columbus Avenue.

"And what would you like the card to say?" Rosie asked dully.

Rosie had talked on the phone to this type with the Upper West Side girlfriend before. Brash. Probably had a high-paying job. Probably handsome but also deeply jerky. Probably had a pretty girlfriend to whom he seldom said, "I love you."

"The card? What card?" Rex responded curtly.

"The card that will accompany the dozen red roses."

A momentary pause.

"Sir?" she added as she rolled her eyes and pressed her condescension through the phone.

"I don't fucking know."

Silence. And then the repulsive chomping sound of gum-chewing came through the phone.

"To Anabel. Love, Rex. I guess."

Click.

Rosie found Rex and the whole interaction to be entirely and maddeningly insulting to her and to the verb *love*. Again.

And so Rosie filled out the card in the manner that she felt appropriate, with her favorite e. e. cummings poem:

love is more thicker than forget
more thinner than recall
more seldom than a wave is wet
more frequent than to fail

it is most mad and moonly
and less it shall unbecome
than all the sea which only
is deeper than the sea

love is less always than to win
less never than alive
less bigger than the least begin
less littler than forgive

it is most sane and sunly
and more it cannot die
than all the sky which only
is higher than the sky

And then she signed it on his behalf: "I love you, Rex."

This was the first time Rosie had ever used anyone's words besides her own on these notes. She had never invoked any of her favorite poets. But this time, with Rex Thorpe's supreme jerkiness to counterbalance, it felt just right.

Even to Rosie, it was unclear whether she was trying to rescue Rex's girlfriend in some small way, or whether she was tactically trying to tell Rex something about how love ought to be. Either way, now her effort was written in ink and it would be showing up on Anabel's doorstep in thirty-six hours.

And Rosie was happy.

When Rex arrived at his girlfriend's doorstep to receive credit for the flowers he had sent, Anabel immediately and energetically threw her arms around him. Unbeknownst to Rosie, Anabel was a literature student and a great fan of e. e. cummings.

"Your note is perfect," Anabel told her boyfriend.

"I will treasure it always. I love you too," she said.

Rex knew Anabel felt sure they would get married and Rex hadn't yet thought of any reasons why she wouldn't be correct.

Rex received his undeserved hug without a word in response. But when he saw the card on that bouquet, he was furious. Because he was not interested in flowery language and he was definitely not interested in anybody doing anything without his explicit permission.

At thirty-one years old, Rex Thorpe was both serious and particular about the things in his life. About his Brooks Brothers pants and steamed, button-down shirts. About the Eames furniture in his apartment. About the Upper West Side restaurants he frequented and the academic degrees of the people he interacted with. About the whiskey he drank and the shape of the glass it came in. About the brand of black ink in his ballpoint

pen. About his vision of himself as a respected and successful man. About being a man of authenticity.

Rex focused his attention so meticulously and intensely on all of these things that he never felt it logical or worthwhile to spare any energy on Anabel DeGette. He never cared enough about her to go out of his way even though she was both pleasant and beautiful enough. Rex, himself, was acutely aware that if a pleasant and beautiful woman were not part of his idea of what a “successful” life looked like, he probably would not concern himself with women at all. But since it was, Rex knew he needed occasionally to express some sentiment of affection while simultaneously ignoring his girlfriend and spending all of his time at work. And a bouquet of a dozen roses with a note that said “Love, Rex” was what he had decided on.

“What the fuck did you do?” Rex shouted rhetorically at Rosie that next day even before he had both feet in the door of Blooms. “I gave you very clear instructions for my note. And nowhere did those instructions include a poem from fucking e. e. cummings. Who the fuck are you to interfere and manipulate my words?”

He was prepared to continue his rant, but stopped abruptly at the sight of Rosie in her knee-length paisley dress. Her messy brown hair slipping out of a loosely tied braid. Her bangs that nearly hid the curvature of her thick eyebrows. The flower-stained gloves that were comically too large for her undoubtedly tiny hands at the end of her tiny wrists. Her petite bones. The slight scoop of her nose. Her freckles. The way the corners of her eyes turned down. The way she jaggedly swayed her hips and hummed the tune of Stevie Nicks and Don Henley’s “Leather and Lace.” The way she radiated.

And most importantly, the way she casually ignored his fury. Rex was struck breathless by it all.

He stood in his place, mouth agape, disappointed that Rosie

had yet to look up at him. He thought he could catch her eye. Just for a moment. He wanted to catch her eye. He wanted to gaze right into it and see something new.

Without even looking up from her daily thorn trimming, Rosie knew it was Rex stomping through the door. She peeked out quickly from underneath her bangs. Handsome and jerky, indeed.

She tried keeping her eyes cast downward at the roses in her hands as Rex spoke at her but lost the battle when his words stopped. She met Rex Thorpe’s eyes for just an instant and there everything was. His unruly eyebrows. His strong shoulders. His smooth skin. The creases in his cheeks. His black hair.

His presence.

Rosie couldn’t bear being in the shop with that overwhelming intensity. That simultaneous repulsion and attraction. So she shook her hands until the canvas gloves fell to the counter. And then Rosie picked up her tote bag full of scribbled-in notebooks and sweet-tooth fixings and scurried past Rex without saying a word. She put such focus on getting out the door and such little attention on what was happening in that shop, that she didn’t even stop to acknowledge the blue crayon and couple of pennies dribbling out of her bag as she dragged it behind her.

As Rosie walked toward the door, she felt another twinge. Although she did not share Rex’s principle, she quite admired his authenticity. Not all people, all men, spoke their mind like this. Not all were willing to let others know what hurt them. Vexed them. Pleased them. Excited them. There was a sexiness in Rex’s assuredness. His masculinity. His convictions. But even with all of those thoughts about the man standing so firmly in the middle of Blooms, Rosie waltzed right out and decided to take the afternoon off.

She hopped on her bike and, without a care in the world,

headed straight for her favorite branch on the willow tree in Central Park. Just the tune of "Leather and Lace" playing in her mind. And Rex's sylvan scent lingering in her nose.

2

As it were, Willow Thorpe hated Wednesdays. Per the rules of the divorce, Wednesdays were always Dad's days. And Dad's days were full of homework and piano practice and chore charts and manners.

But it wasn't long before her mother found a way to make Wednesday nights Willow's favorite night of the week. Another adventure, another opportunity for so much love.

Willow tugged her favorite Keith Haring T-shirt over her thick hair until it fell onto her shoulders. She smiled when she looked in the mirror to brush her teeth and saw herself wearing it. She loved that oversize T-shirt with the thick squiggly lines and bright colors. She loved how it exuded excitement all around. How the figures were so simple and so happy dancing around together.

She washed the toothpaste from the edges of her mouth, then wiggled herself under her sheets. And then she waited. She squeezed her eyes shut like she was sleeping. But she wasn't even close. And then she waited some more. And when Wil-