

Overgrown

The baby's cry echoed throughout the house, beckoning her parents. Her father came in first, already in his home office; her mother came in right after him from downstairs. The two crowded in front of the pale pink crib.

"Hi, baby," her mother cooed, "what's the matter? You hungry?" She lifted the little girl out of her crib and cradled her. Only then did she notice the leaves.

Small, bright green leaves poked out of the baby's mouth. A thin stem could just barely be seen in her mouth. Her father was stunned into silence, his eyes wide and glassy. Her mother, on the other hand, was intrigued. Her face was set firmly in thought; her eyes took in the leaves and stem. The baby wailed even louder, bringing her father out of his trance. He hurried out of the nursery and returned shortly with a pair of scissors.

"What are you doing?" his wife asked, backing up.

"We need to cut the leaves, Rose," the man answered, hand trembling.

"I'll do it. Here, hold her." Rose took the scissors from her husband's hand and passed their daughter into his arms.

With all the care and patience in the world, the girl's mother snipped at the leaves. One by one the leaves fell onto the ground. When all of them had been cut, the stem retreated back into the baby's mouth. Her giggles filled the room soon after.

"What the hell was that?"

"Don't swear in front of her," Rose chastised, pointing warningly with the scissors. "We have a very special girl here." She smiled down at her daughter, knowing this was the beginning of something beautiful.

Rose began taking notes as her daughter grew. As a baby, she noted, only leaves grew, and very few at that. But as she grew into a toddler, she finally started seeing buds grow from her daughter's mouth. When her daughter cried after being chastised or corrected, purple buds would grow. When her daughter was given something or experienced uncontainable joy, pink buds came tumbling out. Rose began noticing the pattern. Anger, happiness, sadness; all of these emotions were always accompanied by flower buds and leaves. She smiled whenever a new bud grew.

Once Gloria grew old enough to go to school, her parents knew there would be some need for adjustment. But to their delighted surprise, their daughter was no different to the children around her. The other kids played and sang with her. She raced down bright blue slides and swung on old swings like any other child. If a bud grew, it was merely cut by a teacher and forgotten. Their daughter flourished, spoiled rotten to the core.

Rose noted with worry that there wasn't much variation in the buds that grew. Her husband, however, didn't seem at all as perplexed and actually had a very simple explanation.

"She is a child, Rose," her husband began, sitting across from her at the dinner table. It was late into the night: Gloria was asleep. "Her mind and emotions are as simple as they'll ever be right now. Just wait until she's a teenager. Then you'll look back and wish she was still just sprouting pink and purple buds." He chuckled before taking a sip of his coffee.

"Yeah," Rose sighed, "you're right. You're right. It's the mama bear in me. Worried always."

“That’s what makes you a good mama bear.”

“Lovely.”

The two sat there at the table. The dim light of a pineapple scented candle on the table as their only bit of light. Songs of rain and coffee being sipped made them drowsy. The peace of the moment kept them awake.

“You are beautiful.”

“Markus.”

“I mean it.”

A comfortable pause.

“When everything changes...” Markus started, reaching his hand across the table.

“We will always love the same,” Rose finished, taking his hand.

Elementary flew by for Gloria, but not without its challenges. It only really became difficult when her flowers would get pulled out. Some of the meaner children saw every now-blooming flower as a new toy. Whenever a flower was forced out of her, blood decorated the ends of the stems, leading to the horrific affirmation that the flowers were actually attached to Gloria’s insides. She shrieked the first time it happened, not just out of pain but at the sight of her own blood. The bullies’ parents were called and the flower pulling eventually stopped, but that did not soothe Gloria’s new hatred of her bullies. That was when a new flower bloomed.

Lobelias. A small dark purple or blue or even pinkish flower. It’s meaning: malevolence. Having or displaying a desire to harm or do evil to others. Hostility or bitterness. All the feelings Gloria housed inside her for her tormentors. Any time she saw

them, whether during lunch or in class, lobelias would blossom from her mouth eerily slow. It usually took three of her friends to calm her down and a teacher to cut the flowers. To Gloria's surprise, one teacher kept the flowers in a decorated pot on her desk. Weird.

Her parents were more concerned with the new growth; its meaning unnerved them. For their little girl to be feeling such intense hate worried them. Markus cooked Gloria's favorite for lunch while her mother sat at the table with her laptop open. They never really explained how the flowers worked. The two were certain it was linked with her emotions but this incident was the last bit of proof they'd been waiting for. They needed to actually tell Gloria.

"Hun, come sit over here," Rose instructed warmly to her daughter.

Gloria came over and sat in the chair next to her mother. "Hi, mama. What's that? It looks like my flowers."

"This," Rose followed her daughter's finger on the screen with her own, "is a lobelia flower. The flower means something, did you know that?" Gloria shook her head. "This flower, well, it means a feeling when you're really, really, mad. Like, you hate someone 'cause you're so mad. Remember when you got really mad at those kids who pulled your flowers?" Gloria nodded again, more vigorously. "Well, that's how your flowers work. If you feel something really, really strong, different flowers will grow based on what you're feeling."

Gloria seemed to consider this for a moment. "So when I'm mad, mad flowers will grow?"

"That's right."

“So when I’m happy, happy flowers will grow?”

“Right again.”

“Cool!” Gloria squealed, giggling. “Can we look at more flowers, mama?”

Rose smiled down at her daughter, petting her hair. “Of course.”

Middle school was many things for Gloria. Annoying with its uniforms and stricter schedule. Exciting with its new events and people. But most of all, important.

The day had gone by as usual. Classes, lunch, boredom, and the occasional argument with Patricia. It was at the end of the day while Gloria was stuffing her unneeded textbooks in her locker that a light tap graced her shoulder. She turned and suppressed a squeal of excitement as her crush stood before her. Diana was nice, cute, and not that much taller than her. A total goof who was barely passing math. Gloria could have swooned right there and then.

“Hi, Glory,” Diana started. The nickname tinged the girl’s cheeks pink. “I was wondering if you wanted to go out. On a date. With me,” she finished awkwardly, playing absentmindedly with the strap of her backpack.

Diana wanted to go out on a date? With her? Before Gloria could even attempt to stammer out an answer, a bundle of red and light purple sprung from her mouth. The red roses were easily recognized by the two. True love. However, the light purple flowers confused them. The flowers were small with only four petals each. Diana pulled out her phone and typed in a vague description and was able to find them easily. Lilacs. Their meaning: first love.

Diana smiled down at the meaning, her cheeks going rosy. She was pulled from her thoughts by a quizzical sound in front of her. Gloria was pointing down at the phone and then writing a question mark in the air with her finger.

“What does it mean?”

Gloria nodded her head.

“Nothing.” Diana smiled, pocketing her phone. “Now, let's cut those pretty flowers off.” She pulled out a pair of scissors and carefully sniped at the flowers, as she always did when she was with Gloria.

The two left the building hand in hand. Diana carried the lilacs and roses like they meant the world to her. Just like the girl next to her.

High school brought an even stronger love between the two along with many more changes: Gloria had finally dropped Patricia, to which Diana cheered with joy; she finally dyed her ends blue; and she even grew taller, to Diana's mild annoyance at being the same height now. However, Gloria knew she was actually taller, Diana just wore platforms all the time. The two were still amazed that even after years of being together, red roses still popped out of Gloria's mouth from time to time. Diana always basked in the warmth those simple flowers gave her.

All of that goodness seemed to come crashing down during senior year. Gloria's mother was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia. She was in the final stage. It made sense looking back on everything in the past month. Rose had been extremely fatigued, sleeping most of the day. The bruises followed soon after. Then the weight loss toward the end of the month: that's what finally sent them to the hospital. It shocked them all. It happened so fast.

The doctor explained the quick pace. Acute leukemia develops and progresses quickly. Mere weeks can go by with the sufferer getting worse and worse. Just like Rose's case. The doctor also explained somberly that even with intense and immediate chemotherapy, survival was unlikely. If Rose sought out treatment, she'd get it, but he had warned them all not to get their hopes up. In the end, Rose decided to die at home.

She had from weeks to days. Gloria refused to go back to school, wanting to spend every day with her mother. If she died while she was away, Gloria wouldn't forgive herself. Rose spent all her time in bed with her daughter keeping her company and bringing her whatever she needed.

They were watching TV one afternoon when Rose noted pink and purple spots in the right corner of her vision. She turned to see small, unevenly shaped petals coming out of Gloria's mouth; her daughter's eyes glimmering with almost-fallen tears. Rose grabbed her phone from beside her to find what the flowers were and what they meant. It took a while, but she eventually found a picture that matched the flowers. Sweet pea flowers. A common farewell gift. Expressing best wishes for those you love as they set off on a journey.

Rose sobbed and wrapped her arms around her now weeping daughter.

They began planning the funeral in advance. Calling relatives to bear the bad news and warn them to dust off their blackest dress. Rose warned both her daughter and husband that her funeral had better be on the sunniest day with the brightest, happiest flowers they could find. If not, she'd haunt them forever. It was odd, having the soon to be deceased planning her own funeral. It unnerved Markus just how prepared Rose seemed to be. He voiced his concern that night.

“Aren’t you afraid?” Markus asked into the dark of their bedroom.

“No,” Rose answered unhesitantly. “Are you?”

“Of course I am.” He searched for a second and found his wife’s hand in the dark.

“Why?”

“Because you’ll be gone. You won’t be here. I’ll never see you again.” A sob escaped Markus without his permission. He tried to choke it down to no avail.

“I won’t be gone,” Rose said simply. The smile could be heard in her soft voice. “I’ll be right beside you at the funeral, saying goodbye to my body. I’ll be in the crowd at Gloria’s graduation, cheering for her. I’ll always be right there, Markus. For you and Gloria.”

A struggling sob was all the reply she got. She turned to rest one hand on her lover’s cheek. She kissed him goodbye.

“Don’t cry at the funeral, Markus. Don’t let Gloria cry either. I won’t be there in the ground. That won’t be me in there. I will be with you. So there is nothing to cry about,” she soothed.

The crying stopped, a kiss on her hand followed her to sleep.

She was gone the next morning.

Gloria walked into the room to see her father hugging her unmoving mother. She couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. Her mother was gone and wasn’t coming back. She couldn’t feel her body as she moved over to her parents. Her father’s cries barely registered. His touch as he tried to keep her from looking at her mother’s face went

unfelt. Her mother's eyes were closed. Knowing they'd never open again brought her to the floor.

The ambulance sirens woke her up. She watched in horror as a body was wheeled out of her home on a stretcher, covered in a white sheet. Her father held her at his side on the couch, watching with glazed eyes as the paramedics moved.

After everything had settled, silence filled the house. The two left behind sat there. Each alone in their own ocean of emotions, or lack thereof. Gloria felt nothing at that moment. Emptiness. As if a part of her had been torn out of her, just as her flowers had been when she was younger. She felt that same pain now. She could feel the tearing of her insides. The hollowness left behind. A space that would never be filled.

Markus was the opposite. He felt swallowed whole by all the thought and feelings crashing down on him like waves. He was drowning with no one there to pull him out of his despair. All he could do was hold on to his daughter numbly as they sat in the suffocating silence of their empty home.

There was no life there anymore. It had just been taken out by men and women in white. He had watched them lift Rose out of their bed. He watched them check Gloria's pulse before tending to the dead. His wife was gone. Their life was gone. There was nothing to fill this desolate home.

The funeral was as Rose had asked. The sun shone in the sky like a beacon, though no one felt its warmth. Flowers decorated a wreath with a picture of Rose in the center, and more flowers decorated the edges of the chairs and podium. Pink roses stood out the most of the three chosen for the funeral. Their meaning: joy, gratitude, but most of all, grace. How graceful Rose was in everything she did. Even in death, she

went with grace. Arbutus flowers, which Gloria picked out, were small, very pale pink flowers, almost white. She had chosen them for her father to hold as well as for decoration. They meant, “you are the only one I love.” When Markus learned of their meaning he knew they had to be chosen. The last flowers were statice flowers; the white variety. They symbolized remembrance and sympathy, with white flowers typically representing purity and beauty. A perfect combination.

As the funeral went on, with family and friends standing together, Markus looked to his daughter worriedly. Not a single flower grew from her mouth. She felt nothing as they lowered her mother into the ground. Nothing when the pastor spoke words of God she did not believe. Talk of purpose and a better place. The hollow feeling had not left her. She didn't even cry.

It was only until after the funeral that feeling flooded her, in the quiet of her room. Sorrow and missing and loss crashed down on her. Clamped her chest and paralyzed her. Tears welled and spilled, burning and hurting. She fell to the cold floor and wailed. Shrieked and cried out for someone who was never coming back. A familiar feeling crawled up her throat immediately. Flowers and stems forced their way out of her mouth. Leaves pushed their way between their teeth. Pinks, purples, and red choked her. Pink carnations: a mother's love. Rosemary: remembrance and love.

Cypress: mourning and sorrow.

Flowers grew more and more as her cries only got louder. All the colors clashed together and she couldn't breathe. She couldn't stop her hot tears of the pain that ripped through her. The emptiness within her now filled with flowers. She yanked at the ever growing stems and pulled them from her lungs, giving no attention to the blood on their

ends. As she pulled more grew to replace them, her grief never ending. She cried out now not only of loss but out of sheer, unbearable pain. The suffocating feeling of leaves and stems and flowers invading her airways. When the flowers were unable to push out of her mouth fast enough enough, they stabbed through her neck, continuing to grow. Her eyes rolled back as blood began dripping down and onto her collarbone. The flowers overtook her very being. She fell to her side.

The flowers finally ceased.