

Wildflowers

When I think of my childhood, my first thought is of you. Isn't that strange when we spent so many years apart? What I know of you is only comprised of fleeting memories before you left for college and scattered photos from the disjointed attempts at family reunions after Mom and Dad got divorced, which eventually faded into occasional visits to one half of the family or the other during school breaks. Yet people say there's a connection between us, a connection supposedly longer than life itself. Doesn't the old Chinese saying tell us that lovers are for one life only, but sisters may stay together even in the next one?

We might be sisters, but to me, being 14 years apart almost makes it seem like we grew up in different generations. I've thought long and hard about who has it better, but honestly, I still don't know. I don't know what I'll end up like by the time I'm living my fourth decade of life, where you are now. I can't imagine myself at your age, just like I can't image you at mine. What was it like, being a teenager with two parents and an abundance of freedom? I spent high school watching hockey games alone, but I try to imagine how you used to watch them with Dad. Back then, the couch was black, and the paintings hanging on the walls were all your own. I can envision him, lounging on the loveseat, TV remote in one hand and a can of beer in the other, and you, sitting cross-legged on the couch, homework and looseleaf sprawled haphazardly over your lap. Eyes glued to the 36-inch CRT television screen, you stare open-mouthed and dreamy-eyed as Mario Lemieux strides his way down the ice to score his 28th goal of the season.

Things were pretty different back then. Our parents weren't so worried yet because they didn't know any better. They let you take the T into town, take the car for a spin, take a boy to prom. When you were in high school, you voluntarily crammed an overload of AP classes, extracurriculars, and sports into your daily schedule, because you loved those things; you loved everything. And when you came to college applications, all our parents did was buy you plane tickets and send you off to visit the colleges you applied to, by yourself. You were accepted by your dream school, a top ten university, and even then, they let you make all the decisions. With me, Mom is different now—more nurturing, more mindful of setting restrictions and responsibilities, all for the careful cultivation of the best results. I guess it's because she doesn't

want me to turn out like you: messy, independent, and wanting to grow every possible direction—a wildflower. I'm used to not having many choices, but sometimes, I can't help but wonder about all the possibilities you had. What was it like, to have so much freedom?

You left your old prom dress in the closet, and a few months ago, I decided to try it on. It was light blue satin and strapless, long and flowing, and I know from the pictures that it complemented your petite frame perfectly. I thought that by donning that dress, I would finally feel a sense of what it was like to be you. Unfortunately, the dress barely passed over my knees, and top half looked as if it were about to burst at the seams. It was too short and too tight, and the ribbon that crisscrosses in the back is missing. I searched for it in the closet, but ended up finding a piece of it in my dresser. It appears that you snipped the ribbon right down the center, and that other half is now hopelessly lost.

It's so typical of you to misplace your belongings. Our parents always berated you for leaving your clothes all over the carpet. I'm lucky; I can't leave my clothes over the carpet even if I wanted to because I don't have a carpet. I guess just because you got your freedom doesn't mean you got away with those little things. Dad used to yell at you all the time. My first memory of you: I'm standing outside your bedroom door and looking on at the ensuing shouting match with disdain because I assumed I was the good kid, so I thought you were the rebel. Even now, you're still that same careless slob you were in high school, dirty laundry piled high and askew, coins spilling out of upside-down purses, thinking that it's safe to go jogging down dusty, deserted streets alone in the city at 9 PM after you finally leave the research lab where you work. Still too forgetful; still constantly reprimanded by our mother for not answering her phone calls. In the background, I continue to look on with disdain, or maybe disappointment, because it turns out that freedom got you nowhere. Now I realize you were never even a rebel at all. You just lacked common sense.

Since fourth grade, most of my summers were spent with Dad, who moved back to China after the divorce. One time in Beijing, I was browsing a tiny, quaint little store packed with things like painted picture frames, mini candles, and cute little figurines, when I saw, on the check-out

counter, a bouquet of paper flowers. Suddenly, I felt inspired. My mother would be flying to Beijing in a few days to visit her side of the family, and it'd be a great idea to meet her at the airport with a bouquet of flowers just like this one. After talking to store owner, she taught me, in the hour I was there, how to make roses and daisies. I came home with an armful of colorful, crinkled paper and skinny, green sticks for stems, and then spent hours folding and cutting and wrapping, even gluing some glitter on top, just as the store owner had instructed, until finally, my very own pastel bouquet was complete.

Convincing my father to drive us to the airport to pick her up was easy enough, although I suspected it wouldn't happen again—my stepmom was thoroughly against the idea, although she only expressed it when she thought I wasn't within hearing distance. The day of her arrival, my mother's plane landed half an hour early. When my Dad and I finally arrived the gate, she was already seated and waiting for us.

“There you are!” she exclaimed when she saw us. I immediately presented her with the bouquet, which she barely glanced at. “Thank you, put it over there,” she said, gesturing toward the luggage trolley, then immediately launched into her own story. “Guess what? As soon as I got off the plane—”

“Hold on, hold on,” my dad interrupted. “You didn't even take a look at the flowers that our daughter made!” Having seen the effort I spent to make the bouquet, he was a bit sympathetic about the meager response I got in return.

“Oh, you made them?” My mother smiled. “That's nice, thank you. Now, I was saying, as soon as I got off the plane...”

The memory still reminds me of an instance back in middle school, during the year or so where I was really into card-making. My friends at the time had learned to expect, on their birthdays, fancy cards of their own, decorated with whatever I was currently experimenting with: 3-D flowers, tissue-paper collages, metallic foils, ribbons and beads, all sorts of textures. For my

mom's birthday, I decided to make card out of black and silver paper with flower-shaped cut-outs. I thought the colors looked cool. My mother didn't agree.

“Black?! Black is for funerals!” she had scoffed. “Thank you, but why would you spend your time making this? It's such a waste of eyesight.”

For as long as I can remember, the only time I would spend with my mom was watching our daily 45 minutes of whatever TV drama was currently playing on the Chinese channel before the 9 o'clock news—a routine that lasted well into middle school. While my mother found the dramas casually entertaining rather than realistic, for me, they were often an emotional roller-coaster ride, and I frequently found myself thoroughly invested in the plot.

There was one drama, about an opera singer, which I remember to be my favorite for a long time, although I don't remember the name of the series. The beginning starts with a beautiful female opera singer who is caught between her feelings for rich suitor from an influential family, and her childhood friend, a poor but hard-working man. Coming from a lower-class family herself and struggling to support her career, the opera singer decides, out of the genuine belief that he will love her and treat her better than her childhood friend ever could, to choose the rich man.

Eventually, however, the rich suitor leaves her for the daughter of another wealthy family, as per the wishes of his parents. By this time, the main character's other love interest, her childhood friend, has already married another woman. Heartbroken, destitute, and with nowhere to go, the opera singer wanders off to another town, hoping to start a new life.

After a year, the rich suitor begins to regret listening to his parents. He spends much money searching for the opera singer's whereabouts, but when he finally finds her, he learns that his father has cut off his allowance. Desperate for money, he gambles, earning himself a small sum with which he buys the opera singer a bouquet of 100 fresh, red roses and asks her to dinner. She

agrees to let him take her to a high-class restaurant, only to order everything on the menu. Afterward, she rejects him mercilessly and leaves him to pay the check.

Dad was the first to meet him, and Grandma was second, but the first time I see him in person is at the airport, all of us waiting for your plane to arrive. He is the man with the roses. Fifty roses, dark red. On the ride home, the three of us sit in the back; you in the middle squeezed between him and me. Your face glows with the sweetest smile when you lean toward me and quietly murmur that nobody has ever gifted you so many beautiful flowers before. In the front seats, they whisper that the roses must have cost him a fortune; where did he get the money? Fifty scarlet roses, already brown at the edges. You didn't notice; of course you didn't—that's just like you. Fifty scarlet roses, already wilting.

I've always wondered why people bring flowers when their loved ones are in the hospital. I suppose it's not so different from bringing flowers into one's home, to brighten a place with something so fresh and beautiful. But for this to be a common sight in a place associated with illness and death is quite strange—until, I suppose, you realize that despite being so full of life, the flowers, too, are dying.

Perhaps that's why my mother prefers to decorate our house with fake potted plants and man-made bouquets from the crafts store instead. I remember her bringing them home when I was a kid: the artificial shrub by the fireplace, the plastic ivy hung across the mantle, the vase of velvet plum blossoms on the corner table. They've been around for ages now, but the waxy leaves are still shiny, the stems still thorny and green, the blossoms still pink, with the only sign of age being the faded dye at the edges of the petals and the thin layer of dust that has accumulated on top.

“It's time to buy some new ones,” my mother suggested the other day as we walked past the aisles of flowers for sale at *Michael's*. I was surprised to hear her say this. Somehow, in my

mind, I had expected the fake flora in our home to stay the same forever, unless my mother decided to sell our house and move away—in which case they would, inevitably, end up in the trash.

Two months after I first met him at the airport, in firm little footsteps, you marched up to Mom. The two of you fought that day, but you won. Barely. You told her you would find a way, and she couldn't do anything about it. You said it didn't matter if no one supported your decision; you would marry this man, no matter what. You were afraid, but you won. I didn't say anything because at that moment, I was blinded by your freedom, the fact that you knew exactly what you wanted and weren't afraid to stand up for it. I just wish you hadn't won.

They told you he wasn't good enough for you, and I thought so, too, but you were so sure you were right. I was almost jealous. I don't think I've ever been that sure of anything in my life. Sometimes I wish I could feel that confidence, just to know what it's like. I want to experience, even just for one second, that feeling of pure conviction, when you feel like you've reached an understanding with the world, even it'll eventually be swept away, and sooner or later life will stab you in the back. Maybe I can only say that because I didn't see your tears that night. I've never seen you cry. Mom has. She says you cry easily, just like me, except your face look uglier when you do. Mom hardly ever cries. She doesn't believe in crying; she's too realistic for that. You cry because you think life should be fair, but it never is. You're an idealist—so am I, except I suppose I only cry when I wake up in the middle of the night and want to feel sorry for myself over the petty misfortunes in life. But don't tell Mom. She's always telling me that crying is sign of being weak-willed, and I'm already too over-emotional. I tell her I can't help it. She doesn't get why not.

“Why do you have to care so much when I disagree?” She asked me once, when I had starting tearing up because of a hurtful comment she had made about a good friend of mine.

“I don't know,” I tried, “because you're important to me, and what you say is important to me?”

“But why is it important that I should try to agree with what you think?” my mother snapped. “Is that really necessary? I’m already holding myself back because I know you’ll get defensive against everything I say, just because it’s me.” I stayed silent, eyes glued to the ground, unable to formulate an answer. “I thought you’d be stronger than your sister,” she finally said, followed by a sigh, “but turns out you’re just like her.”

It was the reproachful tone of the statement that stung—in that moment, I hated myself, because I regretted talking back. I regretted every time I had ever talked back to my mother, and I regretted every time in the future that I will inevitably do so again, even when I swear to myself that I’ll keep it in. I regretted it not because I was sorry for what I had done, or what I had said, but because I was sorry for myself, for having to hear her ugly words and live as the object of her disappointment, yet again.

And what I really meant, which I didn’t realize until after the argument had long passed: *I don’t want you to agree—I just want to have your encouragement and support, even when you disagree.*

A friend once told me that her favorite flowers were peonies. I must say I find this quite unbelievable. *Why, on earth, would you like peonies?* My family has grown these flowers in our front yard for as long as I can remember, leaving me with quite a deep impression of the plants. The thick, luscious layers of petals on a peony are attached to ridiculously skinny stems. As a result, the big floppy heads of our flowers would always droop down to the ground like some sad-looking thing. Sometimes, in a heavy rainstorm, the blooms would fall off the stalk altogether, big clumps of petals face-planted straight into the dirt.

Despite its lack of aesthetics, the poor proportions of the plant are not enough to cause my dislike for the flower. The truth is, any admiration I have for peonies is heavily displaced by the fact that they inevitably attract ants. Even as a kid, I knew to call these plants “ant-flowers.” Every spring, as soon as the large and round, pinkish-green, veiny, perky buds start to emerge, the

entire plant—flowers, stalks, leaves, and all—begins to swarm with a colony of those tiny arthropods, hundreds of little, black busybodies milling about. Just imagining the sight makes my skin crawl.

The fact is, you can love your peonies all you want, but you will never love them as much as those pesky ants. Some people even insist that peonies rely on ants in order to bloom at all. Apparently, this myth is not true—peonies do not *need* ants, although keeping the ants around may be beneficial, as the two organisms engage in a symbiotic relationship (On Peonies and Ants). Peonies use “the ants' natural tendency to guard a food source.” The peony secretes a sugary substance which attracts ants and in return, the ants protect the flower against “the ever-present threat of herbivory. If an insect tries to take a bite out of a bud, the ants quickly swarm it and drive it off. It's a win-win situation. The ants get an easy, high-energy food source and the plant suffers less damage to its reproductive organs.”

The losers in this relationship are, of course, the humans who only wanted the peony plant around for it's beautiful blossoms, not the annoying pests that come along with it. Even after the peonies bloom, the ants often refuse to leave the plant. My grandma, who used to live with us, once decided to cut some of our peonies to display in a vase in our dining room. Upon finding an ant leisurely crawling across our tablecloth, I immediately threw the flowers out.

During poetry workshop, my class started to discuss the word “blossoming” and it's association with femininity, puberty, and fertility, especially in light of another word that appeared in the poem that quickly caught everyone's attention—“patriarchy.”

“Part of the impact of the patriarchy is that women are described as flowers—delicate and short-lived,” one male student explained.

“They see her like a garden,” the someone else cut in. I couldn't help but be strangely disturbed by the sudden twist on what could so easily have been rephrased and disguised as romantic.

Just another reason why I wouldn't ever want to be given a bouquet for Valentine's Day.

Your phone has been set to silent for days. He's looking for you again, but you're just so tired, and he doesn't bring the roses anymore, so you don't go back. Your messages fill up with unread texts, and the numbers in the little bubble on the screen count up to 20, 30, 40, as the missed calls increase. You wonder if you should just pick up the phone, but you're too afraid to hear his voice again.

For a while, you had come home to that same voice in person, every night. It's been a few months since you left, and just when you thought it was all over, out of nowhere, he had shown up in your life again. Yesterday, you finally caved and played the voicemails. In between his crying, you learned that he's been laid off from work, and can barely even afford to pay his bills anymore. He's depressed, he told you. Life doesn't mean anything anymore; he might as well die without you. He's sorry, he's so sorry, and can't you please give him a second chance, or just answer his phone call, just this once? A few messages later, his desperation simmers down. By the last message, his voice is eerily calm. *I'll be watching you*, was all he said, and that's when you stop listening. For days, you hold your breath, waiting for him to return. He never does.

It snows on the day you come home to visit. Little white crystals dust the top of your hat and sink into your dull, black locks as you lift one hand to wave at us, the other five pale, bony fingers clutching the handle of your suitcase. I can make out the wrinkles by your crescent shaped eyes as you smile and shuffle toward the car, shivering in your frumpy, old coat and flimsy flats. You've barely buckled yourself in before our mother starts criticizing your appearance—*nia'er le ba ji de*, she would say. Withered, faded. As if a wilted wildflower.

It's too cold to go out this week, so we stay inside the house. Mom clears the dining room table and we make dumplings, which is what our family used to do for New Years back when there

was more than two of us at home. The last time we did this together, I was still in elementary school and you were in college, home for winter break. Dad was here, too. Somewhere in my dresser, I still keep a photo of us standing at this very same dining table, taken while I was rolling out the dough, Dad was mixing the filling, and you were folding the dumplings. Too busy trying to keep up with the pace of our little assembly line, we didn't notice Mom come in with the camera. It was one of the last pictures the three of us took together in this house before you stopped visiting home so often and before Dad moved to Beijing.

Now, within the warm atmosphere of the dining room, it's the first time in a long time that we almost feel like a family. At one end of the table, a lump of dough sits inside a flour-dusted bowl. Next to it, Mom stations herself in front of the heavy, wooden cutting board and lets her nifty fingers fly, left hand rotating the skins as her right hand moves the rolling pin back and forth at a steady rhythm. You and I grab the chopsticks and scoop the filling inside the dough, carefully folding over the skins to seal the ruffled edges with our fingers. We work as fast as we can, but even with twice the number of hands, we are no match for Mom. After a while, she has to stop rolling to help us with the filling. Your hair becomes a nuisance, long strands scrunched into a messy bun with a few wisps half-hanging over your shoulders. Mom nags you about it, like she always does, but you shrug her off. Too lazy to brush. Too tired to care.

Maybe you could move back, Mom suggested. You're 33, and your time is running out. Maybe it's time to try something else. At Harvard, there's no room for mistakes. Working in the lab isn't as rewarding as thought. Five years of research and not a single success, they might just send you packing without a second thought. You smiled bitterly and shook your head, said it was too late to try something new, yet I can't help but think that you just didn't want to give up on the old. It's too hard to confine yourself to black and white choices again when you're used to having so much freedom.

There's a rosebush outside in our backyard, hidden behind the bushes. I wish I could shred them with my fingers—soft, velvety petals one at a time, until my nails stain scarlet—but in reality, they haven't even started to bloom yet. A whirlwind of white dances past the windows and

settles over the bare tree branches and cold concrete, covering the roof with a blanket of snow: a placid, comforting sliver of false security that reassures our muddled thoughts and drowsy eyes.

Two plates of dumplings fill up quickly. Mom leaves the room to boil a pot of water, and for a few minutes, it's just the two of us. Nobody speaks. In silence, we make the rest of dumplings and line them up in perfect rows on the plate before leaning back to admire our work. I wonder why it took us longer to finish than I expected. Probably because we're out of practice. It's been a long time since those family reunions.

When I was younger, our neighbors next door would always buy flowers to hang from the awning of their back porch. I don't know what they're called, but I can picture what the flowers look like very clearly—red, or pink, or violet, but always the same variety, and always in those white plastic pots. Every time the flowers wilted, the neighbors would throw them away. The old flowers would end up sitting out by the trash cans, and a few days later, a new pot would be hanging from the porch ceiling.

My grandma would wait until after dark to walk over and bring the dying flowers back to our house. Just like that, our backyard eventually became home to a small collection of rescued pots. Every day, my grandma would water them and make sure they were getting enough sun. Little by little, the yellow leaves turned green, the floppy stems straightened themselves, and new buds began to bloom. I thought it was magical, how she could nurse the plant back to life, even when our neighbors had given up all hope.

Works Cited

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