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Floral

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Abstract

Floral is a personal essay that explores the speaker's relationship with different flowers and floral elements, ranging in time from early childhood to present day.

Keywords

Floral, Mother, Flowers

Disciplines

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Comments

Recipient of the 2015 Virginia Woolf Essay Prize

Floral

My father and mother made a handsome couple; he is a landscaper and she was a biologist. They both were avid gardeners; my mother had a knack for color schemes and arrangements and my father loves planting things and watching them grow. Together they made my childhood home blossom into an Eden. Our Victorian house was framed with flowering plants on all sides, some trained to grow up a wooden arbor or along abandoned wicker furniture in the grass, spreading their leaves up towards the sun.

The inventory of the yard went like this: two long strips of morning glories, baby's breath, petunias and irises, a grapevine, one plum tree, a blackberry, strawberry, and raspberry patch, two apple trees, and a pear tree in the middle. The place was alive and buzzing, and both my parents always seemed to have soil along their fingers. My mother loved lilacs. My father brought roses home nearly every week from the florist and they would pile up along our counter, old bouquets to new, even though we had rose bushes all along the house. The two of them could call up fertility nearly everywhere they went, except within each other.

The struggle to have me was apparent. They were older when they married. My father had waited half a decade to ask my mother out after he fell in love with her. He saw her first in a dimly lit pub. He was there with his then-girlfriend. He claims that as soon as my mother walked in, he was in love. "She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen," he'll tell you. If you watch him tell the story, it's easy to believe him. His bright blue eyes, striking like spring hydrangea, mist up. It is almost as if he can see her again, entering the pub with chestnut curls soft and damp from the rain that evening. He and his then-

girlfriend broke it off amicably shortly after that evening. She began dating a mutual friend as he admired my mother for a few more years while their crowds ran together in the years after college. She taught at a local college and he worked in the area. He waited nearly five years before deeming it appropriate to admit how much he loved her. It was two years of trying before they had me. I slipped out of my mother's womb weakly, like a bulb left in a cellar too long.

They were lucky to have had me, the doctors said. But one simply was not enough. My father was one of six children and my mother one of five. They were determined to have a big family, to give their children what they had - a sibling for almost every day of the week. It took nearly another four years for my mother to become pregnant with my younger sister. During the fertility treatments, cancer sprouted in her breast. It was like any other weed we were familiar with. It sprouted and germinated and sprouted and germinated until it was in her marrow, her lungs, both breasts, her brain. We waited for each treatment to take hold but very few of them did. None of them stayed long enough to slow the steady growth of her cancerous cells. My father continued to bring her flowers every week while she was sick. He'd pull in late, after dusk, after an hour-long commute home, a new vase in arm filled with white roses and baby's breath or daffodils in the spring, tied with a ribbon. She'd trim the stems of the flowers while standing in a purple bathrobe. She would put them in fresh water, sometimes feeding them the plant food that comes in the shiny packet with the note attached, and sometimes not. Perhaps, occasionally, she didn't want the bouquets to last throughout the week.

So long as she was alive, we never ran out of flowers. I saw hundreds of bouquets while we lived in that house, and I hate to imagine how much my father spent on plants

that were snipped for short-term enjoyment. But even with my exposure to all sorts of plants from a very young age, I had never once seen big, open lilies like the kind you see at funerals. Perhaps it is because they are difficult to grow and are normally a potted plant. The lily has persnickety preferences. It must be planted in sun or part shade, the depth must be two-and-a-half times the height of the bulb, and soil must be a porous type with good drainage. They don't do well if they are too damp. Rather demanding, for such an unappealing and pungent flower.

After my mother died, we had dozens of lilies. They surrounded the coffin at the wake, like a horrible curtain. They nearly reached the ceiling. I still don't know how the funeral home had so many. They even littered the steps of the church where the service was held. They followed us to the graveyard. There were large pots filled with them on either side of the hole we buried her in at the end where her gravestone would eventually be. Lilies reek of funerals. Thank God we tossed roses onto the sleek coffin as it went to its final home. They were familiar. Cut the stems up one inch from the end at a forty-five degree angle, change the water every two days, keep them in a cool spot away from direct sunlight. Cut the thorns off the bottom bits of the stem so as not to prick your fingers, pinch off the leaves so they don't float in the water and make it moldy. Roses were commonplace. Roses were comfort. My father let me pick my mother's gravestone. It was a strange and morbid responsibility for a girl not yet ten, but the therapist we were all seeing as a family said it was a good idea for me to have little responsibilities. I picked the stone that had full, blooming roses carved along the edges.

Lilies have a long and rich history. According to myth, they sprouted from the milk of Hera after some of it dropped on the ground as she was nursing Hercules. The queen of

the gods brought forth this versatile plant, a different lily for each occasion. Peruvian lilies for friendship and devotion, stargazer lilies to express sympathy, pink ones to represent wealth. White lilies to symbolize chastity and purity in some cases; they symbolize restored innocence after death, in others. The one lily I had seen before the massive wall at the funeral was the lily-of-the-valley, a symbol of the second anniversary of marriage. It is so quaint and unobtrusive, I had no idea it was related to the wide open maws that had encased my mother's funeral. The lily-of-the-valley grew in a giant section of soil boxed off near a back entrance to our house. It was the entrance my father always came through. These flowers are almost playful. They line the stem all the way up, shaped like little bells, and they blow in the wind. Even its leaves are pleasant, elongated and striped with brighter, yellowish lines. My father probably planted them practically: it's a good flower to cover shaded ground in a damp, cool area and it is fantastically fragrant. I like to imagine he planted each lily-of-the-valley plant carefully, one-by-one, before their second wedding anniversary as a surprise for my mother. The flowers are said to represent humility and devotion. Perhaps they were planted around the time I was conceived, when my parents were both dedicated to finding a way to flower.

Immediately after we buried my mother, there were no longer flowers littering the kitchen counters of the house. The gardens fell into disarray. In fact, my father barely remembered to cut the grass. The grapes on the vine rotted and dropped, attracting all sorts of bees and wasps. I imagine he was overwhelmed with having to raise two girls so suddenly. We had dentist appointments and parent-teacher conferences, all things he had never attended before. Now he was the only one left to take care of it all. The afternoon she died, my father stood in the oak wooden hallway in our house in the country, defeated. The

priest stood in front of him, almost blocking him from the stairs, his hands on my father's shoulders in an attempt at comfort. In a childish fit of grief, my father grabbed the priest by his robes and said, "Why did she die? Her job isn't done yet." Like a strange seer, the priest replied, "It's your job, now." His landscaping job in Philadelphia and his new job, taking care of us at home, became too much to balance with an hour commute each way, every day. Eventually, we had to leave the house behind. We sold the Victorian, left behind her grape-vine and flowering trees and lilac bushes, and we moved to the suburbs. The new house was a white, rectangle box with windows spattered about with black shutters. I complained that the only thing to see at our new neighborhood was the four or five gas stations along the main road, and nine or ten banks tucked back into corners. We had moved closer to his work, so now he came home before dusk, but tired as he always had been, without flowers in his arms.

He began to date a florist a few years after we moved in. My sister bitterly resented her, but I thought she was sweet. She always smelled of cotton and flower-food and her hands had scratches and red lines on them from where she had to handle the tough wire used to form bouquets or arrangements or where pine branches had cut through her soft, white skin while she formed a wreath for the Christmas season. I found out, much later, that she was the florist he had bought so many bouquets from on his ride home to our house in the country. I imagined him coming in and asking for another bouquet for his dying wife while the other clerks marveled at how generous he was. *What a strong man,* they must have thought, *to face his wife's death so bravely, bringing her something to cheer her spirits.* They wouldn't have been wrong. My father has a way with gifts. He's good with flowers, jewelry too. I wondered if he strapped each new vase into the passenger seat of his

car, making sure it wouldn't jostle and spill milky water during the sixty minutes back to our house.

I often wonder who asked whom out. Was it assumed that they would go out together, once my mother had died? Had my father started seeing her when my mother was still alive, or was it merely a coincidence after-the-fact? Did she love him even when he came in, wedding band still proudly displayed on his left ring finger? Did he even notice her or was he distracted by what awaited him at home? He is a handsome man, I think, with nearly black curls and a strong jaw, one small mole next to his left eye, past where his eyebrow ends. Did she resent my mother? Is it possible to resent a woman dying of cancer? I imagine it must be, especially one with a husband like him, so giving and kind. Or perhaps he asked her out and she felt obligated considering he had been such a good customer, bringing in revenue every single week, until my mother's death, without fail. I've never asked. Whatever the circumstance, I'm glad to have another woman with a green thumb close to me. She watches my basil plants when I'm away from the house, and teaches me how not to kill the succulent plants I'm trying so hard to grow. Even though I'm the daughter of two very educated gardeners, I, in fact, struggle to grow anything.

My father became paralyzed in his own helplessness in the face of my mother's disease. The flowers were his way of coping. I had suspected this for years, but I found out for sure one afternoon, when he had finished planting a lilac bush at our new house. There is one picture of my mother that everyone admires. She is wearing a bright blue, long-sleeved shirt and her ever-present gold cross around her neck. She sports high-waisted jeans and her hair is long and feathery. She gives the camera a cool, placid glance. Her eyes are open wide and she looks past the lens to the person holding the camera, a slight smile

on her lips. I imagine she was looking at her first fiancé, since the picture is dated from when they were engaged. A lilac bush frames her, and you can almost smell its fragrance as you study her face, so unaware that the man she was looking at would never become her husband. Even if that picture was taken by her first fiancé, my father adored it. He had planted that lilac bush not only because it was her favorite kind of flower, but also because he wanted to remember that photograph, which was now packed away among our groups of cardboard boxes. Still, eleven years later, most are packed up and waiting for us. My mother isn't here to demand we open them and discover what we've been missing.

After my father had finished planting the bush that day, he leaned on the counter, dirt smudged along his temples and around the bridge of his nose and I poured him a glass of lemonade. I passed it over, silently. He gulped it down, and continued to shoot looks to the lilac bush in-between swallows, probably studying how deep he had planted it, if the mulch was high enough around the trunk of the bush.

“Why did you buy her so many flowers?” I asked.

He didn't answer for awhile. I could see he didn't want to cry. He managed to croak out, “Because I thought they would keep her alive,” before finishing the glass and placing it in the sink, walking with his back to me up the stairs and into his room.

I saw then how desperate he had been to save her. He couldn't have done anything to stop her death. He often remarks that he would have given anything to trade places with her so his two daughters could have had a mother. I tell him that he's a better mother than the others I've encountered along the way. His sensitivity allows him to see what some mothers wouldn't see or wouldn't think to address during a busy day. He didn't have an easy task. We've been difficult to raise. I become dormant like a tulip bulb. My moods are

cyclical, rising in the summer and sinking in the winter. My sister is too similar to my father in disposition; they anger easily and both have difficulty expressing how they feel. Once, shortly after we moved, they faced off in the bathroom. She was at his waist at age six, but the expression on her face was fierce and mirrored his perfectly, both of them waving their hands in the same manner when she refused to take a bath. They are both like a sequoia; they blossom during a fire and then reach a long state of calm, growing slowly, inch by inch.

We planted another garden at our new house. There's a new arbor, but this one is metal and arches around a wooden slatted bench. There's a mound of honeysuckle behind it and four neatly trimmed rose bushes planted in a semicircle framing the rest of the yard. We have a tree that was destroyed by lightning. It's split down the middle and it still hasn't been removed. The daffodils flower around it. We tend the garden carefully, watering it either early in the morning or late at night during the heat of the summer to avoid scorching the leaves. All three of us get on our hands and knees to pull weeds on cool afternoons. We bicker about what to plant next— he wanted a tree in the middle of the backyard, we wanted it to stay open for late night stargazing. The florist lives with us now, and she quit her job so there's no need to visit the tiny flower shop five miles away anymore. Now, we keep each other alive. We have finally run out of flower food packets, collected from the years of constant and carefully arranged bouquets. The only bouquets we bring inside are small ones, cut from the pink rose bushes early in the spring and then again, when they flower in the fall.