

October 2021

Purple Tulips

Alicia Method
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>

Part of the [Digital Art and Design Commons](#), and the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Commons
Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.
Network

Logo

Recommended Citation

Method, Alicia () "Purple Tulips," *The Mercury*. Year 2021, Article 50.
Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2021/iss1/50>

This open access fiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Purple Tulips

Author Bio

Alicia Method is Sophomore English and Music double major. She is a Staff Writer for the Gettysburgian and a cellist in the Sunderman Conservatory.

Purple Tulips

ALICIA METHOD

Dear Mom,

You told me never wear blue and black together. Black and blue. I was thirteen years old, had barely figured out what a hairbrush was, and I came downstairs wearing black corduroys and a blue cardigan and you told me to change and I was so furious I crawled under my desk and cried.

Black and blue.

I talked to a woman today who was wearing a black and blue sweater with pompoms on the fringe and a gold flower pin near her collarbone. You never got to be 92 years old, but I know you would never have worn a black and blue sweater with pom-poms on the fringe. I suppose her mother never mentioned about not wearing blue and black.

Her name was Sally Fieldings. 92 years old. She uses a purple wheelchair and is very particular about the color. I don't think she has any family left. Last Tuesday, when the sixth-grade chorus came, she grabbed little Bobby with the red hair and sat him by the piano and made him play Jingle Bells till the yellow school bus came back and stalled for fifteen minutes.

Do you remember going to St. Mary's with us? You were the only parent who ever wanted to chaperone that trip. All the other parents wanted D.C or the amusement park, but you liked "singing carols for the elderly". You would stand in the back and sing too loud wearing your half-smushed Santa Hat and everyone would think you were one of the students. Maybe if you had worn your high heels it would have been different.

I've interviewed eight residents so far. Sally was the ninth. I think she was bored. The other eight were desperate to pass off their life stories. Maybe they thought it was all they had left to give.

Like the smoke that circles up ceilings after you blow out a candle. But Sally. I genuinely believe when she scratched her name on the sign-up sheet taped to that horrible mustard brick wall, she was only thinking about having a one-hour time slot where she didn't have to be alone.

You wouldn't blame her. You hated being alone. You hated when anyone else was alone, even if it were only a few minutes. Do you remember when I lost you at the pharmacy? 5 years old. I got stuck staring at the multi-colored gel pens and you didn't take a cursory second to come searching. Just ran up front, grabbed the intercom and yelled over the whole store that you were "up here and come this second." God's booming voice. You picked me up right on time from school every day, 3:15, so I wouldn't have to walk back by myself, even though it meant speeding on the highway at 2:30 pm. And you hated highways.

So, Sally wasn't alone from 11:11 to 12:11. She told me she picked 11:11 because it was a sacred number to her and the rest of the Fieldings. "Everything began at 11:11."

Mr. and Mrs. Fielding, Sally's parent's, were married on November 11, 19 something. Mrs. Fielding was the youngest of eleven, and Mr. Fielding had lived in eleven states, each time for exactly eleven months. I thought she was making that up, and Sally said she wasn't but even if she was it wouldn't matter because "it still made for a good story." I told her that wasn't the point of the St. Mary Memory Project and she told me I had two good ears for listening and one mouth to keep shut.

You never told me to keep my mouth shut. You loved my voice, you just wanted me to use it well. Mr. Fielding worked for a railroad company. He was able to travel the whole country, watch it fly by at 90 miles per hour — to his eyes a supernova of speed and space. Sally said the place he loved best was Kentucky because that's where his family came from. He would crouch on the Kentucky yellow dirt and sift the particles while his eyelids rumbled, proclaiming he was "touching the ground where his ancestors walked." Sally knew because she used to go with him.

Mrs. Fielding worked a job. That wasn't normal and all the neighbors whispered about it over pound cake at high tea. Mr. Fielding didn't like it, but he didn't get a say in it because he was gone six months out of the year. Mrs. Fielding didn't like that Sally went with him because she wanted Sally to get an education, but Mr. Fielding said traveling the

country could be education enough.

You would have let me go. You would have come with me. You would have pinned your brown hair back to a French braid and sailed away on the tracks shouting about Vienna and tapping wine glasses mischievously. Vienna? Was it Vienna you wanted to see so badly? I can't remember anymore.

Sally also said everything begins with a mistake. It was a mistake they got on the wrong train, it was a mistake they were ever in Austin, Texas. It was a mistake that she wore her Sunday dress on a Tuesday which made Mr. Fielding chide Sally, so she ran out of the car into Randy Harper.

Randy Harper was a train hopper, but he stopped hopping when he met Sally. Randy Harper was the love of her life, she said, but she didn't want to have a love all her life. They were married in a Texas courthouse on a Saturday morning, the kind of Saturday morning where you see wet laundry flying in a heat and cats curling up by dried lakes. They were married for five days. Sally said it only took her five days to remember she never wanted to be married.

I asked her if she regretted it. You think old people start to regret the things they did when they were nineteen and still had hair. She said, "no absolutely I do not". But then she clawed her purple fist over her purple wheelchair and insisted on a muffin.

Did you regret anything? People are always talking about regret and death. Not wanting the clammy fingers of mistakes and things undone to creep up their death bed. Missing out on this promotion or opportunity or person. Saying all the wrong things at the wrong time. What did you regret? Leaving home for three weeks to work a job in Chicago until I cried so often the babysitter called? 8 years old. Coloring your hair green just to spite all the old men at Grandads church? 10 years old. Making chocolate cake instead of apple pie so our terrier choked? 14.

Was it all the things you did or all the things you were never able to do?

We had only ten minutes left after the muffin, but Sally said that was just enough time and then talked until 12:25. I guess you sort of lose

time when you're 92 years old.

She told me she got a job as a typist. "I could go 90 words per minute, and that was quite good in those days." You could tell she was still proud of that. She spent her whole life hammering out, minute by minute, the words of other people. Sally in a pink dress, her fingers flying over the surface of symbols, wafting wordy currents. Sally with the typewriter that was hers, just hers, a hefty black thing that is a chipped dalmatian trinket being sold at some yard sale now.

You never wore pink. You said it was an affront to your eyes.

Sally stopped going on trains after all the typing. She said she liked being still. Her mother moved in with her — 39 years old — and they had a little yellow kitchen to bake croissants and paint purple tulips.

Purple tulips.

Do you remember the purple tulips in our front yard by the tottering bricks and oak tree? And the wallpaper in the bathroom by the basement door? Yellow roses, blue chrysanthemums, white daisies, and purple tulips. They were your favorite flower so I brought them to your hospital room and put them by the windowsill so they would get enough light and you said you didn't want them by the window you wanted them on your bedside table so you could look at them when you were falling asleep. Your arms were all black and blue, but you held the purple tulips so close and tight and tried to hide you were crying. And when the flowers dried up, I would take them home and crouch on my bedroom floor, sifting through the petals till they fell one by one on the dirty red carpet.

Sally's mother moved in with her and the little yellow kitchen and they found a stray mutt outside at midnight with a full moon and a terrible storm hovering behind the horizon, scratching its nails on the chalkboard sky. Lightning. They kept that dog for five weeks before they found the owner. The owner was a very old Jimmy Stewart. That's what she said.

You have to wonder if any of it was real — and if that even matters.

Sally asked me why I was working on this project. This protection, celebration, careful consideration of the past.

I told her I certainly wasn't doing it for the company. She told me the only reason we listen to stories is to find bits of ourselves in them. We only want to touch our own reflections, really, because it's comforting to know one isn't quite alone. One can't be alone if there are bits of us in other people's stories. One can't really be gone then either.

Sally didn't know you; she'll never know you even existed. But all her groaning made me smell your perfume, and I wondered if I should be sitting on some street corner telling people about your smile and forty-dollar shoes.

Maybe someday I'll be 92 and glued to a purple wheelchair and have a terrible temper and no hair. And some annoying girl will want to hear my story for five cents and 60 minutes, and I will tell her about my mother who dyed her hair green and loved purple tulips and never wore pink and drove too fast and sang too loud and left too soon. And those little bits of you can fly into the crevices of her mind before she is blown out by the September wind.

I hope the Septembers aren't too gusty where you are.

Your loving daughter