

## Their Song

Anne walked through the home improvement store on a Saturday afternoon looking for a gift for her sister's birthday. As she passed the door to the garden section a little too closely, the double automatic doors opened in a revealing swish to beckon her outside.

It was April. Without thinking, Anne knew what was in the garden section this time of year. Beautiful flowers and plants in pots of vibrant colors awaited happy people to purchase them, take them home, and plant them. She knew planting them would begin a love affair. (Plants can love, can't they?) The people would immerse themselves in the beauty of the colorful blossoms and foliage, enhancing their happiness by the endeavor. The plants would thrive and love back by producing more blossoms, colors and leaves to flutter in the wind and scintillate the air, the vision, the thought and the heart.

But, Anne wouldn't even look in that direction. What would be the point? Those are for people who can appreciate them. They are for people who don't hurt inside every day. The beautiful colors of petals were not for those whose past walks with them wherever they go, tapping them on the shoulder and punching them in the face when they turn to look. The variegated greens and yellows of the plump foliage are for those whose memories don't hide behind corners and underneath the bed, scheming the next attack and skulking and pouncing in the consciousness of the day and the very vividness of the night. Beauty like that was wasted on broken people, people like Anne who couldn't see the beauty, much less have a love affair with it.

Outside it was April. Inside, it was tan and dusty and smelled of ant bait, fertilizer, and stale chemicals. There were a few dried-up cacti on a stand near the door in nondescript dark green pots meant for disposal. To any other observer, the impulse to get lifesaving water to the

little cactus plants would be urgent. But, to Anne, the shrunken and barely-alive specimens didn't yearn for water, they yearned for the release of death. Yes, these little cacti were more Anne's speed. No love affair, just life that doesn't change, that doesn't move, that doesn't respond to love or give love--dried up, brittle, dusty, solitary and painful.

Anne probably stood staring at the cacti a little too long. Even though she wasn't listening, when someone else passed through the doors, her ears heard a whispered-sound in the distance over the swish of the sliding panes of glass. It was uncalculated music played by the wind. She ignored it just as she ignored everything pleasurable.

Instead, Anne moved a few feet and then blankly looked at a cart of cullings. This was the cart you can find in every garden section that employees shove around to collect the dying plants or dwindling flowers nobody wants. This was the cart everybody walks around to reach the beautiful blossoms reflected in their eyes, the cart nobody really sees. The contents were marked 90% off, as if anybody would be crazy enough to buy something so close to death.

The cullings had to go because they made the beautiful displays of freshness and splendor dingy and unappealing. So, they were collected daily, alive but barely, and probably would be thrown away at day's end. Other shoppers did not want to think of what happened to them, so they didn't.

Anne's eyes were drawn here because she could relate to these plants. She didn't think about buying them. Instead, Anne thought about bending and crawling onto one of the shelves, pulling her knees to her chest and crouching her head down so she could just fit under the crowded plastic shelf above. Nobody would buy Anne, or the grey stick without leaves next to her, even at 90% off, so she would meet whatever fate her cart-mates were destined for. And it

didn't matter, because Anne was dark and withered and polluted the happiness and beauty of the world.

Something brought Anne back from her thoughts and reminded her to keep going, to find what she came for. She looked up and saw the bird feeders. "Good," Anne thought. "Who wouldn't want a bird feeder?" She selected a pretty copper-colored one with a squirrel excluder and little perches for the birds. She hoisted a ten-pound bag of bird food into her basket with waning muscles.

As Anne turned away to walk toward the checkout counters, something nagged at the back of her mind. For some inexplicable reason, she didn't want to leave. Anne was the most comfortable at home by herself, but she felt compelled to stay in this place. If her sister hadn't insisted multiple times she come for dinner, she would have walked around, dwelling in her own head, with nothing important or meaningful to do.

Anne just sort of existed slowly and silently in a void of her own. She was empty, and that is what empty people do. But, she was an empty person who didn't want the insistent hassle of her sister's calls, so she walked to one of the counters at the front of the store to check out.

As Anne emerged through the swishing front doors into the sunshine with her cart, she shielded her eyes from the sun with her forearm. Anne spent so much time inside these days, curtains closed, just sitting and staring into space, her eyes were sensitive to sunlight.

Anne took a step toward the parking lot, and the sun glinted off the windshield of a small red truck approaching from her left. Anne's present catapulted into past . . .

. . . the truck slams into the side of Annes' car, metal-on-metal screams, deafening . . . her car spins . . . its back crashes into the plowed hill of dingy white snow . . . sliding up and over,

taillights leading . . . finding its way to the base of the overpass in the night . . . dirty brown slush explodes in a spray . . .

. . . Anne heard a light tap on a horn and she realized the red truck had slowed to a stop and was waiting for her to cross to the parking lot. She shook her head to clear it and stepped quickly across in front of the truck, her breath quick, her heart pounding, and walked directly to her car.

Anne barely registered the frantic drive home. As she parked in the garage next to the empty spot, her breath and heart finally started slowing their gallop in her chest.

Finally, in the part-safety, part-dungeon of her home, Anne put her bag down and opened the basement door. If she didn't do this now, she never would. Anne climbed down the stairs, turned the light on and rummaged around in a plastic bin for a gift bag. Her sister's gift would require a large bag and the biggest bag Anne could find had a colorful pheasant on one side and a rabbit on the other. Good enough.

Anne started back up the basement steps. The sunlight reached its tiny arms down to her and touched her on the face with its razor-sharp fingers, slashing her cheeks and her chin and her forehead to the bone. She turned around and sat on the step, facing away.

This is how she spent her days and nights—facing away. She couldn't endure the light. Deep down, she envied the people out there in the light, invigorated by it, not crippled by it. But, her conscious thought, if she had conscious thought, was that she just didn't deserve what everyone else had. She yearned for the numbing, hateful, pain of seclusion and darkness. She lived in the pain as much as she could. It was her destiny. What she lived for before was gone,

and there just was no point. So, she sat, facing away into the darkness, allowing its engulfing shroud to take her and numb her.

An incessant banging on her front door above jarred Anne's numbness. She turned her head toward the basement door, instinctively squinting her eyes as she looked into the cutting glare of the sunlight. Instead, her eyes saw darkness. The sun had retreated, replaced with the comforting, numbness of her companion, darkness. The limits of light had given way to make her world a little larger.

"What happened? I thought we were having dinner," her sister was saying as Anne opened the door.

"I'm sorry," was all she could say, "I'm sorry."

And she was sorry. She always was, but it didn't matter what little bit of feeling crept around her numbness. It was always engulfed by her dismal reality. So, without saying anything else, Anne opened the door wider so her sister could come in.

"Please come out with me tomorrow to the botanical garden," her sister begged, a too-long twenty minutes later as she walked out of the door into her happiness.

"I would say yes, but we both know I'll end up not doing it."

"I am not going to give up on you, Sis. Meet me at the entry kiosk at nine in the morning-okay?"

"I'll try. I won't feel like it tomorrow, but I'll try."

Anne shut the door and went into the living room. The darkness of the room hugged her. It numbed her. It preserved her saving lull. She sat on the couch, facing his chair in the dark, remembering him . . .

. . . Anne can see his closed eyes in the on-again-off-again headlight beams of the cars speeding past . . . his handsome face is speckled with blood where every shard of glass entered . . . his chin folded over the arch of the steering wheel . . . the steering wheel pushed into his chest, breaking his body, breaking him . . . life blood froths from between his lips as he battles for a breath . . . frothing in pulses as he fights and fights . . . she hears her own scream trumpeting over the sounds of his last breaths as he struggles to stay with her . . .

. . . the sound of her screaming voice brought Anne back to the living room and to the darkness of her reality.

“I did this, I did this, I did this, I did this,” Anne screamed in cadence with her wildly beating heart, her ragged breaths turning into sobs. “I did this, I did this, I did this!”

Anne started for the kitchen as she sobbed. She had to get away, run away from the evocation of the terror of that night--a night that continuously existed in real-time for her. But, knowing the futility of trying to flee, Anne slumped to her knees on the carpet, still fiercely chanting. Drops of spittle sprayed from her open lips and clenched teeth as she breathlessly continued her guilty mantra, “I did this! I did this! I did this!” . . .

. . . as he dies . . . his ending breath . . . his eyes erupt open in a last exposure to the hateful light . . . their eyes immediately connect in the pulsing light of the approaching vehicles, sirens blaring . . . his pupils so black, so big, twist into her soul as she helplessly watches him die . . . the union of their eyes is interrupted only by a dribble of blood staining an orb and pooling in

the corner of his eye . . . a diluted drop traces a path from the corner of his eye, down his nose, and mingles with the last life frothing from between his lips . . .

. . . Anne's sobs continued as her dark living room eventually won the tug-of-war.

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It hadn't really been a decision, more like a non-decision, to ignore the airbag service message in red digital script trailing across the bottom of the instrument panel. Even though she knew, she had not protested as he opened the car door to let her in or when he turned the key to start the engine. She had not commented in a concerned voice as the garage door started its low, rumbling, creaky ascent along steel rails to its temporary position between the car and the ceiling. She could have said, "oh, we should probably take your car until I can get my airbags checked out." That would have been so easy. Anne never insisted on returning home as he drove under the illumination of street lights toward their favorite restaurant.

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His car--why hadn't she insisted they take his car that night months ago?--the car she drove now that hers was a fractured skeleton, stained in his blood. Anne felt her heart pushing its way out of her chest upon every hammering beat. Her body and clothes were sopping wet from her sweat. Her glasses were fogged from her hot retching breaths. It didn't matter, she knew the route in the dark, the one she had walked a million times.

As Anne opened the door separating the house and the garage, she lifted his keys off of the little white hook efficiently placed by the door. The government-issued key to his office door and the dainty little key to the riding lawnmower in the shed out back were still attached to his fob by a little silver circle. Anne pushed the button to unlock the car as she stepped down the

wooden steps, one, two, three, into the dark of the garage. But, when she reached for the door handle, it didn't open the door. The trunk latch--was that the muffled sound she had heard? She found it with her fingers, slightly open in the dark, a very dim illumination within.

Anne opened the trunk to close it, her mind catching on another memory of her broken car, all doors and trunk gaping, as she visited the salvage yard to retrieve her papers from the glove box.

But now she stood in the dark, her preferred dark, with his car, the one with operational air bags. Sitting down on the bumper, she swung her legs into the opening of the trunk. She lay down and pulled the lid closed above her, almost to latching, until the little trunk light went out.

Anne's mind uncoiled, her failure and betrayal swimming through her, drowning her just as she liked it to do. She circled her body around the memories and pulled her legs to her chest, touching her nose to her knee . . . as small as she could be. In the dark of the trunk, in the dark of her garage, in the dark of her house, in the dark of her world, she allowed her mind to be infused by the blackness, and she found relief in nightmare-jarred oblivion.

The sound of her name, "Anne, Anne, where are you?"

She opened her eyes to the thin, sliver of light invading the trunk where she lay. Disoriented and exhausted from life, she lay still for a moment to see if the light would let her go, let her find the oblivion of sleep again.

"Anne, are you out here?"

Her sister's voice, louder this time.



If Anne hadn't needed to pee, she would have pulled the trunk closed until it latched. But she had needed to pee, so she pushed the trunk open above her, shielding her eyes from the light that stabbed her through the arched windows in the garage doors.

"I'm in here," small, tired voice.

"Where? Oh, Anne, what on earth are you doing in the trunk?"

"I'm okay, sometimes I just come out here."

"Why would you get into the trunk?"

"You don't want to know. Just leave it. I need to pee."

Her sister made her, or she would never have left the house. She pulled her out of the door, unbrushed teeth, unwashed body, unbrushed hair. Anne wore sweat pants, no bra, and an old sweatshirt, his sweatshirt, from the time they went skiing in Colorado.

And Anne sat on a little rock wall. Her sister watched her stare at the plants in the landscaped garden, only darkness reflecting in her retina. And then something punched in. Was it a tune playing on the wind? . . .

. . . Anne feels something touch her fingertips. . . something warm . . .

. . . She experienced something for a fleeting second--and then not. It wasn't dead, it was alive, but only a fluttering of alive. Still, it was not something she cared to confront--and then darkness again.

Anne's sister saw the roses surrounding them. To her, they were patches of vibrant color, partitioned by brick paths that led to a small concrete fountain, water delicately spilling down each tier into a large basin. Four koi, orange, white, and black swam under lily pads that floated

on the surface. Beautiful, barely-pink flowers with pointed petals and yellow centers gently moved as drops fell next to them. Anne's sister knew this was one of Anne's favorite places, or had been before the accident.

Anne's sister was desperate to break through. But Anne just couldn't see anything anymore. No color, no beauty, no shape, no texture, and no good. She was blind to everything but the bad, the regret, the guilt, and the tragic reality of her memories.

Later, once again in the parking lot of the home improvement store, Anne didn't want to go in, so she told her sister she would wait in the car.

"No, you have to go in." The idea was that maybe a blooming plant would "cheer her up."

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They once had a beautiful flower garden. In the center was a patio with chaise loungers where he and she had spent hours every week relaxing together. They had enjoyed pulling weeds and pruning bushes together. They had enjoyed feeding their koi and transplanting flowers together. After the accident, the plants withered and the fish in the pond died. Her brother-in-law had dipped the meaty, smelly bodies out of the water and had drained and covered the fountain.

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The car door next to Anne opened and her sister took her hand out of her lap, pulling on her arm. Anne gave in and got out. It was easier than fighting.

In the garden center, Anne's sister held her hand and pulled her down the aisles, asking her "what about this one? Isn't this lovely? Oh, you love fuchsia so much. Isn't that one perfect?"

How about we get multi-colored impatiens and put them in that woven hanging pot we saw? You can hang them from the tree.”

Anne couldn't see the color or the beauty. When she looked hard, with all she had, she could see the blossoms and the leaves. She could see the shapes of the petals, but they were only gray and tan. Her world was gray and tan if she decided to fight the black. If she didn't fight, if she embraced the black, she saw nothing. Seeing nothing meant she felt nothing. Anne hid from the fear and the pain and the shock. She hid from the guilt and the fault. She hid from the loss and the alone and the missing. And the grieving couldn't start.

While her sister paid at the open-air register, Anne sat on a bench inside the garden center, hiding. Her brain did not process the scent, the color, or the beauty around her. Then, a sound struggled to invade the black. A sound pushed hard against the void where Anne lived, found a crevasse and then a seam. It struggled and clawed along that seam and advanced to the gray and the tan. It emerged in the space between black and alive . . .

. . . Anne feels a whisper of a touch . . . warmth engulfs her fingers and the back of her hand feels the roughness of . . . something . . . a breeze touches her cheek . . . a melody teases . . .

. . . there it was again. Anne barely perceived it, but the sound was there. Muted, it was almost music, but also chaotic. Anne tried to block it out, but the melody had a claw-hold on her consciousness.

And then, it was gone again.

“Let's get you some groceries. I looked when I picked you up, and you don't have anything to eat. You have lost too much weight.”

Anne followed her sister into the grocery store and up and down the rows.

“This kale is beautiful. Do you want black beans or red beans? Let’s get tortillas and whole-wheat bread.” Her sister’s voice was muffled and the words meaningless. What did it matter, she probably wouldn’t eat it anyway.

When they arrived at the cash register, Anne’s sister waited for her to pay. Anne stood there, watching a streak on the conveyor belt appear, and disappear, appear, and disappear. Her sister pulled out her wallet and paid for the groceries. She put the bags, two-by-two, into the basket. She took Anne’s hand and placed it on the side of the cart. Anne followed her sister out to the car. Led like an old dog, blind and submitting, she mindlessly got in.

Her sister drove her home with the groceries, the flowers, potting soil, and the brown woven hanging pot in back. Anne’s black eyes peered straight ahead as they slowed and stopped at a light. Cars crossed the intersection in front of them. A red SUV, in a hurry, sped across the intersection . . .

. . . the SUV smashes into the side of her car and it is sliding, sliding, up and over . . . her heart beats so hard and all she can hear is her scream . . . his eyes explode open and he coughs frothy blood onto her face . . . she swipes at the redness over and over with her hands, screaming, “no, no, please no!” . . .

. . . “Anne! Anne! Stop it! Stop screaming!”

Anne was next to her sister again. Her sister turned in her seat toward her, trying to hold Anne’s hands still as she swiped at her face over and over. “No, no!”

“Anne! Anne!”

Anne, gasping for breath, fought to find the dark, just like she had a thousand times. Her heart still beat hard in her chest and her breath was loud, swishing in and out with a violence that sounded like a raging storm to her ears.

“Breath slowly, Anne. I’m here. I’m here for you,” her sister said, holding both Anne’s hands in hers. Anne tried to ground herself on her sister. But, she wanted to die to it all, to feel nothing again.

Her sister pulled through the light and into a parking lot. She put her arms around Anne and pulled her close. Anne couldn’t see her or feel her or hear her. She was back in the place where she didn’t feel, a charcoal-turning-to-black place where she was most at home.

At the sidewalk in front of her house, Anne’s sister unloaded the groceries and the plants. She took them in the house and then came back for Anne, pulling her up, out of the car, and into the house. Anne sat at the kitchen table as her sister made her a sandwich for lunch. She ate two bites, but the food was tasteless.

“Okay, sis. I’m going to pot this plant. Want to help me?”

Anne didn’t answer, staring off toward a dark, comforting space.

“I’ll do it then, but you have to tell me where you want me to hang it up.”

After the flowers were in their new vessel, Anne followed her sister out the French doors overlooking the back garden. Anne stood next to a chase lounge as her sister hung the flowers, choosing a place, because Anne said she didn’t care where they were. Then Anne’s sister pulled the vinyl covers off of the outdoor furniture.

“Sit. Don’t you remember how much you used to love this garden? It really needs your touch again. See the hibiscus, it needs water. And, the plumbago needs to be trimmed back. Do you want me to have someone come and clean out the water feature and get it going again? It’s a shame about the fish.”

Anne did not want to be there, but she did not want to be rude to her sister, so she sat down on a chaise lounge. She heard her sister moving around her, picking up branches and tidying up. Then her sister pulled the cover from a little table in between the chaise loungers.

“Oh! Look at that! Your windchime! I’ll hang it up!”

So, her sister chose a spot right in front of the loungers and to the side of the stagnant little pool at the bottom of the dry waterfall. “Oh, no wind, I’m sorry. Maybe tomorrow.”

After her sister finally left, Anne crawled into bed in her clothes, still no bath. She was asleep soon. That was the only thing she did well these days . . .

. . . Sirens blare sharply and swirling lights of first responders surround them . . . so much blood . . . his body broken and his eyes gaping at her . . .

. . . Something rescued her from the nightmare—was it a sound? Anne lay awake in the dark for a while, trying to listen over her heart beating in her ears.

Anne eventually moved to the living room to escape the realities of her dreams. She lay on the couch, television on. Talking heads took turns saying nothing. She turned the television off, put her feet on the floor, her elbows on her knees and sat with her face in her hands. Time strode on.

Something pulled at Anne. It pulled her from the blackness and into a little gray area between partly alive and partly dead. She heard it again.

It was a sound she used to hear, they used to hear, a chaotic tinkling, erratic notes occasionally playing on the wind in short bursts. Listening, she was pulled to the French doors and opened them. Anne realized the windchime was tinkling in the breeze outside in the garden. She walked across the yard and to the lounge next to his. She reclined in the moonlight and calming breeze just like she had in the past.

Anne looked at the source of the melody. Silver metal tubes of various lengths surrounded a brown wooden orb on a string. The tubes harmonized with the orb to produce a calming and melodic tune.

Anne's eyes were drawn to the flowers her sister had hung. The woven pot overflowing with blooms gently swung in the moonlight, hundreds of colorful petals fluttering in the breeze.

Anne closed her eyes, immersed in the soft melody . . .

. . . and his long, warm fingers are between hers . . . his rough thumb rubs the back of her hand as they lay under the stars, the windchime playing its tune . . . Anne looks over and sees his kind, blue eyes in the moonlight . . . she sees the hint of creases at the outside corners of those handsome eyes, creases they had earned together over the decades . . . the moon lights the backyard through the branches of the huge oak tree . . . surrounded by the pinks and blues and yellows of the flower garden . . . she relaxes and listens to his voice backdropped by the sound of softly falling water and the music of the windchime they bought on their trip to the beach . . . he tells her about his day . . . the glass of burgundy wine . . . his warm hand engulfs hers . . . his familiar voice lulls her . . .

. . . And Anne dreamed of him, and smiled as their song played.