

# Red Poppies

I was sobbing again. I sat at my desk with my hands covering my face. My throat was strangled tight against any noise that might expose my lack of self control to the customers who dawdled outside. I'd hate to interrupt their exacting comparison of the 20 different Magnesium supplements on the shelf. I felt like screaming "Just pick one already, they're all the same!"

I wasn't angry at the customers though. I was feeling crushed with loneliness, longing, and an unsurpassed boredom. I felt the mundane responsibilities that weighed on me: kids, cooking, cleaning, working, and the husband. Every day the same thing. Again and again. I just wanted to be excited by someone, to be excited by something! I felt that if I had to live through this tedious life for one more day, I would throw myself into traffic. I looked curiously at the box cutter on my desk and spied the big veins living in the underside of my wrist. I wondered what it would be like to let the blood escape from the safety of my skin.

I paused.

Knowing that I was going to use that box cutter solely for its intended purpose, and knowing that ennui was not fatal, I shook off the sorrow and took a deep breath. I began cleaning up my face and gave myself a pep talk. At least try to be cheerful, I said to myself, my life isn't that bad. I was depressed because my life was repetitive and uninteresting but there were people in the world suffering from much worse than dissatisfaction. Besides, I would hate to be caught crying by any of the employees. I would rather fester silently than set off a chain reaction of pity.

And of course, there was a knock on the door. I wiped my face with another tissue and took a deep breath, trying to pretend that my face was normally this splotchy and puffy. "Yeah?" I called out. My mind started spinning with all the subsequent conversations I was now going to have to have with the ladies about my emotional meltdown. I tried, instead, to concentrate on bringing down my heart rate.

The door opened to my little office and Nick walked in carrying a box. He rarely spoke, which was remarkable for someone who worked in customer service. Instead he stared at me with a sincerity I have rarely experienced. He paused and let his eyes run the length of me, taking in each detail of my distressed state. I stared back boldly, almost daring him to say something.

He gestured towards a chair with the box. "Yeah, that's fine." I nodded, trying to look aloof. I pretended to shuffle some papers on my desk.

His look was fierce and cutting but also tender and worried. When I met his eyes I suddenly felt very odd. My mouth slipped into a coy smile through no control of my own. The restraints that I usually kept myself tightly under were suddenly flimsy. My shoulders relaxed and my face softened. My body was doing as it pleased with no regard to my brain and I struggled to keep control of myself.

Startled by this moment of authenticity, I felt my face instinctively attempt to cover the flirtation with the tight smile I usually wore. It didn't work though and I felt my face transform from the sweet grin, through the forced grimace, and then into confusion at my own overthought.

He put the box down on the chair and closed the door. He came over to my side of the desk and I leaned back to make room for him. There was barely room for both of us. He took my face in his large and surprisingly smooth hands. His square fingers were cold and reassuring on my blazing skin. My eyelids dropped closed and I breathed deeply. He smelled like artisan soap and bulk herbs.

I suddenly felt the beautiful light of the universe shining within me and around me. I was completely present in this moment of perfection. I felt how I was a part of everything and at the same time completely individual from everything else. I felt like a snake mating in the springtime, locking onto myself and around everything and everyone. I thought I felt him reach down into my sorrow and find the crushing loneliness.

He raised me from my chair and perched me against the desk. He smoothed my frazzled hair and maybe brushed his fingers against my own. Then, in a perfunctory manner he reached across me and picked off a bottle of vitamins from the shelf I had been blocking.

I fell back into my chair and watched him close the door on his way back to work. Questions spun chaotically through my mind. I was shocked. I was dizzy and high.

I leaned all the way back in my chair and stared at the dingy ceiling tiles. I felt the melancholy attempt to settle back into my bones. Looking at the ceiling, I looked for meaning in the nonsensical dots framed in the repetitive squares. My eyes roamed the ceiling until my gaze landed on the O'Keeffe poppy print that hung behind my desk. It was a gift from my husband to celebrate the promotion that got me into this office years ago. The picture was dusty, just like everything else in the claustrophobic room. I realized it must have been months since I've last touched the feather duster. I snatched it out of its hiding place and, standing on my chair, began to remove the layers of grime that coated it.

Suddenly the red poppy was glowing, almost jumping off the paper. What before had just taken up space on the wall was now shining bright with radiant oranges and reds so luminescent that it could have been flames spread across the paper instead of ink.

I felt the lightness return to me as I cleaned my office, suddenly paying attention to objects that I had long forgotten about. Feeling the universal love, I paid homage to the physical objects around me until everything glowed expansively. I felt my blood pumping through my veins, the same color as the crimson poppy, and I finally felt truly alive.

That painting of the red poppy blazed in my mind and stoked the fire in my heart that had long ago resigned itself to embers. I finished my work that day in a state of bliss. I was in love with everyone and everything. I cooked dinner that night with the passion of an experienced chef. I helped the kids with their homework with the patience of a private tutor. My husband and I made love that night with a newly found passion that left us both breathless.

"What's gotten into you?" he asked as he traced his fingers over the veins in my arm. I wasn't sure how to explain what had happened that day, so I simply said, "Oh, I tried a new supplement at work."