

In a large crystal vase in the middle of her dining room table was a bouquet of roses that her granddaughter brought to cheer her up. Each stem was sliced on a diagonal so that more water was absorbed, prolonging the life of each flower. The smell of roses filled the apartment and when she closed her eyes she thought she was back at her shop.

Maggie Moss sat on her blue recliner. The television screen flickered with the local news. The early morning sun streamed through the large window in her living room facing the parking lot. Maggie's hands ached. The doctor explained it as an inflammatory disorder affecting joints, unfortunately including her hands. For some women breast cancer is the diagnosis they fear the most. For Maggie, it was rheumatoid arthritis. The diagnosis forced her to close the flower shop that had been in her family since 1946. The day she closed the shop she imagined as her own funeral. Customers she had served for years streamed through with downcast eyes. They wished her good luck in retirement. The flower coolers were empty. The shop's history, stored in the filing cabinets in the office, shredded. The store window displays, often filled with scenes of the season, packed away into storage.

She had been surrounded by flowers all of her life. Her parents, John and Martha, wished to be a small part of the American Dream. They opened the flower shop on Main Street with hopes of making a living. As a young girl, Maggie helped her mother arrange flowers in the design room after school. She would tag along with her father to the greenhouses to treat and care for the growing plants. After college she moved to the city. She worked in advertising for only a short time when she received a phone call from her mother. Maggie's father had a massive heart attack in the back greenhouse during his routine watering. Her mother found him four hours later. Maggie returned home and never left. She filled the immense shoes her father had left vacant. The flower shop became her life. Florists are a lot like priests. They know if someone has died or is getting married. Maggie knew her customers affairs, and she kept their secrets. On a cold winter's day, when she least expected it, a handsome man from out of town came into the shop to order flowers for his mother's funeral. Maggie loved two men in her life: her father and Warren.

The pills on the table next to her recliner were flanked by the television remote and a photograph of her late husband, Warren. Her granddaughter had taught her during their last visit how to use her cell phone to search on the Internet. After Rachel left, Maggie spent the afternoon searching ways to die. Swallowing a bunch of pills was the preferred method. She wanted to go to sleep and not wake up. She held the pill bottle in her hand. She struggled with the lid. Her fingers had misshapen as the arthritis progressed. In frustration she threw the bottle against the wall.

She stared out the window. A couple, a few years older than Maggie, walked arm in arm towards a sitting area with benches and potted plants. Maggie cringed. The grounds crew had planted the annuals too early in the season. People are a lot like the petunias speckled throughout the gardens of the senior living facility. All of them have roots, all of them are just trying to survive the conditions. Everyone dies.

A knock on the door forced her attention away from the couple now seated closely together on a bench. On the other side of the door was a woman with grey, tightly curled hair. Her red sweatshirt was adorned with holly leaves and a smiling snowman.

“Welcome to Wilton Commons! I’m Kitty like the cat. I’m the president of the Welcome Committee,” she said.

“Thank you,” Maggie managed.

“I hope you are settling into the new apartment. Betty lived in this apartment 12 years before she died last month. Oh, but don’t worry, she died at the hospital. I don’t want you to think this place is haunted or anything!”

Maggie thought of the petunias. Everyone dies.

“I heard from the office manager that you used to own a flower shop,” Kitty said.

“Yes, for many years.” From behind her back Kitty presented Maggie with a blue hyacinth potted in a brown plastic pot.

“I thought you might like it to brighten up your place. Although I see you have a beautiful arrangement already,” Kitty said as she handed Maggie the hyacinth.

“This needs to be planted outside,” Maggie said accepting the hyacinth, “or it will die.”

“Maybe you could give a class to some of our residents about flowers and arrangements.”

“I don’t do flowers anymore,” Maggie said as she instinctively wiggled her gnarled fingers.

“Well, um, tonight is a potluck in the community room. We all bring a dish to share.”

Maggie forced a smile and nodded. “Sure.”

“Potluck is our most popular event here. Most of the resident are widowed. Honestly, if it wasn’t for my daughter calling every few days to check in on me I could die in my apartment and no one would know,” Kitty said with an uncomfortable laugh.

After Kitty left Maggie put the hyacinth on the ledge of the front window. A potluck, Maggie wondered as she sat in her blue recliner. She opened her phone and typed hyacinth into the Internet and was pleased with her inquiry’s return. Yes, a potluck might be just what she needed.

In the small galley kitchen she got to work. She pulled out the ingredients she needed to make chili. She hummed as she rinsed the black beans and opened the can of tomato sauce. She put the ground beef into the frying pan and sprinkled it with garlic powder. She walked over to the front window and carried the hyacinth into the kitchen. She pulled the plant out of the pot and rinsed the bulb in the sink. She placed the plant on the cutting board and as she raised the butcher’s knife she whispered her apologies to the hyacinth. She added the chopped bulb to the sizzling meat in the frying pan.

The sky turned purple and pink as the sun lowered behind the clouds. The apartment smelled of chili, which she had transferred into a cast iron crock. The clock ticked on her wall as it neared 5:30. She gathered plastic bowls and spoons. With her hands full she ignored her cell phone’s indicator of a text message. It was probably a wrong number. She let the door close behind her.

The community room was full of residents when Maggie arrived. They all sat at long tables covered with pink paper tablecloths that reminded Maggie of blooming azaleas. The food was on a table against the far wall. Residents made meatloaf, mashed potatoes, lasagna, mixed greens, and biscuits. Kitty greeted Maggie.

“Chili?” she asked.

Maggie smiled. “My special recipe.”

“I bet it’s delicious. Let’s find a spot for it on the table.” Kitty rearranged some dishes and Maggie placed the chili in the center of the table.

“Make yourself a plate. I saved you a seat next to me so I can introduce you to Barbara and Shirley. I made the meatloaf,” Kitty said with a wink.

Maggie took a slice of meatloaf and a scoop of potatoes. She put some of her chili into a bowl with no intentions of having any of it. She found Kitty and sat down in the empty seat next to her.

“Did you make the chili?” Barbara asked as she took a mouthful of it. “It is delicious. I can’t wait to see what else you make.”

Maggie felt her face flush. “I’m so glad you like it.”

Kitty returned with a bowl of the chili and proceeded to eat her entire serving. “Maggie, you must share the recipe. There is such a distinct flavor to it. What is it?”

Maggie moved the chili around in her bowl with her spoon but she never took a bite. “It’s a secret ingredient,” she said.

She watched as many of the residents served themselves bowls of chili. Her excitement grew with each bite of chili she witnessed. Then she saw Rachel. What was she doing here? She kneeled next to an older man engaged in a conversation. The young woman smiled and nodded in response to whatever he was saying. In Rachel’s hands was a plastic bowl. Rachel’s face broke into a smile when she saw her grandmother. She waved and weaved her way through the tables. A surge of urgency rushed through Maggie’s body as she struggled to get up from the chair.

“Hi, Grandma.”

“Did you eat the chili?” Maggie said breathlessly.

“It is delicious! Fred gave me a bowl when I came in. Everyone is so nice here.”

“Oh God, no,” Maggie said as she collapsed into the chair. “Why did you come here, Rachel, why?” she pleaded.

“I texted you. I told you I was coming to get you for dinner but it looks like you are enjoying a feast here!”

“I need to go back to my apartment now,” Maggie said. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Rachel put the plastic bowl in her hands on the table. Maggie cried harder at the sight of the empty bowl.

“Grandma, please tell me what is wrong!” Rachel said. “Is it your arthritis? Where are your pills?”

Her granddaughter guided her down the hallway, and then into the recliner. Rachel went into the kitchen to get her grandmother a glass of water. On the table next to the chair was Maggie’s cell phone. There was her granddaughter’s text: “On my way to see you for dinner, Grandma. My treat. Sound good?” If Maggie had checked her phone she would have told Rachel not to come.

Rachel handed her grandmother a glass of water. “Why did you mutilate a hyacinth in the kitchen?” she asked.

“I thought the bulb was diseased.”

Rachel raised her eyebrows. “You’ve always been so connected to flowers and plants, Grandma.”

Maggie remembered what she read on the Internet. If ingested hyacinths may cause stomach irritation, irregular heartbeats, high blood pressure, and death. Rachel just turned 20. She was young and fit. She would withstand the poison. Maggie felt her nerves ease. When Rachel left later in the evening she complained of a stomach ache.

“It’s probably just a bug, dear,” Maggie said.

A few hours later, Maggie woke up to the sound of sirens. An ambulance, with flashing lights, was parked outside of the large front window. Fred laid strapped to a gurney as the workers loaded him into the truck. The ambulance returned at least a dozen more times through the night. In the early morning hours Maggie watched from her recliner as Kitty was the last one taken away. Maggie was disappointed. She glanced at the bottle of pills on the table between the television remote and the photograph of Warren. She hoped the hyacinth bulb disguised as an onion in her chili would have more of an impact. If it had worked on the residents at Wilton Commons she might ingest it herself. But, it seemed to only make people sick. She wondered if there were flowers more toxic than the hyacinth. She searched for lethal plants on the Internet when her phone started ringing. It was her daughter, Lauren, on the other end.

“Mom, mom something terrible has happened.”

“Slow down, Lauren. I have a hard time hearing on this cell phone,” Maggie said.

“Mom, its Rachel. Can you hear me? I don’t know how to tell you this. I can’t believe it. Oh, Mom.”

Maggie sat forward in her chair. “What’s wrong with Rachel? She had a stomach ache that is all.”

“She is dead. She is dead.”

The phone slipped from Maggie's hands. She brought her gnarled fingers to her mouth. "It worked," she whispered. Her thin lips curled into a slight smile.