

## Gray Flowers

“Your services are no longer necessary,” my manager says, his gaze fixed somewhere on my forehead. “Sorry it’s come to this.”

My head pounds from the six fingers of Jameson whiskey I drank last night. “I was going to resign.”

He shrugs, a sweaty flush on a face I used to consider handsome. “It’s a little late to bother with all that. HR already signed off.” He motions towards my desk—the clutter of papers and empty cups from the coffee cart, the wilted gardenia. “You want a box?”

I swallow, humiliated to feel tears rush into my eyes like protective friends. I’ve cried far too much in this place, part of why I’m no longer “necessary.” But for once, these tears are evoked by anger rather than misery.

“I don’t want to work in this hellhole anyway,” I shock us both by saying. I stuff a framed photograph into my purse, the only item on my desk worth keeping. It’s been face-down for the last two months.

My manager backs away, hands awkwardly positioned outward as if in a gesture of surrender. *Just disappear quietly, please*, his body language screams. I head towards the elevators. Despite six years in this place, none of my coworkers make eye contact as I leave. They’re suddenly caught up in phone calls or extremely urgent emails, judging by the intense expressions on their faces. One woman even bends away from me to poke through her trashcan.

They can’t see me. I’m invisible already.

My feet are numb inside their rain boots as I take the elevator down to ground floor and step out the south side of the building, onto the spring-wet streets of downtown Pittsburgh. My bus comes within a few minutes.

I'm halfway back to my cramped two-bedroom apartment when I realize I'm not ready. Can't bear going back and starting the rest of my shell of an existence. I stand and yank on the cord, and the bus slishes to the curb of a rain-soaked street in Dormont. The door hisses open. I shove the umbrella out first then drop to the cracked sidewalk, diesel fuel and wet pavement in my nose. The buildings are squat, their faces tired. Rain assaults the rust red awning of Art's Flowers and Gifts.

Sometimes I can't remember the richness of colors like blue and green. It must be a symptom of a life gone grayscale.

I glance at my watch as the bus pulls away, water spraying the back of my coat. Fifteen minutes until the next one. Pushing against the glass door into Art's, a bell jingles overhead. It's crowded for a Tuesday morning. A line of customers stands at the register. Others poke through shelves of synthetic flowers, handblown glass birds, and magnets.

I slip behind an elderly woman chuckling over greeting cards. At the back wall, I find the graveside floral arrangements. They are organized by style—headstone sprays, vases, wreaths, pillows, and crosses. *Helping you remember*, a preprinted advertisement reads. *High-quality silk. Designed for long-term use.*

My hand reaches out to touch the petals of a tiger lily. My mother used to grow these by her front door, ostentatious blooms against dull brick. I squeeze my eyes shut and see her hand instead, holding out a cup of tea. No matter where I go, I end up in her shabby house, nestled in the crook of her sofa. The lamplight soft. Rain pattering the window.

*It's all meaningless without love*, my mother says, the crocheted blanket around her shoulders the colors of a sea touched by sunset.

Inside the shop, a man laughs, and the vision of my mother's living room fades. He's my age, standing near the register and watching something on his phone. Rain-tousled brown hair.

A beige trench coat and navy slacks. The phone blares a happy birthday song, probably a barnyard animal superimposed with his face doing a ridiculous dance. He laughs again, so loudly it booms across the shop with the irreverence of a pool game inside a church.

My hand clenches around the handle of my umbrella and water drips from the fabric into the top of my right boot.

Perhaps he feels other customers judging the contours of his perfectly symmetrical face because he glances up at the scowling woman next to him and the grin fades. “Sorry,” he says.

There’s a book tucked beneath his arm. A briefcase at his feet. And I try not to envy him, this carefree, casual, delighted-with-life person. He emanates happiness like a well-tended plant.

I turn back to the floral arrangements. *Long-term use*. The words wrap themselves around my neck like a noose.

“Yeah, thanks! Thirty-four today,” the man is saying. “Big dinner with friends tonight. Having lunch with my mom in a bit.”

He says it so carelessly, *lunch with Mom*, as if it’s a universal truth. I don’t envy him. What I feel is darker, more complicated than envy. I’m a storm turning green.

I glance at my watch. Ten minutes until the next bus. I pluck up a wreath of blue and yellow flowers against a bed of ferns. It makes me think of spring afternoons watching the bird feeder.

*Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?* my mother quotes inside my head. *And not one of them is forgotten before God.*

I see her bruise-mottled skin. Sunken eyes. Bottles of impotent medication. Hear the wheeze of the oxygen machine. I know the feeling of forgottenness.

This wreath is too bright. I exchange it for a cross wrapped in a “fall floral mix.” It’s more subdued except for the touches of orange. Why didn’t God create gray flowers? I know my mother would have an answer to that, but I don’t want to hear it.

*No longer necessary*, I hear in my head, over and over. The implication of the words unbearably heavy.

I get in line behind the birthday boy.

At the register, the shop owner beams a smile at him. She’s perhaps sixty with frazzled gray hair, rimless round glasses, and a full figure beneath a green smock. “How can I help you, Nolan?”

“You know.” He shrugs. “The usual.”

The proprietor’s face suddenly wilts. “Oh, honey. I can’t believe I forgot. It’s today, isn’t it?”

He nods, still wearing a grin, but his jaw tightens.

She holds up a finger. “You wait right here. I’ll be back.”

I check my watch. The man sees.

“Why don’t you help this lady first?”

The shop owner’s gaze turns to me and heat floods my face.

“Oh, no. I’m not in a rush,” I lie, strangely more curious than impatient. I move my lips upwards and wonder if I’m actually smiling or just grimacing. “I need to look around a little longer.”

Five minutes until the bus.

“Take your time, sugar,” the lady says and bustles into the curtained-off backroom.

*Three lumps of sugar*, my mother says, and I see her fingers around the delicate spoon.

Her eyes searching mine. *It’ll be all right, sweetheart. It’s not forever.*

“That’s kind of you,” the man, Nolan, says to me. “I’m trying to catch a bus.”

I finally look up and meet his eyes and I’m met by the vivid color green. Flecks of yellow there, too. Sunlight dancing on pine trees. A happy person with eyes to match.

The book beneath his arm is a beautifully bound copy of *Wind in the Willows*, the edges of the pages worn, well-loved.

He points to the grave arrangement in my hands. “Family member?”

I open my mouth to say *my mother*, but I can’t because my throat is suddenly constricting like it’s refusing a poison.

“Recent,” he says rather than asks.

I nod again, humiliated. I can’t breathe. I have to stop doing this—on the bus, in the bread aisle, at my desk downtown, in front of clients. I have to stop feeling. I can’t live like this.

“It’ll get better,” he says.

I steel myself against the platitude. What can this man know as he stands in a floral shop with a too beautiful face and a too happy life picking up flowers for his birthday? What can anyone know about this pain?

He holds out a tissue and I pretend not to see it. I set down the cross on a shelf and wipe furiously at my face. “I thought I’d be better by now,” I say without thinking.

He looks at the cross, then looks at me. “Grief isn’t a cold that runs its course.” His tone is gentle, but it isn’t the cautious tone I’ve been hearing for the past two months. Others speak as if their words might unglue me, and they can’t bear to watch. But this man’s gentleness is different. It holds a note of fearlessness. “Grief is terminal.”

I make a sound like a laugh. “That’s not very encouraging.”

“I don’t mean fatal, exactly. Terminal has a few implications.”

“You mean grief has an end. When I die.”

He nods at me, those forest eyes assessing.

I frown, feeling as if he means more than eternal oblivion. “My mother believed in a life after this one. I just ...” I shrug and swallow. “I can’t seem to wrap my head around it.”

“So much of life is accepting the things we can’t understand.”

“Easy for some to say.” I let the bitterness unfurl off my tongue and wrap itself around me like a shroud. Anger is all I have left. The only emotion that will be hot enough to waken me in the morning. Without it I’ll simply cease to be. I’ll disappear.

*We hope for what we don’t see*, my mother whispers.

“Yes,” Nolan says, the corner of his mouth coming up. “Easy for some.”

The shop lady reappears holding a basket overflowing with wildflowers, a wooly stuffed lamb in the center, a child’s arrangement.

“How many years is it now?” she asks.

“Four,” he says and his right hand reaches to the book beneath his arm and grips its edge as if *The Wind in the Willows* is the only thing tethering him to reality.

“God, it’s not right.” Tears now, in the lady’s eyes. She holds up a hand when he reaches for his wallet. “Don’t pay me a dime. We miss her, Nolan.”

I see the lump in his throat. It is his turn to be overcome, to lose a grasp on words. He nods at her, smiles, turns to go. But as he does, he looks into my face one more time.

“You’re not alone,” he says.

Out the front window, I see our bus jostling towards the stop.

*I’m sorry*, I want to say. *I couldn’t see you*. But the words don’t come. I cry instead, feeling the kindness in his words like I used to feel the love in my mother’s touch. Hope—so much less certain than anger but somehow more potent.

He steps outside, carrying the basket and the book, and raises a hand towards the street. The bus slishes to a stop and he boards. Next stop, Acorn Hill. I can see it in my mind. A short walk up a maple-lined road. A cemetery on a hill. Sun rising behind the mountains.

Light breaking through gray.

If I can catch the next bus, I wonder if I will see him there.