

You, Departed
for Gram

The daisies, your favorite,
are blooming early this March.

I still have the dead ones from the hospital bouquet
that held your last breath.

They're pressed between worn pages
atop my sturdy oak desk and

I'm unsure whether to frame them,
a muted memento of hands still warm,
or rip apart each crumbling petal,
wailing.

My stethoscope dropped to the floor
like a snake surrendered
when I received the call.
You, just 65, unresponsive on a ventilator.
'Come fast' they said
and I bolted to the airport where
unwelcome palms pressed against my
ribcage pockets still filled with mint top tubes.

You, a mother at 16,
my grandma at just 32.
You raised me as your own
in the taupe and tattered trailer
green mildew stretching up the sides
after my own mother
swallowed by her sorrow
snuck away with shadowy men
to strange lands unknown.

Childhood summers
driving south to your homeland
Conway Twitty crooning
breezing past Tennessee cotton fields
sipping sun tea paired with
plates of collard greens and
broken squares of cornbread.
Your spotted hand with the sapphire ring,
fingernails brittle and bare of polish,
squeezed mine as we rode in your rainbow fleet.
Every year a new colorful car
magenta, gold, and burnt orange.
Easier to find in the parking lot, you said.
Sensible.
Despite the hazy grey of it all, you loved cheerful
bursts of color and unruly, spindly wildflowers.
I made it to your side,
your coarse blonde hair stuck to your brow,
plastic protruding from your throat and veins.
As I stepped into the harsh hospital light
my family parted for me
to step in the space nearest to you.
They knew after too many years of my seat, empty
that you always
wanted me closer to you.

I joined the somber chorus of weeping loved ones
our throats full of sobs crescendoing.

A compassionate extubation, the doctors called it
Conway's melody hummed from my phone
until your final breath fell
to the last note of "The Rose."

It was the first day of spring
and another mother taken.

In the days after you were lowered into soft dirt
atop a hill,

in a feral frenzy I stole five tubes of
strawberry chapstick from your nightstand.

That night, my giggly girl traced my arms with her
glittery fingertips in search of matching freckles,
pleading for a sister.

But my womb will not birth again.

Unthinkable, a child who would not know you,
whose crinkly nose you would not
also stroke into slumbers.

Memories reel like old videos now.

You behind the camera.

Me tiny and waddling.

Molding snowmen, blowing mermaid candles
looking at you, smiling.

Always smiling.

Me, saddled atop a wild horse
bucking, neighing.

You never wanted

to mount even the tamest mare

but you marveled watching me

wind through my hair, free.

I, who was mostly taught love through desertion,
mistook harbor for horror and
vanished to the city of spires and books.

Away from the dry cigarette air,
away from the sting of parents long gone,
away from the oxygen tank moaning behind you,
working overtime behind the deli counter
sneaking sticky honey candies.

I fled from the hurt and the heavy
toward a decorated and boastful life
to convince them

I was worthy all along.

I know my clawed escape
brought you freedom too.

I know you beamed at me,
the hungry world wanderer
frown browed scholar
dutiful and tender nurse,
milk leaking from my breasts,
always reaching and restless.

But I wish I'd stayed

and shared bowls of

dripping watermelon.

Wish I'd understood sooner

that peace is not found in a pulsing pace afar,

but it was always here

in our warm home atop rusted wheels

in the backroad country drives,

alert for dashing deer.

In the quiet shuttling to and from

day in, day out.

In the steady showing up

and never leaving.

And still today,

when I cry out in choked tears

against the bleak and bestial night,

aching for our phone calls

but hearing only the phantoms

of your snorting laugh and southern drawl,

I slide open my nightstand drawer

and press your soft, sweet wax

to my cracked lips

in queer remembrance.

This isn't my first letter to you,

departed.

I slipped the other

into your sky blue coffin,

ink smeared with

howling grief.

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By Terri Motraghi