A Many-Splendored Thing

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He sent me flowers again today. I sit at the kitchen table, looking at them. Arriving at precisely nine this morning, when he would have already been at work for over an hour, the delivery person observed my tousled hair and housecoat, and walked away after I signed the sheet and tipped him, grinning to himself. Characteristically, the arrangement is massive in size, teeming with variety. Melon-colored day lilies loom from the center, their stamens protruding like wagging tongues. Violet lupines splay from the sides, tall and shaft-like, quivering at the lightest current of air. Roses bleed throughout, their cloying mouths adeptly hiding the catching thorns beneath. I carefully removed the tissue paper, filled a glass vase full of warm water. Added the packet of nutrients that accompanied them, and a penny before inserting the flowers. My mother would always put a penny in the water of fresh-cut flowers; I never knew why, but continued this long after I began arranging my own.

The twins straggle from their room, rubbing their eyes and trailing their “bobbies” behind them. I gather Amelia into my arms, make room for Linus on my lap, kiss them both good morning. Inspecting their baby blankets — which had reached the ripe age of four with their owners — I notice how dirty they are, become anxious for all the germs that are surely swarming within the frayed folds. I make a mental note to wash them this evening, after the children fall asleep, for to part with them in waking hours has proven to be too tragic of an experience.

Amelia burrows her chestnut curls into the nape of my neck, and I breathe deeply, committing to memory the smell of baby powder and the lovely clay scent of children. Linus slides across my knees, buries his nose deep into the bouquet, inhales noisily.

“These from Daddy?” he asks, regarding me with the sobriety of an elderly man. I nod, rake my fingers through his hair, trying to reestablish a part amidst the garden of cowlicks which has sprung up overnight. He shrugs me off, begins playing with a lupine, weighing it down only to release it like a catapult and watch it spring back up. My daughter places her hands on either side of my face, tracing the curves of my jaw line and tugging on my ear lobes, which are no longer pierced. I had done enough baby-sitting in my life to know that children and earrings do not mix, and so had let the holes close during my preg-
nancy. She quickly loses interest in the unextraordinary contours of my face, touches my left hand, moving the platinum band between the stem of my finger and the first joint.

“And when I am big, I’ll get married, too,” she assures me. I involuntarily shudder and put my arms around her, hoping that her little body can warm me.

I then take her by the tiny shoulders and turn her to face me. Her hazel eyes stare back into my own as I assure her, “You’re going to go to college, so you can take care of yourself. You can get married if you want to, but you don’t have to.” She nods soberly, pops her thumb in her mouth, ponders its sea-salt taste.

It’s bathtime when I hear the garage door open. Amidst the splashes and occasional screeches of dismay, I listen as he puts his keys on the counter, opens the refrigerator, rummages in the utensil drawer for a bottle opener. I can almost see him loosening his tie as he climbs the steps.

While imagining this, Amelia splashes Linus, manages to get soap in his eye. He wails solidly, half-heartedly splashes back at her, as he rubs the wounded orb and looks at me for consolation with the other eye. I run some clean, cold water in one of the plastic cups lying around, tilt his head, and flush his eye. His head bucks back at first, but I hold him firmly and sing a few lines of a song they learned at preschool last week.

*gray squirrel, gray squirrel, shake your bushy tail,*

*gray squirrel, gray squirrel, shake your bushy tail.*

And each time I shake my rump a little at the “tail” part, like the children did when they performed the song for their father and I the day they learned it. They both laugh gleefully to see me act silly, begin shaking their bums in the water, making little waves that traverse the length of the tub and back again.

The loose board in the doorway of the bathroom creaks behind me, and the twins shoot up like arrows, squealing “Daddy!” and clapping their hands in excitement. I do not turn, see my husband’s shadow as he leans over and kisses them on the tops of their still-damp heads. They wiggle their soapy fingers at him, and I glance to see him backing away in mock horror. The children shriek with delight, move dangerously close to the edge of the tub, and I reach out an arm for each child to steady them from losing their balance. Adam crouches behind
me, rubs his hands up and down my back. I busy myself with getting the children reseated, then offer him my cheek. But he turns my head with his finger, kisses me full on the lips, shoving his tongue so deeply into my throat that I involuntarily gag. I can feel the children staring, so I withdraw quickly as he turns away in disgust at my reflex. To change the subject, I ask him how his day was.

“Same old, same old,” he replies, as he thrusts his hands around my hips with a pressure so great that I wince. Thankfully, the children have lost interest in our interaction, are now racing little plastic boats in and out of the soap suds. I tell him that there’s a roast in the oven, that I’ll be down as soon as I get the twins to bed. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him nod, turn, and leave.

Standing the children up again, they hold on to my shoulders as I scoop bath water in a cup, rinse the suds from their glistening bodies.

“Clean,” they whisper over and over, like a litany, as I used to do before they could talk. I envy them their innocence; wish that I could still pray.

I bundle them in thick towels, first Linus, then Amelia, and run a comb through their baby-fine hair, rub lotion over their spindly limbs, pudgy tummies, smooth backsides. They scramble into their pajamas, race to the bedroom, leap into bed like young stags, and I see that it’s going to take a while to settle them down. Tucking them in, I swaddle their blankets around them — after resolving the temporary panic that ensued when Amelia momentarily lost her bobby. I read them stories: The Very Quiet Cricket; Goodnight, Moon; Have You Seen My Cat? And they know these by heart, their lisping words trailing my steady intonations. I take my time lulling them to sleep, create little stories by request about a little girl named Anna and a little boy named Larry who have great adventures in their backyard. Their eyelids become heavy, as first Linus, then Amelia, drops to sleep. I listen to their slow, shallow breaths; my eyes trace the barely visible lumps that their bodies make beneath the covers — a presence so slight that I have often flipped on the hall light, having to see their heads upon the pillows, their open mouths, so that I can know that they are still there. I kiss Linus lightly on the forehead, and he shifts slightly and inserts his thumb in his mouth. He already has long, dark eyelashes — the kind that most women would kill for — which flutter slightly as he slips into his dreams. I then brush Amelia’s hair from her forehead, kiss her gently, and trail my finger down the slope of her nose, a miniature version of my own.

I turn off the light and linger in the doorway, reluctant to leave my sleeping babies.
Though a stirring in the kitchen summons me, and I shuffle down the hallway, descend the stairs.

Adam has already set the table, is lighting candles as I enter the kitchen. He never likes to see me in normal light; only candlelight or complete darkness are acceptable. He grins at me, and I can see the lust curling his lips above his teeth as he pulls out my chair in exaggerated gallantry. I comment on the arrangement, thank him for getting everything ready. I slice a piece of roast for him, and a smaller one for myself. He spoons salad into our bowls as I retrieve the bread from the oven. The first few minutes elapse in silence as we busy ourselves with meal preparation. I politely ask for specifics of his day, and he embarks upon a lengthy tale of a merger for which he is responsible, and the sundry people whose cooperation he must ascertain to reach this goal. I nod periodically, ask pertinent questions of clarification, but am grateful for the candlelight, which prevents him from seeing my eyes glaze over in anticipatory dread. I can only eat my salad and a slice of bread; the roast has gone cold, and congealed fat shimmers out to me in the dancing flames of the candle. I swallow a piece of bread, wash it down with water, fighting the nausea that is festering in my stomach. Every so often, I begin to share a detail from my day—something charming the children said or something we saw on our way to school, but each time he cuts me off, asks me for another piece of bread, to pass the salt for another glass of wine. Adam helps himself to my untouched piece as I thank him for the flowers.

“You liked those, did you?” It is more of a statement than a question, so I do not answer, observe a sly smile spread over his face.

He eats quickly, pushes his chair back, expels a sigh of contentment. Without a word, I begin clearing the table. He watches me for a minute, then rises and brushes his hand along my rear as he exits the kitchen.

I scrub the dishes so thoroughly, that the dishwasher we had installed becomes an object of futility, but I load them in anyway. Tackling the roast, I slice it as thinly as I can, mentally calculating how many sandwiches can be made for Adam’s lunch tomorrow. I scour the pan, plunging it into water so hot that my knuckles become scarlet, look blistered. I worked so efficiently that soon, too soon, there is nothing left to be done, and I blow out the candles, head for the bedroom.

He is under the covers when I enter, reading a magazine, his shoulders, broad and tanned, protruding from the sheets. I enter the bathroom, where I brush, and floss, and brush again.
I wash my face twice, run my fingers through my hair, slip into my nightgown, pull the housecoat over that. As I open the door, I see that he has turned off all of the lights, pretends that he is sleeping. I move back toward the light switch in the bathroom, but he detects my movements, warns me to “Leave them off.” Still, I entertain the impossible, increasingly-fleeting hope that he will drift off as I pursue my nightly routine. I slip beneath the sheets, try to make as little movement as possible. And wait. The mattress creaks and he rolls towards me, slips his hands under my nightgown, begins to breathe laboriously. Quickly, my nightgown and housecoat are pulled over my head, tossed into the nebulous darkness which envelops us, and he is on top of me, running his rough hands the length of my body. He bites my breasts, and I gasp, cry out in pain. He ignores this, bites harder, and I feel them swelling, not with arousal, but blood. Soon, he is in me, slamming his hips into mine, over and over. I reach behind me, clench the rods of our headboard in a death grip, screw my eyelids closed. Try to transport myself to another place. As he nears climax, he drives harder and my breath escapes me in short, arduous bursts. I am being split in half. Eventually, it’s over, and he slumps on me, sweating furiously, as his respiration returns to normal. He rolls off of me like a great sleeping bear, draws the sheets up to his chin, and sleeps the sleep of the dead. Wishful thinking.

I wait until I am sure that he is asleep, then grapple on the floor for my night clothes. Quietly, I pad across the hall on bare feet to Amelia and Linus’ room. I choose Linus’ bed, as his sister has moved in her sleep so that she is perfectly horizontal, leaving little room for me. He curls his tiny body into mine and mutters something unintelligible in his sleep. I shift my torso slightly away from him, fold him into my arms, and eventually, after what seems like hours, fall asleep.

The next morning, I hear Adam’s movement as he gets ready for work, but pretend to be asleep. I hear him stop in front of the children’s room, grunt in disgust, and slam their door in a kind of protest against my defiance. At this sound, I feel Linus start, and his limbs twitch momentarily before he mumbles to himself and falls back asleep. After I hear the tell-tale noise of the garage door, rumbling beneath me, I disentangle myself from Linus’ arms as gently as I can; I head to the children’s bathroom and draw myself a bath, leaving the door just slightly ajar so that I can hear when they awake.

The water is steaming, as hot as I can stand, and I gingerly lower myself into the bathtub.
The heat sears the scabs on my breasts, pours into the newer wounds like liquid fire. But eventually, the pain subsides, goes numb, and I relax, allowing the water to lap against my knees. Although I’ve added the children’s bubble bath, I can still see through the water in patches, and I touch the variously-colored flesh that covers my hips and lower abdomen. Greens, reds, dark purples, blacks — a rainbow of hurting and healing. I close my eyes, lean against the wall, and concentrate on the gentle movement of waves as I shift my weight, the periodic drip of the water from the tap.

When I pick the twins up from school, I tell them to close their eyes — no peeking — that I have a surprise for them. I steer the car in the direction of our local park, unbuckle their car seats, and lead them to an area next to the playground, as they run away from me in excitement, then back again, and I know that their umbilical cords have yet to be severed. In a basket I have brought snacks — carrots, raisins, cookies — and we drink juice as they fight with one another over who gets to tell me which story from their day at school. Their enthusiasm is contagious, and I allow myself to be lifted and carried by their energy, can genuinely smile at their tales and antics. They eat quickly, for the playground looms dangerously close, is calling to them like sirens. Before I let them go, I gather them in my arms, and they give me what we refer to as “loving” — Eskimo kisses, little hugs, pecks on my cheek. It is with great difficulty that I release them, and they race across the field, their lithe limbs illuminated in the waning sunlight. I follow, watch them swing and climb like little monkeys, quell the urge to clip their wings and limit the extent to which they can ascend on the terrifyingly tall bars. Linus finds a small herd of metal horses on springs, and he mounts one, my little cowboy, and begins rocking back and forth, reminds me of those dogs with bobbing heads that people used to put in the back windows of their cars. Not be outdone, Amelia joins him and soon they are whooping and hollering live I’ve taught them.

“Mommy!” they call “Look at me, Mommy!” Before long, they are inviting me, begging me, to join them.

Mommy can’t, I admit, and my heart breaks to see how crest-fallen they look.

“Why? Mommy has a owie?” Linus presses, since every hindrance in life can be attributed to some owie or another.

I nod my head, but cannot look my child in his earnest eyes, and so turn away.
That afternoon, I return to the kitchen to make some tea. Filling the teapot with water, I shake some loose tea into a strainer. As I wait for the water to boil, I notice that several of the leaves on the flowers are dying, becoming brown, curling back into themselves. I remove some scissors from our all-purpose drawer, begin to clip away at what has become dead weight. The lupines wobble back and forth with each of my movements, their conical blooms touching the table, then springing back up. As I prune a particular region of the flower arrangement, one of them continually taps my arm. I take the scissors and hack it off at the stem, stare at the damage I have done. Only a green shaft remains, and the indigo blossom lies inert, on the table. The low, thunder-rumble of the coffee percolating dances on the edge of my consciousness, but I paid it no attention, continued to disrobe the stems of their glory, clipping at a furious pace. Eventually, I find myself staring at a vase of green shoots, the carnage of flower heads lying all around me. They stare at me accusingly, like beheaded dolls. I drag the trash can over to the table and begin brushing them into its plastic recesses. When my work is done, I am left standing before a bouquet of vegetation, appropriately purged of its swagger. I pour my cup of tea and head back upstairs to check on the twins.

For dinner, I have prepared a simple stew, made with the roast of yesterday. Adam is ladling it into large bowls when I return from my nightly tuck-in rituals. I am wearing my robe, and he seems surprised that I have changed since he came home. I see the seedlings of a smile dance over his face, which is danced over by the candlelight, and he makes a move to come towards me.

I hit the switch, and the kitchen is flooded in light. He squints, and as I allow a moment for his eyes to adjust, I look at the window, can see our reflection against the black void of night outside our little house. Before he can move any closer, I remove the robe, letting it fall around my ankles. I step out of it, advance towards him, see an hollow recognition in his eyes as they traverse the length of my colorful torso. We remain like this — staring, wordless — for what seemed like hours, but could not have been more than ten minutes. Eventually, he can look no longer, and stares at his large, hair-covered knuckles. I watch as he screws courage into his face, then rises from the table and advances towards me. He grabs me around my waist, presses himself into me, his lips on mine to suffocate any protest before they might escape. Before I have time to consider the consequences, I reach out and slap his face, put-
ting all of my weight behind my open-faced palm. He staggers backwards, holding the wounded cheek, glaring at me in consternation. Quietly, I put the robe back on, and go upstairs. I have made myself a small bed in the children’s room, and I burrow beneath the numerous blankets and quilts, sleep soundly for the first time in years.