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“Snowdrops”

“Snowdrops,” by Sarah McCann:

“Are they up yet?” my grandmother asks hopefully.

“No, not yet,” my mother answers patiently, as if addressing an eager child. From her position on the edge of my grandmother’s bed, I see her smile silently as she continues knitting. She is smiling because of the familiarity of the question. For the last few weeks of her illness, my grandmother has been living to see the snowdrops bloom in her garden. Sometimes I think the only reason she doesn’t succumb to her cancer is so she will live to see the tiny, white flowers she so adores, one last time.

I don’t understand her strong feelings for the snowdrops, as they are, by far, not the most beautiful flowers growing in my grandmother’s garden. I wish to ask why she is so drawn to them but my mother’s presence stops me. For some reason, I feel the need to ask the question in private. I realize then that my grandmother’s eagerness for such a simple thing is almost childlike, and this causes me to reflect. We come into this world as children, and exit in almost the same way.

“Grandmother, why do you like snowdrops so much?” I ask during a visit one day, once my mother has gone downstairs. She looks so fragile lying in her bed, I almost regret asking the question. Answering may prove to be too much exertion for her weak lungs to handle. However, she takes a breath and begins to talk, slowly and quietly.

“When your grandfather and I were married, around this time of year, the snowdrops were in bloom. I wore them in my hair at our wedding. Your grandfather adored them. Every year we planted them in our garden, and through some bizarre miracle, they always bloomed on our anniversary.

“After your grandfather died, I missed him terribly. All I had to do, though, was look at the snowdrops, and I felt close to him, as if he were with me again. Our snowdrops were what saved me on days I missed him so much I wanted to die.” My grandmother finishes her story and stares silently into space, thinking. I don’t want to interrupt her thoughts, so when she closes her eyes and drifts off to sleep, I still don’t speak.

We visit my grandmother again, but on this day my mother asks me to stay downstairs. Grandmother’s condition is worsening and she can’t cope with any visitors except mother. She no longer has the strength to talk.

I remember my most recent talk with my mother. She was in need of someone to confide in, and I was the only ear available; otherwise, I’m sure she wouldn’t have burdened me with her pain. She told me of her visits alone with grandmother, and how she wished grandmother would just give up and allow herself to go, to end her own suffering. I could see my mother’s pain, and how much she longed to cry; but for my sake, she would not. I imagine what my mother is doing upstairs right now – sitting on grandmother’s bed, holding her hand and encouraging her not to fight anymore.

My thoughts are interrupted as I notice a glossy, white album on a shelf across from where I am seated. On the binding there is a date printed in gold ink: April 13, 1937. I pull the large book from the shelf and gingerly open it. I am mesmerized by the black-and-white photo that greets my eyes. I recognize Grandmother and Grandfather, posing together happily, and I know this must be their wedding album. Grandmother's beautiful white gown draws my attention. Then my eye is attracted by the tiny white flowers perched in her hair. They are her snowdrops, and for the first time, I can see just how beautiful they really are.

The telephone rings on the most gorgeous day of spring so far. When my mother answers it, I know right away what has happened. My first question is, "What day is it?" Through her tears, my mother answers, confirming my suspicions. [Their anniversary.] She doesn't want me to come with her today, but I insist. There is something I need to see.

When we arrive at Grandmother's house I immediately run to the backyard. While the image of the snowdrops is blurred by my tears, they have bloomed just the same. [And now, for the first time I am seeing them as she saw them. And they are, as she was, beautiful.]¹

At this hour of Yizkor, of remembrance, we see again our dear ones through our sorrow. And we know by the clarity of those images that fill our minds that they will always live on inside us in the way they touched our lives, and in the way they shaped even a small corner of this world.

We feel them beside us when we witness beauty they taught us to recognize. When passion wells within us kindled by their sense of purpose. In the echo of a laugh, the angle of a smile.

The enduring meaning of their lives is a part of who we have become. God's creation ever more wondrous for their having signed it with their brief presence in it. And our own lives ever blessed.

¹ Based on "Snowdrops," by Sarah McCann.