

The Flower Man

He was deadheading dahlias when it happened. The air was sweet and thick. The honeyed sun sat fat and tired in the sky; shadows stretched their fingers before bed. When he felt the rent in his heart, the arm-clenching pain of it, his first thought was, 'Oh! And on such a perfect evening.'

Deadheading was one of his favourite pastimes. There were Conjurors, and there were Tidiers in the Garden Club. The Conjurors liked the dangling chaos of an overgrown wisteria; self-seeded poppies where they oughtn't be: a clamouring clematis. He was a Tidier. Order. That's what he liked. It was like birdsong in his ears – the steady snip-snip of his grinning secateurs. The hushed tumble of a tired blossom.

He sold dahlias. He was the Flower Man. Not just dahlias... lilies, cosmos, love-in-a-mist. And before the summer blooms, the sweet peas, and before them, tulips. There was always something. He'd tried to get Margaret interested in winter wreaths but – typical Margaret – she wouldn't show willing.

He didn't do it for the money, and he had no real interest in being the Flower Man. The children bubbled around him outside the shop, hot sticky hands clutching their pennies, impatient for another sugar hit. They turned their moon faces towards him, waiting to be adored, to be remarked. Other people's children. Germ vessels. Their mothers pushed buggies backwards and forwards as they picked out the cheapest stems for their mothers-in-law. 'She only has them one day a week, but she will she let me forget it?'

Margaret loved other people's children. Always had. Every walk in the park, every trip into town – she couldn't leave the house without chatting up some white-faced mother, shadows circling their dead eyes. Nap times, nappy rash, first words – she wanted every detail. And she was the right age to be a granny so everyone assumed she had had her own. She hadn't. Not really.

When it came properly, the pain skewered him. He wanted to cry out but the hurt swallowed his voice and he could only gasp. His surprised eyes watched as the secateurs slid from his gloved hand.

He thought he caught a flash of Margaret's glasses at the kitchen window as he fell, blank white moons full of cold sky. She'd be out in a minute. Good old Margaret. He just needed to keep breathing. But his legs crumpled like wet paper. He caught a waft of lilies as he slid to the earth, their thick heavy perfume, growth and decay all bound up together.

Margaret hated lilies. 'Funeral flowers,' she grimaced whenever he cut them, and she would find somewhere else to be. She was right. White flowers on tiny white coffins. He'd had to cut the stems short or they would have overhung the boxes. Seemed like the only thing with colour at those services were the red rims of Margaret's eyes. Raw. Grief-salted.

Lying there, he was glad he had cut the grass at the weekend. It would have been awful to feel long blades tickling his cheeks now, chastising him: 'Look what you've left undone.' Other people would worry about having clean underwear. But he could see, beyond the green blades at eye level, tiny little weeds sprouting in his rose beds. How could he have missed those? The iron band around his chest tightened. Was his heart actually breaking? All that

work. What a waste it would be.

She'd be out in a minute. His legs were hidden by the flowers, it was true, but his head and shoulders were visible from the kitchen window. He willed himself to make a noise, something to attract her attention.

It was after the first baby, Rose, that he had turned to the garden. Margaret's sadness was so vast – edgeless, bottomless – he couldn't get close to her. And she had no words for him. He was alone.

He had felt it too. Of course he had. He wasn't a monster. He had painted the little box room, moved out all his old magazines, the broken teasmade, the sewing machine that never got used. He had clambered up and down those attic ladders like rigging. But he hadn't felt it quiver inside him, a butterfly stirring. He hadn't felt his ankles turn to jelly, or his blood weaken as it colonised him. It just wasn't as real for him.

'We shouldn't really,' she had giggled, eyes shining buttons. 'We shouldn't get carried away,' as she'd fetched the sewing machine back down, and started assaulting piles of gingham fabric, her maternity smock billowing from its elastic tucks over her modest bump. She was barely showing. He'd been at work and when he came home he knew something was wrong. There was no scent of sausages in the pan, no radio on. Margaret had sat clenched-jawed, milk white, on the metal-framed kitchen chair. Even then, before anything had really happened, she had known.

Everyone said it was tragic, but it was nothing out of the ordinary. If one didn't stick they should try again, the sooner the better. Easier said than done. It takes two to tango, as they say. The garden was easier company. It had been

wild when he'd first gone out there, hacking and chopping with a fury he didn't even know he'd felt. They'd not been in the house long. It was going to be their first family home. They'd wanted a back garden big enough to kick a ball around, and Margaret had always wanted at least two. So they'd pushed themselves - got a big mortgage, for those days, moved into this nice neighbourhood. And he had a knack for growing things. 'Green fingers,' Margaret had said, when the pills kicked in and she finally started noticing the outside world again. Of course there was no such thing. Just science and a bit of luck with the weather.

Alice, next door but one, she talked to her plants. He had dismissed it at first, but she did get some fine blooms. His lilies had failed the third time, so Alice had donated some of her own. She was a good woman. A looker, too. Always had her hair done, nails neat and polished. She made Margaret look drab in comparison.

There – he could see Margaret's glasses now definitely. The light bounced off them and they were turned in his direction. Thank God for that. The pain was gobbling him up, it was getting harder to think straight. She'd be out in a minute.

He'd worked hard for her, for Margaret. She'd worked too as a teaching assistant, but it wasn't the same. Just a bit of pin money. His work had been hard. He'd get home and the first thing he wanted to do was get outside: feel the drizzle on his skin, the wind through his hair. Some days he didn't even stop to say hello, he was too desperate to check on the marigolds or the sunflowers, and when he looked up again it was already dark. In the old days

she'd come out too. Bring a cup of tea and sit on the bench she'd bought, cagoule huddled around her, more often than not munching on a slice of cake. She was always making cakes, even though she knew he didn't have a sweet tooth. She took some to the WI, but not enough, to his mind. She had become shapeless, over the years, as if cake could fill the void. Not like Alice from two doors down.

Margaret used to seek him out, always wanting to 'talk about things'. She was a distraction, really. He'd be in the rhythm of a deep dig – stab, lean, sink, lift – and she'd come shuffling out, billowing her dark clouds behind her. In the end he'd told her straight: She needed to get on with things – move on – or he wouldn't stick around. After all, it wasn't his fault, was it? No blanks in his gun – the doctors had said. It was her that couldn't hold onto them.

Well, that had put an end to the tea and cake. But at least he got a bit of peace.

The best nights were Garden Club nights. Alice was Entertainments Secretary so she always wanted to chat through the speaker schedule, or discuss which of the grand houses they might visit. She usually came around in the afternoons so that she could get it all sorted before the meeting. It felt cosy, sitting side by side in the kitchen, lighting on the dimmer, tea steaming in the nice cups, arms rubbing up against each other as they frowned at the iPad. She always smelt good. Washing powder and hairspray. Margaret tended to make herself a bit scarce. Sometimes when the scent of Alice filled the kitchen, Margaret went down the garden to look at the rose bushes. Five of them planted in three years. One for each time.

Well, if she wanted to take herself off, that was fine by him. No one needs a third wheel. He wouldn't mind if she came out to see him now though. He could feel the cold damp from the grass rising through his cords.

It was the strangest thing – he could have sworn Margaret was looking straight at him now. He was gazing at the kitchen window and those glasses hadn't moved. It must be a trick of the light. Like when you were sure someone in sunglasses was looking at you, but it turned out they were inspecting the rack of postcards over your shoulder.

His own vision was grey edged now, the image no longer sharp. Just ranks of sword swords lined up in front of his nose.

40 years this year, since the first time. Margaret had said they should do something, something to remember all their lost babies. She'd said that it sometimes felt as though they'd never even existed. He had wanted to tell her that they hadn't, not in any meaningful sense. That she'd let the absence of something change her whole life. But he had bitten his tongue and suggested a cruise instead. Alice had been on a cruise with Derek before he'd shackled up with Annette from Marketing and she'd said it was 'life changing'. Margaret had looked at him with cobble-hard eyes. 'A cruise,' she'd spat, and he'd felt a bit dirty, although he couldn't work out why.

Alice would be a bit of fun on a cruise. There was that trip with the Garden Club, all the way down to Coleton Fishacre in Devon. The others went to bed early – a cacophany of walking frame clatter and pill packet rattle. Alice hadn't gone to bed early. What a night. They'd tried to put another long distance trip on the agenda but the others weren't so keen – if they sat too

long on a coach all their blood ran into their ankles. 'Margaret isn't to know that,' he'd grinned at Alice, and she had smiled back at him, with her mouth full of tidy teeth.

Oh he'd take it back now, if he could. He'd undo all those other nights too. He'd erase Alice from the face of the earth if Margaret would just come outside. If she would just come and tell him she'd phoned an ambulance.

There was no mistaking it. She was looking right at him. She was sipping from a mug and gazing at him, as if she was weighing something up. He could almost see the condensation on her lenses.

Oh thank God. She was coming out. He was sorry. If he could only talk he would tell her he was sorry. Sorry for all the harsh words. For the infidelities. He was a crap husband. He'd tell her, as soon as he felt better. She was in the garden now, by his side. She reached down and patted his cheek. Bless her. Good old Margaret. And she was reaching for something. His phone, look, it was on the lawn by his outstretched fingers. No – not the phone. It was the secateurs. What did she want with them? And she whispered something to him. What did she say? It sounded like 'Not long now, dear.' He closed his eyes tight against the pain but the snip-snip chirrup of the secateurs cut through his brain fog. Something hit him on the cheek. A dahlia. A dahlia in full bloom, face open: bright, rich orange dripping to the very tip of each petal. And another one. Another.

He gasped again. 'No'. The word was dragged from his lungs like a fish on a hook. But she didn't hear. She couldn't hear over the snip, snip, snip of the secateurs.

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