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Sunflowers and Oak Trees

Maya Van Wagenen

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Sunflowers and Oak Trees

There is a smell that cut flowers give off as they wilt. It is musty, deep, and sad, as if the dying blooms are trying to remind the world that they were once whole and beautiful. Our house was drowning in the stale aroma of the flowers, and like them, I felt as if I too had been plucked from normality. I sat broken, mourning the life I had once known. I heard Dad's dragging footfalls in the hall and I looked up. His face was older and sadder as he crouched down next to me. I turned away, not wanting to hear anything anymore, least of all another apology. Yet I couldn't have been more surprised when he took my small six-year-old hand in his and whispered, "Come on, Maya, let's go plant sunflowers."

As we left the house, Mom watched us and raised her eyebrows, but said nothing. Dad opened up the faded blue door, and we stepped out into the early autumn breeze. The massive oak trees were sentinels, and I looked up to their strong branches for comfort. Already their leaves were dying, changing to a red-brown color around the edges. Soon they would fall, and the trees would stand exposed, naked. The birds were getting ready to leave for winter, and I couldn't help but wonder if the entire world was mourning the loss of my baby sister, Ariana. It had been two weeks since she had passed, but I couldn't get over the shock of having someone I had loved more than life itself being snatched away from me.

Dad held a package of seeds my great-grandfather had sent us from his own garden. He handed them to me, and dug holes in the dirt with a trowel. I bent down and began poking the black and white seeds into the soil. Finally, thinking of the flowers in the house left over from the funeral I asked, "Why don't plants live a long time?"

“Some do and some don’t,” my father replied, looking up at the sky.

“Why?” I asked.

“They serve different purposes. Oak trees live a long time. They grow tall and give us shade and lumber. Other plants, like these sunflowers make the world beautiful, but they’re only here for a short time.”

“Like Ariana,” I stated, imagining my tiny sister as I’d last seen her: the gentle curve of her mouth, the swirl of her brown hair, the perfect little fingers, the shadow of her eyelashes on her round cheeks.

“Yes, Maya, like Ariana.” Dad leaned down and passed a layer of dirt over the seeds and poured water over the ground. I said a silent prayer that they would grow, smiling at the wet earth, still so full of potential.

“You are our oak tree,” he said placing his hands on my shoulders and looking me straight in the eyes. I nodded holding back tears.

The sunflowers never bloomed. The first frosts took them away before the buds could open. Every spring after that, we planted the sunflowers. They embodied golden sunshine, and made our home the brightest on the street.

Even though the precious flowers never last very long, they help us oak trees understand that beauty is a sweet and fragile thing. Even though it hurts us when it disappears, we are left grateful that it was here for a little while, instead of no time at all.