

WHAT WE CANNOT SAY

by Sara Searson

“Grandpa, I came to visit,” Angeline said, stepping into the small room and quietly shutting the door behind her.

Grandpa smiled at her in that vague way she’d grown so used to. “Hello,” he said. His voice was pleasant, cheerful even, but devoid of any genuine affection.

He didn’t remember her anymore. He didn’t remember any of them anymore, but she was the last one to still visit after he forgot them.

Angeline was sure that he was still somewhere in there. Everyone dismissed her as being too hopeful, too naïve. But every time she came to visit, there were flowers on his side table. Today, there was wilting anemone, in blooms of whites and yellows and pinks. A beautiful flower, but to Angeline, a stab in the heart. Anemones stood for fading hope or feeling forsaken. Grandpa knew they weren’t visiting; he just couldn’t say so.

Angeline tutted and pulled the wilting flowers off the table. “None of these,” she told him sternly. She replaced the sad flowers with the one’s she had stored in her duffel bag, pansies in all the happiest colors she could find.

Grandpa looked at the flowers and smiled. “Love,” he told her quietly.

Angeline grinned. “Yes.”

He looked at her, frowning, before nodding to himself. He carefully sat up, before reaching into his bedside table and holding out a hand towards her. "Take."

Angeline blinked in surprise before holding her hand out.

Carefully, he opened her hand and placed something metallic and cool in it. "After," he told her quietly. "For after."

In her hand was a staple of her life. The key that had hung around her grandfather's neck her whole life, that opened the safe in his basement.

"Angeline," Joseph called. Angeline shook herself, looking towards her brother who was still decked in his black suit. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," she responded quietly. "Thank you for doing this with me."

"What else are brothers for?" Joseph pushed the golden key into the lock, pulling open the dark metal door as the silver chain clinked merrily against its surface. And inside that dark cavity was vibrant color, white soul gazer lilies, red and pink carnation blooms, clusters of blue hydrangeas, and bright yellow tulips.

"It's... flowers," she whispered, pulling out a pink carnation. She spun it slowly in her hand, admiring the delicate petals. "How did he even manage this?"

Joseph jerkily pulled out a lily and stared at it blankly. "I don't get it," he finally said. "There has to be something else in here." Joseph grabbed a handful of flowers, crushing the petals between his fingers throwing them to the floor carelessly.

Angeline stopped his hand before he could destroy anymore, grabbing his wrist in tight fist. "What are you doing?"

"I'm searching the safe, Angeline."

“For *what*? This is it.”

“It’s just... flowers,” he responded, echoing her words with distaste. “Is that all we meant to him?”

“What? No, Joseph. They aren’t *just*. Lilies and pink carnations for remembrance, red carnations for admiration, hydrangeas in thanks, and tulips for joy. It’s a message, Joseph.”

Joseph studied the safe skeptically. “A message for what?”

“He’s saying goodbye. He’s thanking us. He — he’s saying all the things he never could when he was alive.” Joseph looked no less impressed by this interpretation. “We’re only the things we leave behind.”

“And he left us wilting flowers.” Joseph tugged on his hair in frustration. “He could have left us anything.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Jewelry, art, heirlooms—”

“What, you wanted valuables? *Money*?”

Joseph was quite for a long moment, staring at her. “I didn’t say that.”

“But you aren’t denying it?”

Joseph threw his hands up. “Jesus Angeline, this had only been the greatest mystery of our entire lives. The secret safe in grandpa’s basement, that we weren’t even allowed to *talk* about. And it’s just flowers.”

“It’s his goodbye.”

"But what was it *before*?"

Angeline thought. He was right, it couldn't have always been a goodbye. "What does it matter? He wanted us to know *this*."

“I’d have preferred if it was empty,” Joseph snapped at her irritably before turning and stomping up the stairs.

Carefully, she closed the door on the flowers and pressed her hand against the cool metal, missing their bright colors in the dim light of the basement. “I love you too, grandpa,” she whispered.