

Fair Flowers of Paradise

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...and round his pierced feet / fair flowers of paradise extend / their fragrance ever sweet.

—from the traditional Southern Baptist hymn “Crown Him with Many Crowns”

Me and my kid brother Gabe shared a place off the highway right up until we couldn't no more. I been by there a couple times since, but there really ain't much left. A little stand of daffodils (thicker now it seems), the same patchwork of pink creeping phlox along the south bank, and that old straggly redbud where our front yard used to be. They long since brought down the power lines, undid the plumbing, and hauled off our little single-wide. Last time I stopped by, there wasn't nothing left but a grassy spot where it once stood, and all those flowers on either side. I knew it would be gone, but I guess I wasn't ready for not seeing it. And I can't exactly say the place looked peaceful, the way it did when we lived there. Just empty.

Right from the start, I knew it was a place the two of us could call home. It sat about nine miles inside the county line, right at the foot of a steep grade where the land started leveling off into river bottom. I found it in the paper one day and decided to call the number just to see. I cut Study Hall and used the pay phone out in the lobby.

The lady on the other end of the line gave me a few details: oil heat, electric everything else, and a month's rent down as security deposit. "Do-able," I thought. She said she had a strict policy on pets—none of any kind, fish included. I told her that wasn't a problem. Then I mentioned Gabe, his condition and all. She said she used to be a nurse, so she knew what we were up against. Said her heart went out to the both of us. Then she held the phone, for what I don't know. I just held it right back. Eventually, she started talking again, and we set up a time for me to look the place over. I hung up, and made my way back to Study Hall.

"Frog chokers" was what my Granddad always called days like the one I went to see the trailer on. The ground couldn't hold another drop, but the rain kept coming. The gullies were filling up, and the river was the color of chocolate milk, swollen right up to the banks.

I pulled off the main road and found about a half-dozen puddles standing in the drive. I did my best to steer clear of them, straddling the big ones. The lady I'd talked to on the phone the day before was parked at the turn-around, waiting on me, having a smoke to kill time. Her window was cracked, but the whole inside was steamed up. She hopped out into the rain and said a quick hello. "Hey there. I'm Linda. You must be Daniel."

"Daniel. Danny. Either one," I said back. Folks had been calling me both for so long it really didn't matter anymore. I was signing my school papers "Danny" at the time but figured one day I'd switch over to Daniel. For now, either would do. I just let folks decide for themselves.

Linda extended her hand to me. It was thin, the skin cold and dry. She gave me the quick once-over then turned toward the front deck. The rain was coming down in sheets, so we tilted our heads and hustled up the steps. Linda had her hair piled up in a tight bun. She kept it covered with one of those see-through plastic rain caps—the kind old ladies like to wear. She had a huge silver ring she was holding and she fumbled with the keys dangling from it. There must've been about a hundred, no lie. Somehow, she knew which one to use, and we slipped inside.

She started walking around the place, pointing out stuff that didn't seem all that important to me. Closet space I didn't need, counter space I'd probably never use, and a frost-free refrigerator, which she mentioned twice. I didn't even know what "frost free"

meant, but I nodded all the same. It was a different roof to live under and that was the main thing as far as I was concerned—a chance for me and Gabe to break free, to cut out a better way of life for ourselves. Salvation at \$225 a month seemed a steal.

I pulled a wad of half-soaked bills from my coat pocket and paid the deposit right on the spot. Linda said there were a couple of things she needed to take care of first, but that I could be in the place as early as the following week. "It's just some general maintenance stuff," she said. "Then it's all yours. I guess I'll just let you call about the utilities and all," she added. I nodded again, like I knew the drill. She never asked my age, so there was no way she could've known this was my first place ever and that I had no clue what I was doing. But she never asked, so I never told. She just counted out the money and lit up a fresh cigarette. I watched her send a blue cloud toward the ceiling. She stood there for a second, nodding a little, looking around the room once she'd pushed all that smoke out of her.

At first I thought the old man would get pissed, maybe call the law on us, or else send a social worker to fetch us back. But the more time passed, the less I worried. And after a while I got the picture. The old man was just as glad to have us gone as we were to be gone. It was like we never happened.

Winter came on extra hard that year. One morning I heard the man on the radio say it was one of the coldest Januarys on record. Sometimes the wind would come tearing up through the hollow, rocking the roadside trees until they started throwing sticks and limbs all over the highway. It would cut through our place so hard the panels in our walls would buzz a little. One time I saw it blow open a magazine that was sitting on a table by the window. I just sat there, watching the pages flip one by one. I couldn't decide whether I wanted to cry or take a crowbar to the place.

The furnace kept giving us fits too. When it wasn't running, we just about froze solid. When it did kick on, it made an awful racket, stunk up the place, and smoked some too. It was kind of like having the old man around again, come to think of it. At night I'd tuck Gabe in with his jacket on then pile the covers three or four deep. I kept calling Linda, but all I ever got was her machine. I left about a hundred messages, but she never did get back in touch. When we first took the place, she seemed nice enough, but that winter I wrote her off as strictly no-account.

I'd quit school by then and was working full-time at the building supply store where, before, I'd only been a part-timer. I worried about Gabe a lot when I was gone. I'd sneak off and call to check on him—some days three or four times a day. The store manager kept breathing down my neck about “personal calls,” but I didn't worry too much. He was always quick to chew somebody's ass out, but I knew he wouldn't fire me. We were short on help as it was.

One afternoon, I spotted a pallet of clear plastic sheeting out back. I snatched up a roll and stuck it in the trunk of my car without paying. It was easy. They'd never even know it was gone. Stuff came up missing like that all the time. When I got home that evening, I stretched that plastic across all the windows. I kept it in place with some duct tape I had. It wasn't pretty, but it did the trick.

Then I met this fella at the store one day. JP was his name. I overheard him tell somebody he did furnace work on the side, so I told him about the trouble I was having with mine. He came over one day after I got off work, and the two of us tore the thing down straight to the guts. He showed me how one of the jets was clogged. We got a new part and put it in the next day. The thing ran like a top after that.

When the weather finally broke, me and Gabe started fishing some. There was a filling station I passed each day. They sold night crawlers, meal worms, and some basic

tackle. Whenever I knew I had a day off that was coming up, I'd stop there and get a few tubs of bait. I'd keep them in the fridge, stashed way in back so Gabe couldn't get to them. You had to stay a step or two ahead of him that way. Kind of put yourself inside his head to protect him from the things he might do. Seemed like, every time you turned around, he was getting into something.

Me and Gabe always had a big time down on the river. We'd stand right in the middle and let the current lap up around our legs. We'd cast upstream and the water would carry everything on down in a dead drift. Every now and then, we'd get lucky and land a few. This one day, we would've both caught our limit if we'd have kept on fishing.

We were casting up under this old train trestle, a place where the water dropped off to run fast and cool. It churned and churned at the bottom until it foamed up white. The water ran deep there in dark green pools that wrapped around the foot of the trestle's big stone pillars. It was prime for trout. They stocked there, too, sometimes twice a month.

I caught enough for supper in about a half hour's time—three fat ones. When a fourth hit my bait, I shouted for Gabe and handed him the pole. "Go on." I said. "Reel him on in. He's all yours." Gabe cranked and cranked on the reel. He kept jerking back hard. "Easy now," I said. "He ain't going nowhere. Go easy. Don't wanna pop your line. That's it. Nice and easy. Just stay tight to him and he'll come to you. He's all yours."

Gabe gets him in close and I step forward. I grab the tip of the pole with one hand, catch the line with the other. It's a brook trout. A little guy, but he's busting with color—tiny red spots up and down his sides, white-tipped fins underneath. I wrap my fingers around him and pull the hook free. Then I get Gabe to lean in for a better look. He eyeballs the thing for a while, pokes it with a stubby finger then steps back a couple feet. I get to my feet and start to drop the trout in my creel. All of a sudden, Gabe starts

shaking his head from side to side. He grabs for the brook. "Hey!" I yell. "What the hell? What do you think you're doing?"

"Back!" he says. I know what he means, but he catches me off guard right at first. I just stand there, the water swirling all around me.

"What do you mean 'back'?"

"Back!" he says again, only this time he means it. He's pointing down at the river.

"No way, Gabe. These are good eating. We're putting him right in the pan with the others. You're shit-house crazy if you think I'm throwing him back. Now go on!"

"Back, Danny!"

By this point, he's right in my face, getting loud. His bottom lip is sticking out and he's breathing funny. He's got that goddamn look on his face.

I get hopping mad. "All right," I say. "You think we oughtta put him back? We'll put him back. He's half-dead as it is, but by God we'll put him back!"

Now it's me that's yelling. I still got the fish in my hand. It kicks a little, pumps its gills in vain.

"Here," I say. "Shove him up your ass for all I care."

I cram the fish into his hands and turn my back on him. I make like I'm re-baiting my hook, but, really, I'm watching him from the corner of my eye. He holds the brook with both hands. Every time it jerks, this way or that, he closes his eyes and his whole body clenches up in a knot. I figure he'll squish the thing to a pulp before he ever gets it to the water.

Later that spring, our yard started filling up with flowers. No telling how they got there. But everywhere you looked, they were popping up through the grass, reaching for daylight. We had all kinds—crocus, daffodils, hyacinths. It made mowing a little

tricky, and every so often I'd clip one by accident. But it didn't really matter much. They were everywhere.

Sometimes in the afternoons, I'd sit out on the front deck with a book, maybe have the radio going, maybe neither. I might just sit there looking at the flowers, thinking a little to myself. There was always the traffic to watch too.

Cars and trucks would coast down the hill, picking up speed the whole way, then come flying past our yard once they made it to the bottom. I'd watch and wonder about the people inside. It was like a game to me. I'd only get six, maybe seven, seconds to look at them. Then they'd round the bend and be gone. Maybe it was more like working a puzzle, and you don't have the box it came in, so you're not quite sure what the thing's gonna turn out to be. You just keep working away at it and then, by and by, the picture comes into view.

I'd start with their names. "That's a Betty riding shotgun," I'd say to myself. "Definitely a Betty. The fella driving? Could be a James. Jim. Jimmy." I'd move on to what they did for a living next. Sometimes what they drove gave them away. A guy goes by in a pickup with a rack over the bed, you gotta figure he's a painter or maybe works construction. Maybe I'm just a weirdo, but I swear, gawking like that—making up stories—it was a nice way to kill a little time whenever the days got to running long.

So I'm out there on the deck one evening. The sun's sinking fast, shining through the branches of the redbud, shafts of light reaching out across the front yard. The flowers are nodding in all directions. Gabe's out by the edge of the highway, waving at cars. Sometimes they notice he's standing there. They toot the horn, or else lift a hand from the wheel for a quick wave back at him. Other times, they just drive by.

I'm watching Gabe and taking in the sounds. It seems quiet at first, but the more I listen, the more I start to hear. The breeze, for instance. It's barely stirring, but when I concentrate a little, I can hear it in the trees out back. A few bees buzz around from flower to flower. I think I hear the river in the distance, but lose it in the sound of passing cars. After a while, I give up on trying to hear the river and just watch Gabe some more.

I ease back in my lounge chair, and I'm pinned for the count. A sunbeam warms my bare feet, and I start feeling like maybe I could doze off, when something soft brushes my ear. It feels like a feather. I jerk a little and look around to see what it is. Next thing I know, it's hovering in front of my face. Just a couple of feet away. Close enough to touch. It's a butterfly. A tiny little thing with yellow wings no bigger than a thumbnail. It holds those wings stiff against the breeze. And, for a moment, it just hangs there, riding the wind like a little kite. Then it turns and sails across the yard. It zig zags through the broken light—out of the shadows and back again. It heads straight for Gabe, but he's got his back to it. He's busy looking up the road, trying to spot more cars.

When the butterfly makes it to the edge of the yard, it flies a circle around Gabe and catches his eye. Then it doubles back the way it came. Gabe's watching it now. He turns and starts to smile. The butterfly hangs in place, suspended between the two of us. Gabe points and I smile, so he knows I see it too. It turns one last time, and he reaches for it when it comes in close. But he misses, and it flies past him. He follows it a few feet and steps across the white line, out onto the pavement. They stand together, Gabe and the butterfly. The sun shines on them. My kid brother smiles. The light in his hair looks like a halo.