

The sun drooped above the horizon, limp and garrotted. Clouds hung in low wisps, casting long shadows across the vase of wilted sunflowers on the dinner table. Outside on the balcony the woman worked, clipping at the rows of pruned shrubbery. Her back was bent and her hands were deft and quick. She turned at the sound of the door.

“How was school?”

“Fine,” the boy responded from the door. He kicked off his shoes and slung his bag to the ground.

“Do you want something to eat?”

“I grabbed dinner with my friend already. Water?”

The woman straightened, brushing the dirt off her hands. She drank deeply and passed the glass back. Her gaze returned to the garden.

The boy looked at her. He studied her lined face. Then he stepped out of the shadow and into the garden. Around him was the smell of rain and fertilizer. He walked through the rows of topiary, stopping briefly to touch the poppies the woman was weeding.

“Careful,” she said.

“I got it, you know.”

“Got what?”

“I got it.” He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. The ink was fresh and smeared. The sun beamed across his face.

“That’s nice.”

“Nice?”

“Great,” the woman said. She rearranged the poppies.

“Did you not want me to?”

“Of course I did,” she said. “I’m glad.”

“But?” the boy asked.

“But?” the woman repeated.

The boy slumped into a chair. “Can you look at me?” His fingers tapped at the table.

She glanced up.

“I thought you’d be happy.”

“A letter isn’t enough to make me happy.”

“Is this what you think I want?”

“Isn’t it?”

“I wasn’t the one who...” the boy stopped. “Could you stop the gardening?”

The woman set her shears down. “Maybe you should have aimed higher.”

“Would that have made you happy?”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps.”

The woman picked at the dirt and the leaves.

“Could you stop that for one goddamn second?” the boy asked.

“This was his favorite place,” she sighed.

He scanned the photos lining the wall. “I wish he was here.”

“Me too.”

The woman paused. “Why didn’t you aim higher?”

“That’s what he did.” The boy gestured to the poppies. “How did that turn out?”

The woman set down her tools and took off her hat. She rose and the boy looked away. He fidgeted with the sunflowers, but they looked wilted no matter how he arranged them. The poppies cast a large shadow across his face.

The sun dipped lower as the woman slowly turned back to the poppies. The boy got to his feet.

“The sunflowers need water,” he said, walking away. He glanced back, but she was still there, pulling weeds.

He walked into his room and sat in the shadows.