



*Cloudless and warm and breezy.
Added montbretia (Lucifer) to bed below
southern porch. Planted a dozen bulbs with
compost and mulched with cedar. Hope
south-facing bed gives winter shelter.*

I received a box of flowers from my dead husband.

That's a stretch. They weren't flowers at all but a dozen montbretia bulbs that looked like hazelnuts with ponytails. Blooms wouldn't show up until July, I figured, if they showed up at all. The UPS man had hidden the box under the welcome mat in a clumsy attempt at security. It amused me until I remembered I had ordered nothing from Burpee's. Within a heartbeat, I knew the flowers—because that was what he had intended them to be—were from Scott.

I knew with great certainty the very day my husband had made the order. The autumn valley had looked like a grade school rendering with the crayons pressed so hard no white showed through. The golden ash trees lining our street shimmered below a cerulean sky. Pots of orange and rust and yellow chrysanthemums lined the

porches of Victorian houses painted the extravagant colors of memories. On any other day, the scene would have seemed gaudy. But not that day. The day was electric, charged by the crisp snap in the air. It seemed perfectly normal for the colors to glow from within.

I'd laughed at the Weather Service's blundered forecast of bitter temperatures and gloomy skies but then thought better of ignoring the warning altogether. I washed the breakfast dishes and went out to the garden to tuck in the flower beds for winter.

Scott found me cutting coneflowers. "Love you," he said and kissed my cheek before leaving with a friend to train for yet another masochistic bike race, probably the Thankless Turkey Tour. I didn't expect to see him before supper or the end of the USC-UCLA football game.

By midmorning, it was warm enough to discard my sweatshirt. I finished cutting back the perennials and worked at laying a heavy blanket of mulch to shelter the plants during the coming winter. Then I raced against the setting sun to add compost to the vegetable garden. As I turned over the last spade of soil, the sun dipped below the plateaus. The dry air of western Colorado relinquished the day's warmth without one bit of struggle.

I slipped a sweatshirt back over my head just as Scott pushed his bike through the side gate. His face was flushed from the last leg of his ride, the twenty miles from the Timeout Sports Grille to home. His gray hair stood in disorderly shafts from sweating under his helmet all day, and while I hoped he had combed his hair before entering the restaurant, I knew better. Scott raised his eyebrows and flashed a mischievous grin. I was in trouble.

"Aha," he said, pulling the Burpee Seeds and Plants catalog from the stack of mail under his arm. "I have intercepted that which tempts you beyond your power to resist. Now we can afford to eat this winter, and Ky can get new cleats, and I can finally get

a high-performing, distortion-reducing Fat Lady driver with a zirconium soleplate.”

He had a point about the flower thing. Dahlias, irises, peonies, roses—or any other flower. My hobby had turned into an obsession and then into a business, which thrilled Scott. He liked the prospect of reversing the flow of resources back into our bank account. For every special occasion, romantic or not, he presented me with books on small business management, and once he even packed my bags to send me to a cash flow seminar in Denver. I knew he really believed in me when I came home to find a truck in the driveway with *Perennially Yours, Mibby Garrett, Garden Designer* painted on the door and a box of matching pea-green business cards on the driver’s seat. The red bucket of daisies on the truck’s cab gave the vehicle its name, the Daisy Mobile.

And yet he still protested, however gently, each new flower addition that encroached his lawn. It was all a part of our marriage dance, the one that questioned and valued our differences. He claimed to be protecting the dog’s right to his personal space. In response, I declared a patch of lawn the “poop deck,” no flowers allowed. It seemed like the fair thing to do.

Usually I took Scott’s ribbing about my obsession for what it was, a not-too-serious-but-could-you-please-show-some-restraint plea for moderation. But that day, standing in the garden with scratches up and down my arms and cedar mulch embedded in my knees, I didn’t appreciate his exaggeration at all.

I jabbed the shovel blade into the ground and sighed. Scott stepped behind me, probably afraid I’d whack him with the shovel, and wrapped his arms around my waist. I pressed the shovel in deeper, tightening my stomach muscles against the warmth of his arms.

“Mibby, I didn’t mean it.” His breath filled my ear and poured onto my cheek. He held out the catalog. “You can buy a dozen of

everything in here if you want. I'm sorry."

Of course, it was clear to me later that I was the one who should have apologized. But I didn't.

"You should be sorry," I said, walking out of his embrace and into the house. It was time to start dinner.

After I'd coaxed a simmer from the spaghetti sauce, I found Scott looking through the catalog on the porch. The light from the kitchen window boxed him in a yellow glow. Showered and combed, he looked more like the steadfast banker I'd married. He made room for me on the wicker loveseat and gave me a cautious smile.

"See anything you like?" I asked, crossing my arms and leaning against the railing of the porch.

He held up a picture of fiery red blossoms arching along a stem. "These look like montbretia, but they're calling them *Cro*—"

"*Crocoshmia*," I said, trying to sound indifferent. "Montbretia is its common name."

"Want some?"

"Maybe."

I left the porch to take the last bag of clippings to the compost pile. Scott walked with me.

"Montbretia prefers a milder climate," I said.

"So do you, but look how well you're doing."

"You'd probably be wasting your money."

Since that day I've spent many hollow hours trying to remember why I was so rough on him. Surely something else, something hurtful and consequential, had triggered my irritation and justified its endurance. Had I resented Scott for leaving me with all the gardening chores? Had he begged out of attending a jamboree fundraising meeting and asked me to go in his place? Had he eaten the last pecan sandy and put the empty bag back in the pantry? Those were the worst things I could think of Scott doing, and even for

me, they were trite. What clung most ardently to my memory was regret. I remembered wanting to tell him how hot he looked in his snug bicycle shorts. But I didn't.

Scott was killed the next day, hit by a truck whose driver didn't see him pedal into the intersection on his way to work. I'd squandered the last hours of our lives together nurturing my annoyance with coarse grit sandpaper and all the while thinking I had the luxury of time to smooth the agitation with an indulgent polishing of steel wool.

Getting flowers from my dead husband was what I classified as a "whammy o' grief." After Scott's accident I worked very hard to avoid them. I stayed away from people, places, and things that could collapse the fragile composure I'd constructed. It wasn't easy.

Grief is an unfamiliar room on a moonless night. You move slowly, cautiously. Your arms reach out, swaying from side to side to find the oak dresser. Your feet slide along the carpet, feeling for the leg of a chair or a chest of blankets. The light switch is never where you remember. Someone has moved the rocker.

Whammy.

All of my planning and sidestepping hadn't prepared me for flowers from Scott. *Whammy.*

I took the box of montbretia into the basement, where I could wail without distracting passing motorists. I lay there, face down in a pile of laundry, until my sobs mellowed into sighs and my sinuses felt like they had been packed with a king-sized comforter. I realized it was almost time for my son, Ky, to come home from school, so I blew my nose and moved to the back porch, where sun and air would dry me out. While waiting for Ky, I fell asleep.



Patti Hill

“Mom?”

I popped up like a mom-in-the-box ready to deliver the after-school litany.

“How was school? Do you have any homework? What do I have to sign?”

Ky reached out to touch my cheek; his blue-gray eyes dancing with mischief. “Mom, you look like a waffle.”

I rubbed my cheek. Sure enough, my nap in the wicker chair had left me marked. Embossed or not, I couldn’t let him distract me from the one bit of motherly behavior I still performed with proficiency.

“Kyle,” I said, slowly enunciating his given name, “what do you have for homework?”

He headed for the back door and the refrigerator. “Not much. I’ll do it after I clear the poop deck and mow the lawn.” He stopped halfway through the door. “Well, I’ll probably have to do it after practice. But I don’t have much.”

The screen door slammed. I heard the quick opening and closing of the refrigerator. There was nothing inside to satisfy a thirteen-year-old’s growing body—only blue Kool-Aid, milk, and a tub of margarine. My stomach turned in shame. Ky bounded from the house carrying half a package of saltines and headed for the tool shed. The next day I’d go to the grocery store, I told myself, ready or not.



Louise Giovanelli came through the back gate just as I was watering the montbretia. She carried a napkin-covered basket that matched her crisply pressed navy capri pants and sailor-collared shirt.

“Mibby,” she called, pulling out each vowel like taffy, “it’s lemon scone day!”

Louise's bed-and-breakfast, the Garden House, was across the alley from my house. On Wednesdays, she baked lemon scones saturated with sweet cream butter. If her guests were the least bit health conscious, there were leftovers for her less discriminating neighbors—namely me.

Louise humphed herself onto the bottom stair of the porch, cradling the basket on her lap. Before she had time to gather a thought, Blink rested his chin on her knee and twitched his nose at the basket. Louise moved one stair higher. Blink sat on his haunches and made Louise the object of his devotion. She rose another step.

"Sugar baby, for heaven's sake, what are you planting now?" she asked in the velvet timbre of her Louisiana drawl.

"I'm planting Lucifer," I said, referring to the variety name of the montbretia. I knew Louise would love the idea of putting the devil in a hole. I didn't dare tell her the bulbs had come from Scott. I was having enough trouble breathing around the emotion in my throat. I turned away from the narrowing of her deep blue eyes, knowing she had noticed the puffs of flesh under my eyes but wouldn't ask. That was why I loved Louise.

"Oh, really?" she said, twisting her blond pageboy off her neck. "Ready for a break? I could use a cold drink."

Since Scott's death, Louise had made it her job to call on me at least once a day. A well-heeled debutante thirty-something years past, she always thought up a bona fide reason for coming. Lemon scones were one of her best, but the raspberry dream muffins from her Monday menu also earned her an enthusiastic welcome. Her imagination was challenged on days her guests ate to the last crumb. Then she came with questions like, "Mibby, how do you get the li'l ol' bugs out of the window on your stove?" That one had kept us occupied for almost two hours as we read the owner's manual and tried to remove parts of the stove. We finally agreed to let

the bugs mummify where they'd fallen.

Louise came to make sure my boat was still tied to the dock, that the knot hadn't loosened and set me adrift. She tightened the knot with love, southern style—indulgent and usually fattening.

Only after Louise and I had downed our drinks and were chewing on ice cubes did Blink give up his post and trot down the garden path to the poop deck.

Ky came out of the house dressed for baseball practice. "Blink, I just cleaned that!"

Grass stains colored the knees of his uniform, and a wide stripe of red clay smudged the left hip. I tried to remember the last time I'd done the laundry. I couldn't. Six months after Scott's death, I was still surprised by the normal events of an ordered life, like Ky going off to baseball practice or Louise measuring out the ingredients for her scones.

How can such ordinary things keep going on when I've been cemented in place for so long?

Louise handed Ky a scone. "Have you had dinner, hon?"

"I'm eating at Salvador's house." He turned to me. "Mom, Salvador's dad will drive us to practice and bring us home."

When he leaned close to kiss me good-bye, I made a mental note to do the laundry.

"Mibby?" Louise said after Ky left, watching the ice swirl in the bottom of her glass. "Are you fixin' to let your hair grow?"

I swept loose strands of hair out of my eyes and refastened them with a butterfly clip. "I haven't decided."

The line of questioning made me nervous. Other seemingly innocent inquiries about my hair had led to a frenetic perm and a misadventure with a sun-streaking kit, all at the hands of Louise.

"Some wispy bangs would soften your forehead. Do you have some scissors handy?"

I promised her I'd think about it. Before she walked back across

the alley, Louise gathered my hands and pressed them to her heart. Our foreheads touched as she prayed, "Sweet Jesus, shelter this precious child with your everlasting arms. Amen."

She left when she saw I wouldn't drift away.



After a shower, I slipped into one of Scott's T-shirts I'd scavenged from his laundry basket after his funeral. I breathed deeply as I pulled it over my head, hoping to evoke his presence with a few drops of dried sweat and some sloughed skin cells. But sleeping in the shirt for six months had diminished its magic.

Blink and I shared lemon scones in front of the television in my bedroom. I chased mine with the last of the blue Kool-Aid and added the empty glass to the growing collection on my nightstand.

Six o'clock. The hour of coming home. I upped the volume on the television to mask the sound of my neighbors slamming their car doors as they arrived home from work. But even over the din of soft drink commercials, the sound of closing doors coughed for my attention. Unwittingly, my heart pounded a welcoming beat to each coming-home noise they sounded.

Opie was explaining to Andy Griffith his earnest need for a huntin' dawg when Ky slammed the front door and clicked the deadbolt into place. The stairs creaked loudly as he bounded up. He dropped his duffel bag and cleats in front of my grandmother's pink damask chair. Before I could protest, he raised his hands in surrender.

"I know! Don't sit down until you take a shower."

"And put those clothes in the washing machine."

He came from the shower to the doorway of my room with his sandy hair slicked back. I wanted to invite him in; I wanted to hold him tightly in my arms and smell that warm place behind his ear.

If he took one step toward me . . .

“I’m going to do my homework now,” he said, leaving for his room with the last scone and a glass of water.

After the late local news, I checked on Ky. Blink raised his head from Ky’s belly when I moved closer to listen for breathing. So still. His right arm was draped over his forehead with his palm open to the ceiling like he was shielding his eyes from the sun. I touched his palm. Although his fingers closed against the tickle, he didn’t wake. Alive. He slept on top of the covers, his young boy body hot from forging the man body within.

I moved his book bag from the foot of his bed to the middle of the doorway where he wouldn’t miss it. By loading his bag at night, Ky gained two minutes of sleep each morning, something his growing body coveted more than food. It took him twenty-three minutes from alarm to out the door. No more, no less. In that time he fixed his own breakfast of instant oatmeal and juice. My only morning job was to send him off with a prayer for protection and a quick kiss.

I studied the gallery of Ky’s dragon art spotlighted by the hallway light. His latest dragon creature lay on his desk waiting to be added to the wall. It dripped blood from the corner of its mouth and held a sinewy carcass in bloodstained claws. Those were new details. I promised myself I’d talk to him about the gore.

Blink followed me into my bedroom and waited patiently while I spread the sheet on my side of the bed. After I crawled into Scott’s place, the dog hopped up and nestled against my back. Soon his breathing beat out a rhythm deep and even. Blink and David Letterman lulled me into a shallow sleep.