

cemetery flowers

by sam deleo

He scanned all the lonely gravesites and wondered where the living were, not the dead. It was a Sunday morning bathed in the pink and blue residues of dawn, unbunching itself in warm waves that gradually unlatched drops of dew from blades of Kentucky bluegrass. It seemed a perfect place to be, and yet he was the only visitor here.

The cemetery was set on the flat top of a hill overlooking town. It had reached capacity some years ago and now there was a much larger cemetery on the western edge of town. Only those who had reserved plots next to relatives were buried here now. But even though the reduced grounds crew now consisted of one man and his teenage son, they kept the grass short and seeded, the lines of oak trees pruned, the edging of the dirt road neatly trimmed back. It was beyond the cemetery boundaries that the years showed. On one side of the mesa where there used to be a pond, now a marsh, cattails and tall grass leaned over the trimmed grounds, and the tufted seeds from a cottonwood tree floated in the air or became trapped in the grassblades. Everywhere else a snarl of foliage grew unchecked and crowded the boundaries. Birches that had been the size of post poles 20 years ago now shadowed some corners of plots, and wild lilac and jagged-leafed sumac, with its blood red flower cones, filled in any open spots or service paths that used to crease the hillside. The blacktop segment of road ended a third of the way up the hillside, where workers had never finished paving, and the original dirt road led the rest of the way up.

He'd brought mostly chrysanthemums with him today. As always, he'd come here straight from the first church service of the morning, which began still on the dark side of dawn. He had never been a great sleeper. He rose before the sun came up most days, especially after his son moved out and he knew he wouldn't be rousing anyone in the house from their sleep. His wife and he had split after his son's graduation from college and she had remarried years later in another small western Pennsylvanian town nearby that he rarely had occasion to pass through. His son had a family of his own and it was with them that he spent most of his time, though not always with pleasure.

To him, all of the family's shortcomings were linked in some way to his brother's death. When someone dies at an expected age from an expected cause, that was one thing, he reasoned. But when a man is struck down in his youth, especially a great man like his brother, you spend months and even years mourning him, and after that you tend to his memory, because that is what a family does. Yet even on his brother's birthday or the anniversary of his death, he would usually be the only visitor to the grave. Beyond the first year or so after his death, none of the relatives came to the special masses he had said for his brother by the pastor of the Catholic church where they were parishoners. He would whisper along with the novenas to himself in an empty pew.

Rather than bringing the family together as he had hoped, his brother's death seemed to create greater space between them, like a transgressed taboo that spreads silence across a room at the mere accidental mentioning of it. He had not known what to do as the eldest of the family but to try to lead by example, and so his visits to garden the plot began naturally, since he'd always kept a garden, and grew to be routine when his stubbornness became a dedicated protest against how little the family responded. Through the decades his brother became relevant to him almost solely on a personal level, as if their fraternal bond existed outside the family context.

Sometimes he would bring cheese and fruit with him, especially when it was hot, and have lunch under the shade of a tree, then drift off to sleep for an hour or two. He wore the same pants, patched and smudged at the knees from kneeling in the grass

and digging or pruning; he never used gloves, preferring to feel with his creased hands the loose potting soil and the smooth front or rough granite edges of the headstone where his brother was buried.

He had an aunt and uncle buried here, as well, along with their only son, but he had not been especially close to them because they were from Ohio and had not moved here until the latter part of their lives. He planted annuals and perennially blooming flowers at their sites, cleaned and maintained the plots, but spent much more time gardening his brother's grave.

Today, however, he had devoted a good 10 minutes walking around the dewy grounds looking for the gravesites of his aunt and uncle — at least, he had a vague feeling that was what he was looking for. Their names and the faces that had gone with them suddenly had become blanks in his mind. When he finally recognized the plots, with the assistance of his signature tulips around his cousin's headstone, he was amazed to discover he had wasted time looking on the opposite side of the cemetery. It was happening more and more to him each passing month. Last week after mass he found himself driving down streets leading away from the cemetery and out of town, forced to exit onto the interstate and turn around. His sense of things wasn't what it used to be and he knew it, whether he could find the courage to face it squarely or not. He was old, he told himself; he didn't feel old, he answered, and it went back and forth like this.

He was the second youngest of four children — two boys and two girls — his brother having been the oldest and three years his senior. When they were young, he and his brother worked in their father's pepper garden and as hired pickers for a neighboring farm. The girls sometimes worked the farm, too, but most often worked around the house, their father being more protective of them. Both his father and mother had died years ago and were buried in the Ohio town where they were born.

He had rarely traveled beyond the surrounding western Pennsylvanian counties except to visit his brother in New York once and to go on a fishing trip to Florida a few years after his divorce; he'd never felt a real hunger to travel. He learned about his brother's travels to locations for different films in their letters and felt happy for him, but unenvious.

Their father had always made sure they worked — the garden or the farm, they had to work. In the garden, they picked the peppers and tomatoes and then retreated to the cool of the cement-floored garage, careful not to disturb their father, who was usually sleeping on a folding cot during the warmth of summer days. They would take their bushels to the side room and begin knifing the spongy cores from the bell peppers and slicing the hot peppers into thin strips. Later, their father would wake up, cook them and begin canning them in a tomato sauce. Sometimes they'd accompany him to the small groceries he sold the peppers to and help shelve them.

The work on the farm was more difficult. They would start at seven in the morning and work with few breaks until seven at night, when their hands would be raw from picking berry plants. They were paid a dime a pint for berries and a quarter per bushel for tomatoes, sometimes also picking corn and beans if the crops were robust. He and his brother would have contests — most pints, biggest tomato, grand total wagers — anything to make the time pass. They grew enthusiastic over the slightest sign of rain and would clap their hands and lift their arms in victory from their beds on the mornings when they would wake to a downpour and didn't have to make the long walk to the farm.

During a particularly rainy stretch, one morning he and his brother stuffed extra pillows under their blankets and snuck off to a pool hall next to the town's filling station. Their father was waiting with the belt when they got back and the rained-upon clamminess of their skin made the stings sharper than usual.

But left in their room, their pride only half-hurt because the pool games had been so much fun, they pressed their faces to the pillows and buried their laughter. They knew harshness was not unnatural, not bound solely within their father's taut torso, but to be endured in even unexpected moments. This is what made his brother's ascent even brighter for him, that it had begun in darkness. And yet there was always that fear of an unforeseen burden being too great. How did one know, how could one prepare?

He began digging out a bed around the headstones of his aunt and uncle and filling it with his own mix of topsoil, styrofoam pellets and mild fertilizer. Then he sprinkled flossflower seeds into the ground and surrounded them with the mix. He rolled pieces of sod back around the edges to make the plot look almost as smooth as when he started.

It was June and the damp spring was beginning to evaporate into summer. Every spring he would enrich the soil with peat moss, manure and compost. Then he would trim and deadhead the spring bulb plants that had bloomed. He was partial to purple hues the last few years because of the reverence and religious aspects he felt the color represented. This spring, May-flowering tulips, with their purplish deep maroon, offset his pink Lily-flowering tulips. The day before Easter he had brought in Daylilies and white Irises for brightness, using transplants in a rush instead of growing them from seed as he usually did, which took sometimes two years before a bloom. He would wait patiently for a cloudy day to transplant so as not to shock the roots, even if their bloom was as brief as Daylilies. The rest of the spring usually meant seeding more annuals and trimming back the long and staggered string of perennials.

He had lived his whole life in the area, retiring 11 years ago from an electrical plant in the valley outside of town. He'd worked with some of the men at the plant for 25 years yet had not kept in touch with most of them, except for one co-worker he went fishing with regularly until the man became ill and moved to Buffalo to live with his son. His barrel chest had served him well during the years he labored in the machinist shop. In his late 50's, he switched to supervisory work as a foreman. Though his body was tired, the gardening kept it familiar with work. Like his hands and body, his face was coarsed with physical labor and tawny from being in the sun. His small eyes were set deep in crowded sockets but gave light to an expression much younger than his years, and the weight of his full lips seemed to curb the swift flow of words. He was aware of how many more words he might have spoke to his brother or wife, but was never completely sure of what they might be. Sometimes he would think he would know, but then he would feel the words change, as if they always remained one step ahead of him, yet in the past, outside the realm of his possibility on either account.

The first and only in the family to go to college, his brother never moved back after graduation. His brother's life was the stuff of storybooks until the accident: He was well-liked throughout school without trying to be, got better-than-average grades and was a good athlete, especially at baseball, which gained him his scholarship. In college, he began seeing a theater major who later became his wife, and it was she who introduced him to acting and convinced him he had a talent for it.

He worked as the ad pitch man for an appliance manufacturer in New York until a casting director hired him for a small part in a movie and they flew him to L.A., his first film shoot. He got increasingly larger parts in other productions, mostly talking heads films, and made enough money to buy two homes for he and his wife, one in New York and one in Los Angeles. In his hometown, they named a side street after him. Even after long after his brother's death, he never tired of driving to the street to show friends and family.

Shortly before his death, his brother made a surprise career shift and opened a playhouse in Toronto. The family never saw him again after he moved there because he was immersed in getting the theater up and running. It was after leaving the playhouse in a snowstorm from a meeting with a theater company and some benefactors that a freight truck jackknifed on the freeway and rolled over his car. Everyone around him felt strangely cheated that he accomplished so much in 34 years yet might have done so much more. While they all grew old, he sustained the same youth, the same magic, his brother often laughed. He would often comment, during quiet family intervals, that it was through his brother that they were all joined to a life wider than those they lived. "Frankie has done all of you proud," he'd say, "all of our names proud."

The noon-hour pulse of the sun resonated in the whirs of the crickets. The clouds he'd hoped to shade his plantings crept from the horizons and then were chased back like ghosts by the daylight to the corners where they hovered, waiting for a hole in the sky to spill across it. He was prepping the soil by weeding it with a hand shovel, using his still strong hands to scoop out smooth cones of earth so they could be replaced with the least amount of shock to the grass roots after the weeds were extracted, when he suddenly began thinking of his brother's place in New York and his visit there decades ago.

He could swear their place was in Manhattan, but it may have been Queens, as he recalled Queens was known to be home to a lot of entertainers and musicians at the time. Was he married already by then? He saw his brother in his stylish dark suit with fedora and cigarette walking toward a street corner alone. He and his sister-in-law were waiting for him at a Greek restaurant. He strode so confidently. But his brother didn't smoke, he suddenly recalled.

He realized, discouragingly, he was only thinking of a scene from one of the movies. He stared off in the distance toward the bramble at the cemetery's edge, suddenly feeling extremely restless and exhausted at the same moment. He decided to nap. There were fall-blooming bulbs to plant in the afternoon, as well as the chrysanthemums, and it would be hot and taxing.

He took his hat off, a white shock of hair matted against his bronzed forehead, and walked to the shade of one of the birch trees to eat chunks of bread and cheese he'd cut up in the morning. He usually only brought things he could eat with his fingers, and he always seemed to notice a vestige of the soil from his hands in the food, almost a smoked flavor. But today he was hardly able to taste the difference between the cheese and the bread as he ate.

He dreamed of he and his brother picking peppers in their father's garden. They must have been about eight and 11 years old, both wearing dungarees and white t-shirts. But he never saw his brother's face in the dream, only glimpses of his back as they moved through the rows. When he saw his own face he woke up. The sun was now veiled in hazy sheets of clouds, a mid-afternoon calm unraveling past the finish of a humid breeze. He shook off the disquietude of the dream by feeding a few oily spar-

rows the last of his bread. Almost instantly, many more of the birds who had not kept a careful enough watch of him today dove in to steal what they could from the others.

Once, 10 years ago or more, he had been offered a job at the parish. It involved volunteer work for various benefits, but they proposed to pay him for any of the handyman jobs he did around the church grounds. He felt somewhat foolish refusing, since the only excuse he could offer was the gardening, but it was what he had always done. He considered it a privilege. "Thanks, but I have my family obligations," he'd told the maintenance director of the church when he phoned.

He watered his lilies and greased their petals and leaves, the scarlet red Latoyas and Stargazers, with their lighter shade of red and lucent white bands. In the summers, he dusted his plants, wiping the chalky mildew from leaves and misting them with a mixture of water and mayonnaise. Summers were easiest, his bones felt light in the heat.

He saved much of the more physical work at the cemetery for the cooler fall seasons, digging up and amending the soil with compost and sand that he would wheelbarrow in, dividing the perennials, which required the patience to gently wash and untangle the roots of every plant, then group them in divisions large enough to prosper and small enough to increase the garden. This kind of work fatigued and stiffened his lower back muscles and he would often skip a day or two to rest.

The clouds had moved back again but it was difficult to say if gray cotton of their bottom halves held moisture. Having eaten and feeling rested, he planned to bring out more plants from the back of his station wagon. In between the decision and the action, after the bread was all gone and he had bent down to pick up his wrappers, another space naked of thought was exposed in his mind and seemed to stretch beyond his ability to contain it, so that at each passing moment he could feel it spread a little further from his circle of comprehension.

When he heard the sound of the horn honk and felt himself instinctively flinch, the truck kept going along his path, and he looked up to see the landscaper and his son waving with the backs of their hands and smiling in their side and rear view mirrors. They were going home for lunch. He looked around and found that, in his absent-mindedness, he was now at the top of the road heading back to town, almost a quarter-mile from the station wagon.

He was winded and sweating by the time he made it back to the car, the sun having re-emerged in a humid burst, and he doused his head with some drinking water to rouse his senses. He stared at the pom-pom heads of the chrysanthemum transplants in the back of his station wagon. The pink seemed to spill outside the space of the petals, incandescent, as if the heat had liquefied some of the pigment. He sat on the tailgate for a long time, watching the wind ruffle the blackish green thicket surrounding him, surrendering to its opacity, feeling his thoughts slow, then settle, until the sun receded again.

The quiz that slowed his tentative steps as he carried the chrysanthemums, transplants for a border around the foot of his brother's plot, was that his brother was no more. Maybe for the first time in his life he knew this matter of factly, without metaphor, but in his state of mind he lacked the awareness to take full note of what that absence meant.

He walked in gentle semi-circle paths for a long time but never found his brother's grave. He would have continued

wandering if his exhaustion had not set him to rest on his knees. In increasingly regular intervals, the wind gathered as whispers in the distant bramble and then bunched in soft howls as it passed through the grounds. Then was silent again. Instinctively, he began pulling the smaller buds from the plants, leaving the larger to flourish. He pulled some tools and wooden stakes from his bag and dug a line of holes about six inches apart. The loamy mix of his soil soothed his fingers as he spread it out and left pocket holes for the transplants.

With the clouds heavy and smoke-edged, the night threatening an early end to afternoon, he was blindly intent on unbundling the roots of the chrysanthemums flowers, which now seemed aflame against the ash sky. He buried the roots and tied the stems to the stakes, taking no notice of the strange grave he knelt before or any other part of the now unfamiliar grounds, which, for so many years, he had known as he and his brother's cemetery.