

## Mary's Flowers – Abigail, Year 6, NSW

Tirelessly, I stormed through the daffodils and daisies on my chubby, little legs like a stampede of wild animals. Brother Marcus ordered me, as captain of the pirate ship, to cease trampling on his daisies. I ordered him, as second in command, to quit stomping on my daffodils. Captain Brother and I sailed our pirate ship through the Pacific Ocean of Daisies and Daffodils. Together we pillaged Mama's veranda, raided The Great Washing Basket of Papa, and taunted the Viking Birds, which chanted their battle song from their village. Much to my disappointment, Captain Brother was also a teenage boy who had to get to school. I hung onto his wooden pirate leg as he dragged me on his foot across the room and fell onto our couch letting out a defeated pirate cry.

"Come on, breakfast time," Mama sighed as she walked past. Immediately I sprang off Brother Marcus like a spring bunny to beat him to the kitchen.

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Mama inserted the keys into the old ramshackle building. I clung stiffly to her back like a young koala, while Papa waved from the door of the bus. The driver pulled the lever to activate the doors and drove off to Papa's job as a firefighter. A nuclear incident had commenced at the number four nuclear power plant in Pripyat. Since then, a ten kilometre evacuation had been ordered for safety by the Soviet Union. When Papa reached his destination, he and Brother Marcus would bravely fight the radioactive fire alongside the other honourable men.

Mama and I dragged in our dusty green bags, and luggage, and inspected our new home. The floor creaked beneath my feet. This bathroom didn't have patterned tiles, it could be reshaped, but it wasn't quite the same. The birds didn't chant outside or spy on us from their village in the trees. Before we had departed, I had watched over the colourful flowers in the garden. Brother Marcus had urged me to take one with me, so I had a true part of home. A daffodil of bright yellow had caught my eye.

"A fine choice, Mary," my brother had commented, "The daffodil symbolises rebirth and renewal."

In the living room the three o'clock kids program was travelling to an end. Mama sat on the cat-scarred couch patiently waiting for the news, as I tested new stockings, ribbons, and puffy dresses. When I had finished sorting my outfits into colours, I strutted down the hallway in my remaining clothes. Mama looked up from a book and cheered, making a pretend camera with her hands and insisting I strike more poses.

Just as I came to sit beside my mother an intermission ad takes over before the next program takes place.

"Bad luck, Marilyn," Mama glanced over sympathetically and I shot her an icy glare.

Exciting music played in the introduction before a man wearing a formal suit and tie lifts a microphone to his beard and begins reciting his report. A vase of daisies attracted my gaze from the reporter like mosquitoes and an electrified light. They had little berry-coloured centres and gold stems drenched in turquoise water. Simone, our Siamese cat stood on two legs to batter at an old dangly strip of string which had been uprooted from the patchwork. Simone was scrawny with long legs, she leapt from her human pose onto the couch leg before shoving her brown muzzle into my ribs.

Beside me, Mama straightened and lifted a delicate gloved hand to her mouth.

Never in my short life had horrors flashed before my eyes like this. The Chernobyl reactor had a rectangle cut out of its roof and walls revealing an ash covered floor the colour of charcoal. Firefighters were desperately smothering the fire from helicopters with clay, concrete, liquid nitrogen, dirt, and sand. I couldn't make out Brother Marcus or Papa, so I supposed they'd be on the ground blocking the fire's path. The fire wasn't just on the reactor, it covered the entire street. Flames of orange mingled with distorted black smoke, Pripjat had been lost in a sea of flame and radiation like Atlantis. A strangled hiss added to the scene, as Simone clawed her way out of my tightening grip.

Four days of mine wasted by the telephone, Mama slept beside the telephone, we both gave calls and waited for calls. We were reassured multiple times of the safety of Brother and Papa, but Mama wasn't satisfied until Papa answered. Fresh relief thawed her stiffness as Papa's voice sounded, happiness spread through my chest but dark feelings clouded my gut. Grief was thick in Papa's throat, and he was sobbing.

Brother Marcus was dead.

"Dead and gone!" Mama raved.

A river of warm tears streamed down my face. My heart was shredded like cheese on a grater. The reality of Brother's death didn't dawn on us, if I blocked it out it could never be real. I cried on, there was something so sour about grief, such torture should never be experienced. Often I would smile through my sorrow, as an imaginary plan to save Brother from his fate would form in my mind, before gravity pulled me to sense, and I recognised there was nothing to be done.

The knocking of the door made its way through me and Mama's misery. I wiped my puffy eyes and brushed my hair behind my ears before walking on wobbly legs to answer the knock. Our local postman was still in view as I reached the door, on the porch was a large envelope written in cursive. With raspy vocals I called to Mama, when she didn't reply I ran my fingers through the tucked in paper, tearing my way into its contents.

Inside was no letter, but two beautiful squashed flowers, a daffodil and a daisy, a sister and a brother, Marcus and me.