

The Banana Trees Stand Vigil in Your Resting Place

12.12.21



Sylvia Trotter Ewens

'Forgive and forget' was her mantra in her final days coming to terms with her experiences, knowing there was no resolve to be found in anyone but within herself. What do you do when a hurt clings, scratching with renewed intent at your consciousness when there is no distraction? What do you do when the perpetrator is no longer there or is not in a state themselves to provide the recompense needed for the hurt? There are just things that will never be, we must only listen.

You didn't say much about your childhood traumas until now. Stories and plans flowed out of you until you couldn't articulate them anymore. You never let go of things. What was in your mind as you stared blankly back at me? You spoke in broken words and pauses, only to repeat again from the beginning. Your words were lost, accusing and meaningless. The words seemed to mean a lot to you, but at times, I had to stop listening. The switch would turn on and off again. You said I changed, but you changed too.

I still love you.

Here the garden is rich, fruits full and flowers overflowing. They beam at us, but the grey and wilted beyond accuses us. The favored keeps drawing our attention away from them. It's easier to care for them. They were saved from the poison that poured through us. They were the hardiest and it was simply easier to look after them. However, every now and then, we look back at these withered growths and think, let's tend one leaf at a time. I will color them in and you will direct me again.

Her passing made me finally understand the ritualistic practice of my mother and her incessant need to collect candles. Many years had passed, but the freshness of her father's death remained. Some days she'd rise from a dream of seeing him and be elated, others she'd be in a moment of devastation. Every so often in these quiet, almost secretive moments, I'd find a candle lit somewhere in the house. I understood, and yet didn't. I understood the gesture, but I did not understand the energy in those flames; the invitation, the acknowledgment, the call and the memory. Now I know.

I have found myself collecting candles whenever one is left behind. I have found my drawer brimming with more than I would ever need. It was then that I realized her practice became mine and her journey of grief had become my own.

The flowers are glaring at you accusingly. They shift, creak and reach for me. They try to block you from my view. They connive for me to forget you. There are rooms in this garden being built without my instruction. Do they want to erase you?

I cling to remember.

I cling to remember how you looked alive. I watch my two videos of you and hungrily take in every word. I remember the lines by heart now, every eye crinkle, smile and mutter, but sometimes I feel like I'm forgetting what it was like when you were alive.

My mind rebels against me. Why won't it listen to me? I bang these walls repeatedly yelling for what is outside to stop rummaging and reordering our carefully laid out garden. Your work will not be made into weeds for plucking or left to wilt in the crevices we forgot about. When I am let out, I search for you in these weeds. If I must, I will nurture what has already become weeds. Luckily weeds are hardy, and I hear dandelions and clovers are edible all the same.

I sometimes share my worries for the future, for my retirement and care. Aging is not kind. Those who are a lot older than me scoff at my concern. They tell me I am so young and that there is no need to worry about something that won't reach me yet, but I will never take my youth for granted again.

Have you seen death?

Those last moments were so quiet, almost peaceful.
The minutes passed slower and the one in agony was me.

Do you understand what grief is?

She is gone and so are all our imagined futures with it.
The futures that were supposed to be, but never meant
to be. Whatever future I imagined sharing with her as an
assumed right, as a given, became an impossibility.

I will never have many of those things.

I forgot where I heard it— if it was imagined or said...
Maybe she said it.

Everything is ever borrowed and to my addition, it can be taken
away.

I braided a piece of your hair and took it with me. The hair I braided, combed and dyed many times as we shared stories. It's the very same hair I washed clean that very morning and dressed in those hair clips that bind the two ends together.

What is in this braid for me?

I grieve with you.

I have been carried by three mothers: the one who birthed me, the one who cradled me for the year before flying me to Canada and finally, the one who raised me into the person I am, who loved me and was loved ever so dearly back. I am the living story of three women, I carry them now in the steps that bring me continuously forward, even when I want to turn back.

Outsiders called me a hero for sticking by her, but I was no hero.

The term disturbed me, and I had yet to put it into words as to why. I could not fathom not being there to take care of her when it was in my ability to do so. I did it because I had to in every sense of the word besides being forced to. I had to because I *needed* to.

She was my mother.

She was my mother, and now I am hers.

You will freeze out there.

You need to eat more.

I will build a campfire to warm you among that snow.

I will eat for you. We will eat together at this table in the late afternoon sun and what I eat will make you full again.

It's all right, accidents happen.

You have to eat what you are given.

*This steady stream will keep you clean, should you need it.
The sun I point towards you will keep the chill away.*

This plate will change and provide anything you want, you must only think it.

Don't chew on ice, you will damage your teeth.

You need to sleep.

*You're too stubborn to accept anything else I can give you.
Unless it's candy.*

This sheltered bed will give you the fondest dreams where no pain will find you.

Be nice.

Don't wander where I can't find you, where I can't see you.

Or they might not come back.

This compass will bring you back to me no matter how far you find yourself and my mirror will show me you are ok.

I know you feel cold.

I'll leave blankets in this place to wrap you in warmth.

You color in those butterflies with quiet glee. You are so entranced by them, and they are given colored life with each completed wing. They will fly in our garden, and you are their artist.

I am glad I gave you them.

We were artists together for a short while.

A part of me stays with you in this garden. I will visit you and one day, when it is time, I will stay there with you.

It is growing cold.

Winter freezes frostbites over your branches, but I hold on.

That hand is only warmer from my own.

I have nothing left to give.

I am searching for you in our garden.

A chair is laid out for you.

I placed down a pillow wrapped in that red.

The hibiscuses are arranged for you.

Your butterflies are settling on the petals and on me.

I have a canvas primed and ready for you.

Let us create together so I may have you with me and we can breathe more life into our garden together.

I don't know what to do, yet the doctors and social workers come to me from all directions. I want to take care of you, and they want to take you. I will not let them. I set in stone standing before you. Will they see my cracks? I hide inside this imposing figure I made for you. I will not let them take you. You were my mother and now I am yours. I know the lines, the demands. I am 30, 40, 50, 60, I am all ages, but not my own. They must not see how rushed I was made. They search for vulnerabilities that can cause me to falter or crumble. They try to look around me, to move past me, but I will take you in here with me. They pity me and I do want comfort, but I will stand steady, steady as you need me to be.

Are you here with me?

Loving, hurt, impatient, stubborn, excited, laughing, hugging, living -- is all gathered up into what I do not recognize.

The trees are shifting, their barks are creaking in our garden. I want to put you near them. Will you support them and they you? Ashes are fertile to the land. I wrap you to keep you warm. I plant you below and I press my ear to the soil and close my eyes to listen. I am waiting for your first arms to spread, but I hear nothing. I see nothing grow yet. I will come back to listen to your roots grow. My hearing and seeing are impatient. I want you back. Maybe in a few years' time you will grow, and I will be here to nurture you to be healthy this time.

1 week ago, 1 month ago, 2 months ago— you were alive.

I count them less frequently now. I searched for you in our garden, but you are not here today. The plants are growing wild and crowded. They shove, they writhe, they warp and reach. They are reaching for me and glare at me in exasperation when I think of you, but it was you I gave for. Spontaneously, I give them water and then I retreat. Your gaze enlivened me. Without their sun, these leaves reach towards this lesser light, waiting for it to be brighter.

If these fish accept you, will that give you life?

I search for a way to give your new form movement again, to understand you are not really gone, just different.

What you see is not there, but you won't believe me. You share your worries for the woman under the bed and the monk who shivers outside waiting for your company. You search for people in our garden if I'm not there. Maybe you will feel less alone when I take you to visit a family garden in the summer.

But you never made it to summer.

You are as thin as these vines all bundled together. They grew mold that was choking them. We were so focused on our fruit trees that we didn't see it get so bad until it was too late. In a way, you knew it was there and that it was happening quickly. You just didn't want me to look. You wanted us to appreciate the vines while they still appeared healthy. We tried to prune the damage off to slow the decay with the hope it would recover, but we had to cut it down.

So high, this pile became. These thin twigs are too heavy for me to carry when all bundled together. They are too tangled for me to make them lighter, and I dare not try. I collapse with them and cradle them. Some of their precious leaves that I held so dear are still green and healthy. I still see you in them, I cry for help.

The night before, I saw you walking along the beach nearby, your retreating figure walking in this sunset picture. Relaxed and beautiful—how fitting. I called for you to come back from your favorite place. I called for you again and again, but you didn't hear me.

I pleaded, *don't leave me* and you came back that one last time to settle my fears.

I wrapped you the next morning in my favorite red sweater to keep you warm and to be in the Christmas spirit despite your worry that you'd ruin it.

It was left in tatters around you because of the people who desperately tried to revive you.

I sometimes think that sweater was me.

I will retreat now to that bed we made yesterday. We carved it out of that maple tree that you sent for pruning. The arborists deemed it sick even though it was still flourishing. It had been there all my life here. I bundle myself up in our red blankets for comfort. It's almost Christmas again. They planted a baby tree where the maple tree stood. A new cycle begins. I hope you don't call them to prune this one too.

I feared you would never say it again, those four words. So confused, angry and tired you were. You stomped and whined. You were three and I was 30. You wouldn't eat what you were given, you wanted to go home, but home was too far away. Home could only be here, but you would not be swayed. You said I've changed, that I wasn't the person you knew. You did not see that you changed too. You wanted me to hold you, to feed you sweets, you cried and watched fish and gardens on your screen. You napped with music as a lullaby and craved light in the dark. You needed bathing and I changed your diapers. You became my child, and at times I grew far too tired and hurt by your tantrums. I was in my 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, any age but not my own. I should have, I could have -- why didn't I do better in all those times I failed in taking care of you? In the end, I was in my 20s and I needed you. I became your mother, but you were mine. I needed to hear those four words back again.

I love you too.

I am looking for you in others; fragments of what you were to me to reconnect to what it felt to be whole again. I hug my partner to be wrapped in loving arms again. We act silly together and imagine what our family will be like after we marry.

Are you here with me?

I sometimes confide now in the lady at work and the gallery. We share our accomplishments, life and worries.

Are you here with me?

I hug the same lady at work who is dubbed the 'mother' at Palace. She just lost her mother too after caregiving. She is not my mother, but hugging her lets me pretend I still have one for a short moment.

Are you here with me?

My mind overthinks a lot of things. When I walked into the hospital during the spring, you asked me to clean up something without recognition. You thought I was a nurse. 'It's just the mask,' I told myself, but my mind supplied a fear all the same. What if there came a day you didn't recognize me? If you looked at me, you would not see yourself reflected back at you. I have only your name. Would you still believe me?

I woke up to you sitting next to me, the canopy above us swayed, shrouding us in dark and then exposing us to the light again. Your presence was so fleeting.

We will lay you to rest soon, I promise.

I braided a bit of my hair in return to take with you and bound the two ends together to match your own. I hid it among the folds of your favorite scarf to carry with you.

What is in that braid for us?

I thought of our final moments together as I formed my small braid. I thought of your shy smile as you looked up at me when I left for work that day. I thought of how comforted you were when you were fresh, clean and warm. I brushed your hair softly that day, and gave your hair a braided up-do, binding the ends with clips. When you passed, those braids were gone. I braided once more one by your ear and bound the two ends together with the very same clips to take with me. It's the only part of you I have left. I gave you back a braid of my own because with you, you carry a part of myself. I wanted this lost part to feel willingly given for that day, instead of taken away. Symbolically, in this braid, a part of me will rest with you— to keep you company, until I can join you completely one day.

A family friend leading the funeral service asked us to spend two minutes to muse on our memories of her. I found myself grasping for memories that I could not recollect. My memories became the video, the photos and the final day. I could hardly recall anything else. I can't remember a lot of things since that day. The fog that filtered over this mindscape concealed many precious memories and I don't know when I'll get any of it back.

Today, we buried you, another step made in a longer journey until you are put fully to rest. You weighed a rock in my arms. You carried light, but the longer I held on to you, the heavier you became. So heavy you were, that my arms began to tremble. I rocked you and walked around to distract myself from the pain. Just as before, I would not let you go until the time came and stood steady as you needed me to be. It's cold in the garden today. Our new well has been filling. I plant you in it as your sister cries next to me. She came to visit our garden. Grains of sand fall past my fingers. Will this finality bring me comfort? The banana trees stand vigil in your resting place, and I with them, our family with us. I hope one day you will grow alive and I promise, I will be there to see it.

