

Alexandra Persad

First Frost

Almost all the flowerbeds had wilted. Some flowers were entirely gone, corpses being eaten by weeds that pushed their way through the dirt. Monica considered pulling them out, but it would be pointless now.

The zinnias were the last flowers with any life left in them. They stood upright, while their petals tumbled to the ground in neat piles. With cold fingertips, Monica scattered them across the speckled dirt, creating a wash of color.

Temperatures dropped to almost freezing during the night. Maybe tonight it would freeze. Monica anxiously awaited waking to a cover of frost on the ground. She imagined it now. How it would mummify all the petals, glistening in the morning light.

She stuffed her hand back in the pocket of her jeans and gave her flowerbeds one last glance. The lilies and peonies had vanished already, but a few stubborn daisies still held on. She gave them a small smile and nod before heading back inside.

The kids would be home soon.

Calvin arrived home first. The high school finished earlier and started later than the middle school. Monica couldn't understand why. Wasn't high school supposed to matter? Or—at the very least—give the illusion that it did?

Cal slung his backpack onto the couch and himself with it.

“How was school?” Monica threw the kitchen towel over her shoulder and leaned against the doorframe. Very classic housewife, she thought.

Cal wasted no time, as he had already taken his phone out of his pocket, staring at the screen. Through the reflection in his glasses, she watched him mindlessly scroll through images of smiling faces and bold sports scores. He enlarged it. Maybe there was a game last night.

“It was okay,” he pressed the side button on his phone and the white reflection disappeared, his eyes returning.

“Did anything exciting happen?”

Sometimes she asked for an exciting event, sometimes she didn't. It depended on her mood, mostly. She had begun phasing it out, and she couldn't quite say why she had bothered asking at all. She knew his answer before he spoke.

“Not really.”

Cal stood up, grabbing his backpack by the handle.

“I've got homework to do,” he walked past her.

She put her hands back in her pockets, needing something to do with them until he had disappeared up the stairs.

When Cal had first started high school, they used to try to fill the hour-long gap with conversation before Mia arrived home. But time twisted and stretched into an infinity. The only thing that seemed to break it—at least fracture it a bit—was a few halfhearted exchanges that she always began. Despite her efforts and Cal’s attention—although not undivided—they always led nowhere.

They used to talk. Not all the time, but some. It felt like such a distant memory that Monica wasn’t sure if she had dreamed it. Late at night she could hear him on the phone. The walls were thin enough that his light chuckles were audible while she was in bed. She wondered what made him laugh now. He used to laugh with her, in the same room, not divided by plaster and drywall and the unfortunate eggshell color that was now scuffed and chipping.

Mia bounced inside the door twenty minutes later than usual. She began chattering about some flooding on the backroads that forced the bus driver to turn around.

“But there was no room, you know? The road was really narrow—the one by that barn that’s falling apart,” her eyes widened. “He almost hit a fence backing up. It was crazy.”

Crazy. Everything was crazy.

Monica oh wowed as she stirred the soup. She had chopped up a few random vegetables and thrown them in a pot with canned chicken broth. She wasn’t a good cook, but Mia always asked what she was making, as if it were a complex recipe that she had spent years mastering.

“It’s vegetable stew.”

Monica played with the crumpled towel that sat on the countertop. It was slightly damp with chicken broth that had sloshed out of the pot.

“Can I try it?”

“Sure.”

She grabbed a spoon from the drawer and watched as Mia chased a carrot around the top of the broth. Monica appreciated that she had yet to fall into a phase of intense dislike for everything she looked at. She was preparing herself for it, as she wracked her brain to remember exactly when Cal had started looking at everything with a bored, half lidded gaze that he divided between real life and the screen of his cell phone. Monica couldn’t picture Mia like that. Maybe it was too heartbreaking for her to genuinely attempt to imagine a teenage version of Mia, she wasn’t certain.

“It’s good,” Mia slurped the remainder of the broth. “Can we add more carrots?”

Monica nodded to the knife that sat alone on the cutting board. “Here, you can chop them.”

Monica tried to serve dinner when James arrived home, but it was impossible. She used to look for a pattern to create some semblance of a schedule in her head, but she had given up, and settled for setting the table when Cal traipsed downstairs, asking when dinner would be served.

Today, James arrived home at seven on the dot. He unhooked his badge from the breast pocket of his shirt. It declared him a technician at the local hospital, accompanied with a poorly lit snapshot of his face from ten years ago.

“What’s for dinner?”

He eyed the spoons and bowls that were placed in front of the four chairs.

“Soup?” he guessed.

Monica nodded. “Vegetable.”

He grumbled inaudibly and Monica watched him disappear upstairs.

When he reached the top, she was left staring at the framed pictures that lined the walls. All of them filled with smiling faces. James and her. Her and James. Their smiles were wide then. Before Cal and Mia existed. Before James’ bleak nine to five. Before Monica’s wifely and motherly duties. Before their lifeless life.

She smiled, trying to look as she once had. The expression felt foreign. She let it drop.

Monica listened to the clinking of silverware against glass as they ate. She watched Cal and James overtop of her water glass, her eyes shifting between them. They were identical, leaning over their bowls the same way and pressing their lips firmly together when they swallowed. Neither spoke.

“How was work?”

Monica always saved the question for when they were all seated. She used to waste it as soon as James walked through the door.

“It was okay.”

Another silence fell over them. They sat in it.

“The zinnias are starting to die,” Monica said, more to herself than anyone else. “I hope the rose bush comes back next year.”

“I love roses,” Mia chewed. “They’re my favorite, I think.”

Monica glanced at James as he slurped.

“Actually,” Mia sat her spoon beside her half-eaten soup. “I think I like daffodils more.”

“Because they’re yellow?” Monica asked. Mia had developed an obsession with yellow. It was the craziest color.

Mia nodded and Mia hopped up from her chair. “I’m full.”

“Okay,” Monica gave her a smile as she carried her bowl away.

“I hope the soup tastes okay,” Monica cleared her throat. “I just threw it together.”

James and Cal stayed silent.

“Did you know that Judith died?” Monica said suddenly.

She wasn’t sure why she said it, but she let the question hang in front of them. She waited for someone to grab it. Finally, James did.

“Who’s Judith?”

“Judith,” Monica clarified dumbly. “Judith Kessler.”

He shook his head slowly.

“She lived down the street.”

James looked lost.

“Two twenty-five.”

He furrowed his eyebrows.

“The blue house.”

Monica shook her head and sighed at the napkin that sat in her lap.

“She always waved at me.” Monica sat her spoon down and flattened her hands out on her thighs. “She gave me tomatoes from her garden once.”

“That’s too bad,” James mumbled.

She glanced at Cal. He had upturned his bowl, inhaling the last of the broth.

“I’m going to the viewing on Saturday, if anyone wants to go.”

“Can I be excused?” Cal asked. “I have some homework to finish.”

He was already standing up, his bowl in his hands. It clattered loudly as he dropped it in the sink.

“James, do you want to go?” Monica asked. “It would be the nice thing to do.”

His eyebrows furrowed as he looked at the soup. “Why are there so many carrots in this?”

Monica wasn’t sure why she read the obituaries. It seemed like something that people did. It was a part of the newspaper, after all. When she had stumbled upon Judith’s name, she was ashamed to admit that she wasn’t entirely sure if it was the Judith she knew. They had never been on a first and last name basis. To Monica, she had always been Judith. The pixelated black and white photo wasn’t any help, either. She also looked much younger in it—less wrinkled and small.

Monica had to consult the internet to clarify her name before confirming that, yes, it was the woman from two twenty-five that lived in the blue house with the tomato garden.

Although she hadn’t recognized her at first, she still felt sad as she realized it was two twenty-five Judith. She had given her tomatoes. That had to count for something, didn’t it?

On her way to the viewing, Monica stopped at the grocery store for a bouquet of flowers. If Judith had died a few months earlier, she would've been able to make her own arrangement from her flowerbeds, but they had died with her.

Monica selected a bunch of red roses. Classic. They matched her lips. She never wore lipstick. Before she left the house, Cal had looked at her twice, as if he hadn't seen her correctly the first time, and Mia told she looked nice. James' gaze had been fixed on the TV, watching men in helmets tackle each other over a piece of leather.

It was sad, she thought, that the only time she had gotten dressed up was to see a body that wouldn't even see her.

Judith looked different. Maybe it was because she was lying in a casket. Upon a closer inspection, Monica determined that it was not the casket at all, but her entire face that had seemed to morph into another. It was plastered with makeup and her hair was stiff with hairspray. She imagined it would feel like plastic if she reached out to touch it.

Monica ushered herself along quickly, not wanting to stare at her anymore. Judith's eyelids were shut, but she still felt as if she was staring back at her.

It seemed like there were eyes on her at all angles. Monica looked around, feeling out of place among the dark storm clouds of people clustered together, offering condolences, and handing out flowers wrapped in clear plastic.

Monica was still holding the roses. From across the room she locked eyes with Judith's daughter. Monica remembered seeing her. She frequented Judith's porch, often sitting beside her mother on the swing when she drove by. She always threw up her hand in a neighborly wave.

In a few hesitant strides, Monica closed the space between them., offering her a smile and drawing her eyebrows together in sympathy.

"Hi, I'm Monica," she said dumbly.

Her daughter nodded. "I know," she answered. Monica nodded although she wasn't sure how she knew. "Thank you for coming."

Monica offered her the bouquet and Judith's daughter transferred the wrinkled and mascaraed tissue she was clutching to her other hand.

"Judith looks nice," Monica said finally, not knowing what else to say.

"Do you think so?" her watery eyes stared into Monica's. "She didn't have many nice dresses. But I thought that one looked the best."

She tried to stifle a sob as she finished her sentence.

Monica put an awkward hand on her shoulder, thinking of her own closet. What would she be buried in? She looked down at the dress she was wearing. It stopped just above her knees, a solid black box that covered her body. Maybe it would be this. She wondered if Mia would have any other dresses to pick from. She didn't like this one very much.

"Where's your husband?" the daughter asked, composing herself once again.

Monica dropped her hand. "He's working."

“He must be a busy man, working at that hospital.”

In complete honesty, Monica did not know what he did. He ran some sort of machine. He scanned people, looked at their body parts. He had an office that he stayed holed up in late at night. That was all she knew. But Judith’s daughter did not want to know that.

“He is,” Monica nodded. “But he wanted to be here.”

She gave her one last smile as she bowed out of the room filled with runny noses and watery whispers directed at Judith's open casket.

Monica wondered what kind of stain her coffin would have. If James picked it out, it would be a dark stain. Surely, he would outlive her. That’s how she always imagined it.

Monica had never liked the name Calvin. She hadn’t picked it. James had pitched her the idea even before her belly started hanging over her jeans. Calvin was his father’s name. She couldn’t say no to that.

“But if it’s a girl,” Monica had countered. “We name her Mia.”

“Why Mia?” the bed groaned and buckled as he sat down.

At the time, they lived in a one-story with ferns that sat on their back porch and stairs that had nails sticking out every which way. Sometimes, she missed it. Their house now was too big, too empty. More life needed to fill it.

Monica shrugged. “I had a doll named Mia when I was little.”

She smiled at the memory. She always imagined the wondrous life her doll would live. The life she wanted to live. But life wasn’t like that, Monica had discovered. But for her daughter, maybe it would be.

“Okay,” he agreed.

“Okay,” she repeated.

Now, she wasn't sure if she liked the name Mia. It wasn't Mia's fault.

She wasn't sure if James liked the name Calvin anymore. It wasn't Calvin's fault.

She didn't know whose it was. Maybe James. Maybe hers. Probably hers.

Frost was forecasted for that night. When Monica looked at the weather report, she frowned, grabbed her jacket, and headed outside. She picked all the remaining flowers. A combination of wilting zinnias and a few stringy daisies.

She put them in a vase that was too large, sitting them on the windowsill in the kitchen. She wasn't sure if it was morbid to have them overlook the flowerbeds, where all the remaining flowers would be frozen, encapsulated under the impending cover of ice.

“Are those the last flowers?” Mia asked.

Monica didn't know where she had come from.

She nodded. “It's going to frost tonight.”

“That's crazy,” Mia said, “that's it's so cold.”

Monica ran a hand over the granite countertop, picking at a piece of food that had hardened against the surface.

“Mia,” she said.

She turned toward her. “Yeah?”

“What would you bury me in?”

Mia visibly recoiled from the question, pressing her lower back into the edge of the counter. She wrinkled her nose. “Why would you ask that?”

Monica shrugged. “I just wanted to know.”

“Don’t ask that,” Mia scowled at her.

She left the room quickly, her arms crossed over her chest. Monica watched her go. She tried to picture Mia’s eyes swimming with tears as Judith’s daughter’s eyes had. She couldn’t see it. She wondered if anyone’s eyes would cry for her.

Monica’s parents had divorced when she was five. Old enough for her to remember her storm cloud of a father that threw his ties on the couches and made the floorboards creak under his weight. But young enough for her to not care when the floorboards stopped creaking and his haphazardly thrown ties vanished from their furniture.

She saw him one Christmas after he had left—before he replaced his visits with envelopes of money and a sloppily written note on discounted Hallmark laminate.

Her mother did not talk about him. When he first disappeared, Monica noticed her mother’s gaze following her carefully. Sometimes, she would pat her head and run her fingers through her hair, sighing.

Slowly, she stopped watching her and she stopped sighing and Monica began wearing French braids so her mother couldn’t stroke her hair sympathetically.

And then, he was truly gone.

Monica did not want her children to rely on sighs and eagle-eyed gazes to remember their father. She did not want them to treasure torn envelopes and halfhearted handwritten happy birthdays. She would give her children the life she wanted with a father that was there. And her.

She would be there, too.

“Don’t you think it’s time to throw these out?” James eyed the vase of flowers. They were beginning to droop, petals gathered beneath them.

“They’re fine,” Monica’s head was buried in the fridge. She needed to find something for dinner.

“I’m going to work.”

She shut the fridge. “Okay.”

“Okay,” he clipped his badge onto the pocket of his shirt.

“You missed a button,” Monica pointed vaguely at the button just beneath his collar.

“What?” he looked down. “Thanks,” he cleared his throat, fixing it.

She waved to him as he left, pressing her lips together in an invisible line.

A few moments later, Mia followed James, then Cal. She offered them both breakfasts. Mia accepted a scrambled egg, while Cal gave her a quick, “I’m good,” before grabbing a granola bar that he stuffed in his back pocket.

When they were gone, Monica studied the vase of flowers, hovering inches above them. She couldn’t understand why James wanted to throw them out. She refilled their water and returned them to the windowsill. She looked at their view. The layer of frost hadn’t melted yet. It was getting colder.

“Sorry about your friends,” she said, looking out at the flowerbeds.

She thought about Judith. Was she in the ground yet? Could they bury people when the ground was this cold?

She tried to picture the coffin underground. Judith with her hands placed across her chest, her shut eyes resting gently while the worms burrowed tunnels and weeds sprouted around her.

It wouldn't be so bad.