

Since the day her mother had been diagnosed, cancer had been like a silent wildfire. A ruthless, insidious force that devoured her mother from the inside out. It crept through her mother's body, consuming her vitality and leaving nothing but ashes in its wake. With every passing day, as the disease tightened its grip, it was as if a part of her mother's essence, her warmth, her laughter, was stolen away, leaving only an aching void in its place. But there was something consuming her daughter too. . .

*Oh mountain~ could you please walk a little slower towards me,
Crossing the flowing river, be careful not to disturb the fishermen.
Oh wind~ rolling clouds into just how many banners,
That flying bird fetches the dusk from the edge of the sky*

The sweet lullaby hung in the air of the sickly white room. Yes, there was the brilliant blue lacquer floor, but she could only focus on the alabaster walls that surrounded her and her mother. Her mother sighed and began to talk about the one thing she dreaded most. Funerals. And though she despised thinking of the inevitable future, she wanted to complete her mother's wishes.

The funeral procession would lead the deceased to where the mountains and rivers meet, and where the fishermen live. When you look up into the sky, you would see clouds the color of ghostly white prayer flags as a breeze passes through. The horses would snort along the way, stamping their feet as if to announce the arrival of the deceased, but the funeral itself would be quiet. Except for the recitation of scriptures, there would be complete silence. Even the cries of sorrow would be suppressed. At dusk, wild geese would come to send a final farewell, though you stay alone until dawn arrives.

There is something poetic about that description, something that would leave a lasting imprint upon the girl's mind before sending her mother into the peace of nature. Yet she knew she would dread its occurrence. For now, she could only hang onto the methodical beeps of the machines as the sunrise entered the room, each echo reminding her of the fragile life hanging in the balance.

*Oh ocean~ unable to contain this crescent moon
Overflowing from the brow, turning back to face a time full of winds of dust
Oh fire~ burning the stars, unable to be extinguished
High-rise buildings concealing brilliant innocence*

Her mother's frail figure lay on the bed, quite weak; the opposite of her once vibrant spirit. A slight twitch of her mother's fingers signaled to her that her mother would be awake soon. The girl went to retrieve a light breakfast and returned to the hospital room to find her mother already sitting up. Occasionally, it still scared her to see her mother's dull eyes that were once so luminous and the soft knit cap that took the place of her mother's long, flowing hair. They shared a weak smile before the daughter set the porridge before her mother. Once the meal was finished, they sat in short silence after the girl returned the cutlery before the mother hungrily plunged them back into their memories.

The weather was pleasantly warm, and the sand caressed their feet as they walked over to the rocking waves. They only had one mission: to collect the most beautiful seashells that the ocean had to offer. Smiles bloomed across their faces as they ran across the shoreline, stopping to place a shell into their bucket before continuing on. The little girl and her mother's laughs were like a melody that danced with the waves. When they got tired, they settled down on the wet sand to eat their sandwiches they had brought with them, watching the sun set over the horizon. As the mother and daughter stared at the darkening sea, a blanket of stars covered the sky beginning to twinkle, while the moon's soft, silver glow appeared upon the sea, casting a radiant path of light. A small fire crackled beside them and the little girl's mother held her close, as the moon's reflection danced across the sea's gentle waves, and a precious memory etched itself upon their hearts.

Their brows furrowed in concentration as they rounded up all their most precious stories. Though her mother's eyes aren't gleaming with life, they were sparkling with nostalgia. But they both knew very well that that day at the beach had been the last of their smiles and laughter. Their carefree lives were about to be shattered. The innocence of what was left of their childhood and memories would be gone. Something that was sucked out of their bodies as soon as they met the towering buildings of the city and entered the sickly hospital. The mountains and rivers, ocean and moon, fire and stars, are all unable to fill the hole within her heart. The girl stole a glance at her mother, not knowing if she should tell her the truth. A truth that didn't seem too important at the moment but held much weight within her own heart.

*That fire etches ravines into people's hearts
Flower, just there in that sea of fire, swaying and blossoming*

She assisted her mother into a small wheelchair, in preparation for a small walk around the hospital. Passing through the halls, the wheelchair squeaked out a welcome to the nurses and doctors who returned it. Many praised her mother's resilience, but the two would only nod, return a fake smile and continue on their way. Cancer had mercilessly ravaged her mother's body. The treatment, the pain, and the uncertainty haunted her mother as well. Her mother could no longer spend as much time as she wanted with her friends and was always tired. Sometimes, she refused to eat. Despite how much the girl wished she could take the pain, she could only watch her mother fight with every ounce of her being. But she couldn't see the resilience in these actions, only desperation. Not a flower flourishing in the fire, but fighting for its survival with burnt leaves and petals scarring its body.

*The flowers of the small town,
Gorgeously delicate
But ever so elusive*

"Mom?"

Her mother turned her frail head towards her.

"Could you tell me about your hometown again?"

A weak smile brushed her mother's face, and she saw a trace of life in her mother's eyes once again. She found a bench, sat down, and wrapped her arms around her mother, anticipating the upcoming story. Her mother looked down at her with loving eyes before proceeding with the story in a feeble voice.

It was a small, rural village, hidden in a mountain valley. A 30-minute walk away was the fishermen's village next to a roaring yet somehow peaceful river. Everyone knew everybody in that village, and it was as if time stood still there. The village itself was known to be engulfed with spider lilies and skeleton flowers, delicate and unique blooms that painted the entire place hues of white and crimson. The mother and daughter had arrived just in time for New Year's Eve, and the village square was adorned with kerosene lights that cast a soft, warm glow. The people of the village had gathered, bundled up in their warmest clothes, ready to share in the New Year's Feast.

After dinner, they scaled the mountains or walked across the valley into the fields of spider lilies and skeleton flowers to light paper lanterns. Armed with brush and ink, they wrote down their deepest dreams upon the oily paper before releasing the lanterns into the midnight sky.

A melancholic smile graced the daughter's face. She would never forget seeing her mother's smile amidst the flowers and the glow of their lantern. The next day, they went back to the field of skeleton flowers, admiring their ethereal beauty in the morning light. The villagers came with baskets of spider lilies, and they began to weave the flowers into garlands and flower crowns. Each head of black hair was soon adorned with crimson and white. If only her mother's life wasn't like the petals of a skeleton flower, so fragile and delicate. But maybe that was why the spider lilies were there, to remind her of the ultimate end. But what about the tenacious vitality of the flowers? Her hold upon her mother tightened. Just how hard would it be to find another memory like this in the future?

The girl wanted to tell her mother how she was suffering from her own disorder, wanted to hear her mother's comforting words, but she had no idea how to start. After all, she wanted her mother to leave in peace if the time ever came.

She was searching, calling for help, but there was no response.

Oh words- roll around the tip of the tongue

When spoken, transform into steep mountains and river canyons

Oh heart- are separated by how many weights? That's up to them. But they are myriads of worlds apart

All my sorrow and joy were laid down, and yet this silent wildfire is all I receive

She returned her mother to the hospital ward for her mother's afternoon nap. After her mom closed her eyes and soft snores confirmed her nap had begun, the daughter exited the ward and sat down upon a bench, lowering her head into her hands. *I'm afraid, afraid to fall apart, but I feel like I'm going to collapse.* She was exhausted from the burden of words left unspoken. The weight was like towering mountains and impenetrable river canyons that separated her from her mother. Each day, the distance between them grew despite loving interactions. Ever since the daughter had followed her mother to the city, to the hospital, she had felt as if she was drowning. The water would slowly build up as she walked with her mother through check-ups before running away in the middle to find fresh air. Sometimes her breath came out harshly as sweat dripped down her forehead as she watched her mother sleep and worked writing

her college thesis. During the summer months, she trembled from an invisible breeze and during the winter she shivered as if it were showing in the building. But she wouldn't tell her mother. She couldn't say that she has a panic disorder. For she must let her mother leave in peace.

Inside the ward, the mother opened her eyes and stared blankly at the ceiling. She could tell how much it pained her daughter to watch her mother's body deteriorate at such a rate. She also could see that her daughter was suffering from something else. Something that she didn't know. But the mother could only be selfish, for she knew that her end was inevitable and near, and she wanted to stay with her flesh and blood. Both of them knew that her times of lucidity were infrequent and were growing less and less as pain overtook her body. It felt as if mother and daughter were already living in separate realities, unable to communicate properly, but yearning to connect, share, and heal. If only that silent wildfire had never begun to burn. . .

*That fire baptizes the indestructible I
Flower, just there in the sea of fire, blooming brilliantly*

The daughter returned to the ward after her mother had finished her dinner. The sun was dipping below the horizon and cast a golden hue upon the dreary room. When her mother saw her, there was a moment of hesitation before she held out a hand for her daughter to hold. Her daughter held onto it as tightly as possible, tears welling up at the corners of her eyes, but she refused to let them drop. Her mother's breathing was more labored than usual.

"Mom, do you remember the ocean and its crescent moon?"

A small nod confirmed her answer.

"Mom, do you remember the skeleton flowers and spider lilies?"

A hint of smile appeared upon her mother's lips as they moved to speak.

"Yes dear. What is it you want to say?"

The daughter looked at her mother and shook her head.

"You are sick, child."

The girl's eyes widened. Did her mother notice her sweaty hands? She took a deep breath, suppressing the rising panic within her.

"You are sick, child," her mother repeated gently, her eyes searching her daughter's face for any signs of the truth.

The daughter's heart skipped a beat, and she felt a lump forming in her throat. How could her mother have known? She had been so careful to hide her panic attacks, always saying she was just going to use the restroom. She was terrified of adding to her mother's burdens.

"I...I don't know what you mean, Mom," the daughter stammered, attempting to feign innocence. Her palms grew even sweatier, and she fought to keep her composure.

Her mother sighed softly, a mix of sadness and understanding in her eyes. "I may be sick, Claire, but I'm not blind. I've watched you carefully, since the day I've stepped into this hospital. I've seen the worry in your eyes and the way you sometimes retreat when you think I'm not looking. You're carrying something heavy, something you're not sharing with me."

Claire's eyes welled up with tears as the weight of her secret crashed down on her. She hadn't wanted to burden her mother, especially not now.

"I just didn't want to add to your pain, Mom. I thought... I thought I could handle it on my own," she admitted, her voice breaking.

Her mother reached out and gently cupped her daughter's tear-streaked face. "Oh, sweetheart, you're not alone. We're in this together, no matter what. I may not have much time left, but I want to spend it helping you, supporting you. It hurts me to see you suffer in silence."

Claire nodded weakly.

Her mother smiled, a tender and loving expression. "Worrying about you is part of being a mother. I may be facing my own battles, but that doesn't mean I want you to face yours alone."

The girl reached out and wrapped her arms around her mother's neck.

"I love you, mom."

"I love you too."

The sun had fully set. Claire had placed a bouquet of spider lilies and skeleton flowers upon her mother's dresser, and they were admiring it through the weak lamplight. How had those two flowers been able to coexist in any way, creating such a beautiful scenery for her and her mother to enjoy, when one represents death and rebirth, of loss and final goodbyes, while the other symbolizes peace and calm, of affection and happiness. At least they would always be a blessing.

Claire's grip on her mother's hand grew tighter, and the mother closed her eyes and fell into a deep sleep. Her mother seemed to resemble a fragile flower at the twilight of its life. Her breathing became soft and gentle, like the whisper of a breeze through a garden, barely stirring the petals of a fading bloom. Her face was without furrowed brows, only containing a soft smile containing the memories of her daughter.

The flowers of the small town,

Gorgeously delicate

But ever elusive

As the sun began to ascend, Claire was roused by a sense of foreboding. Swiftly, she turned her attention to her mother and the adjacent monitors, yet everything appeared unchanged. Just as she was about to settle back down, the methodical beeps suddenly became monotone. The daughter hurriedly put her ear against her mother's chest before tears began to flow. As she sat back down in her chair, her head shaking uncontrollably. *No, no. No, this isn't happening.* She raised her head to look at her mother's body.

Her features were as delicate as the petals of a wilting flower, though there remained a timeless beauty in the fragility of her form. She lay there, as if in a deep slumber, as her body gradually surrendered to the quiet passage of time. Her skin soon took on the pale translucence of a delicate blossom after the rain. She looked so peaceful, as if she was ready to return to the earth and become part of the eternal cycle of life and nature.

When the nurse came to cover her mother with a piece of white cloth, Claire finally collapsed, it was as if she was drowning. Kneeling, her chest felt tight, and she found herself unable to get off the ground next to her mother's bed. Tears began rushing down to the floor as Claire's hands gripped tightly at the white cloth. She gasped for air with each breath she took, unwilling to accept it. But she knew she had to. A nurse came to soothe her and her sobs slowly transformed into tiny whimpers as she sat huddled on the hospital floor, wishing that someone could come and tell her it was a mistake. But no one came. She had to pick herself up. Her mother must have a proper funeral.

The flower of the small town,

Gorgeously delicate

Blooming among the flowing clouds

Claire went to therapy for her panic disorder. Slowly, she recovered through consistent medication. She continued to pursue her studies with vigor and found solace in the photobooks and memories of her mother. Whenever she could, she would travel to her mother's hometown to see the spider lilies and skeleton flowers, spending hours drawing them, collecting them, weaving garlands and flower crowns. When she became tired, she would lay down on the ground, surrounded by these flowers and stare into the sky which held boundless, flowing clouds. If she focused hard enough, the clouds would look like a reflection of the flower field she was in, and there would be a lady dancing, a brilliant smile embellishing her face. When the lady stops, she looks down upon Earth and gives her daughter one last grin before leaping away into the heavens.