

Poppies Were Her Favorite Flower
By Susanne Kowalska '21
Short Story Honorable Mention

He had never thought he was capable of what he did. As he handed the woman behind the counter a dollar and a few coins, he turned the prayer candle over in his hand, avoiding eye contact and quickly leaving the booth. He walked slowly through the parking lot, unlocking his weathered car with a quick turn of his wrist. The lights in the car blinked on, and he placed his new candle in a broken cup holder. Just a mile down the road, was his destination- the sole cemetery for the small town he had passed through only once before.

It had been a business trip. On the way back he had decided to take the scenic route, forgoing his usual trek on the highway. His path had taken him through the countryside, and through the town he had now returned to, finally. There was nothing special about the town, and had it been any other night, he probably wouldn't have remembered his drive through. He would have returned home, and although tired and weary from another trip that didn't pay enough as it should, he would have greeted his wife and kids with a smile. But that didn't happen.

He pulled over to the side of the road, seeing a wooden sign for the entrance of the cemetery. Grabbing the candle and a box of matches, he sighed deeply and popped the door open. He stood for a minute, wondering if he could go through with it. For a second, it seemed as though he was going to turn around, put the place out of his memory, at least temporarily, because it would never truly be gone. But guilt drove him forward. He walked through the stone archway guarding the entrance, a chill filling his body. He pulled his coat around him, but it did nothing to warm his body from the cold. He stopped again, glancing at the names on the tombstones. He didn't even have to think, he already knew the name he was looking for, knew all the details of her death, no matter how much he wanted to erase them.

The land by the entrance was old, so he walked further into the graveyard, looking for signs of a recent burial. As if on instinct, his feet took him through the graveyard, past the tombstones of men and women with unfamiliar names and unfamiliar lives, unknownst to him except through their connection to the town. He came to a stop in front of a small patch of recently dug up earth. Trembling, he moved to light the candle, staring at the inscription on the tombstone.

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He sunk to the ground with a sharp breath- seeing her name in newspapers couldn't compare to the feeling of absolute dread he felt at seeing her name etched in stone, the ultimate confirmation that it hadn't been a nightmare. Flowers still adorned the surrounding ground, remnants of friends and family that had the right to mourn her loss, had the right to weep over a life lost too young. He had none of that. Without noticing it, he had started to trace the letters of her name, imagining her learning to write those same letters just years prior in school.

His own daughter, Eloise, was only a year older, and she still bore the innocence of her childhood. Right now, Eloise and her brother thought he was away on another business trip, as he often was, leaving them in the care of their mother. He couldn't afford the days off of work he had taken instead, and already knew the upcoming week would be a struggle. Even with his overtime hours and trips no one else was willing to take, it just wasn't enough. It was never enough. His wife tried her best to work when she could, but the care of their children came first. Jeffrey was simply too young to leave alone.

He would do anything for them. Despite the stress money put on him every week, influencing every decision in his life, seeing his children happy made it all worth it. It pained him that he couldn't provide them with the comforts of a normal life, and often sacrificed his own necessities, like his car, still in desperate need of repair, just to be able to treat them to some ice cream. He supposed that was part of the reason he did it. The thought of leaving his children, his wife, alone with no income to support them, was a more terrifying thought than anything else. The sky over the cemetery had started to darken, and surprising even himself, he blurted out an apology.

"I'm sorry." He sighed, looking at the weak flames of his candle flicker in the wind. He hugged his arms into his chest, for the first time noticing the tears dripping down his face. He made no move to wipe them away. What good did him coming here do? It was selfish. Like a murderer returning to the scene of the crime, silently mocking the family who would never be able to hug their daughter again. He deserved all the pain he felt. The sky now looked as it had that night, the sun beyond the horizon.

"It was dark, I-I couldn't see." Out loud, the excuse sounded weak even to him. It was completely his fault. She had run into the road, but he hadn't been paying attention. Maybe if he had been, he would have reacted in time, gone home with a

scare but nothing more. Instead, he saw her only at the last second. Time had seemed to freeze, and his hand jerked for the emergency break, but as he began to pull it up, the damage was already done. He felt rather than saw the impact, knew immediately he had been going too fast, had been too slow to react.

He had thrown the door open, blood running cold at the frail body in front of him. Her eyes were closed, but her limbs jutted out at angles unnatural to the human form. A steady stream of blood was already coloring her white blouse, and he rushed to her side. One hand attempting to stop the bleeding, he used the other to grab for his cellphone. His fumbled to type the numbers on the keypad, but his mind suddenly flooded of his future. It was his fault. There was no question he would end up in his jail, and his family, alone. He cradled her body in his hands, watching the color drain from her face. He couldn't do anything. He moved to his phone again, but suddenly heard the sound of voices. He jolted up, making his mind up in that second. He picked up her small body and rushed her to the sidewalk, hoping she would be found soon. As fast as he had come to town, he was gone.

To this day, he still didn't know the state she had been found in. Whether she had been alive, or already dead. If her parents had been worried when the streetlights turned on and their daughter was nowhere to be found. Maybe if he had stayed, if he had only been brave enough to stay, she would be alive. He thought about her everyday, knowing he had no right to. He had chosen his family, and he knew if he was in the position again, he would make the same choice. There was nothing he wouldn't do to protect those he loved.

But sitting in front of her grave, her life became more real to him than it had ever been before. Images flooded his mind of her first words, first steps, first day of school, all the firsts a parent cherishes, and then all the first she was yet to experience- her first kiss, first job, first apartment. It was like all at once, he knew her inside and out, and all at once, grief washed over him in waves. In that moment, she was his daughter, snatched from his clutches too early.

He pounded his fists into the ground, not caring at the dirt flying up to hit his face. Rage gave way, and he laid sniffling on the ground, curled up into a ball. He would be found the next morning in the same position by a sympathetic groundskeeper, assuming nothing bad of the young man. She woke him up, and he simply mumbled an apology, leaving as quickly as he had once came.