

2024 HIGH SCHOOL SHORT STORY CONTEST – HONORABLE MENTION

Hydrangeas

By Juniper Sohn

I grew a sunflower in kindergarten for a class project. It grew and it grew and it grew in my backyard garden until it was taller than my parents. It loomed over my head until it was gone one morning. I rushed to my mother, swearing that someone must've stolen it. She took my hand in hers, and gently showed me its fallen corpse, buried in a flurry of tall grass. I couldn't see it until she lifted up the head against the light coloring of my house.

I watched lavenders in my middle school gardens grow during classes. I loved when the rooms were right above them, especially if my seat was by the windows. As I spectated the small budded flowers spread throughout the grass, they slowly faded. By my second graduation, I had to sit by the edges of the wooden fence to see them. I don't think anyone watered them enough.

I passed by the same bunch of flowers when I went to high school every morning. They were tulips. I could tell by the shape of their petals and how they fell around each other. Sometimes it was hard to tell how many there were. I saw four when I began high school. There were only two when I graduated. I found out there were actually six before I left for university. I never saw the others wither. Maybe they blended into the sidewalk.

I decided to grow an orchid when I went to college. It stayed perched on top of my dorm desk. I watered it every day and tried my best to take care of it. I liked orchids because they don't blend in with everything else. They stand alone. My roommate and I were close then. Sophomore year, she knocked the orchid over while making out with her boyfriend. I couldn't find it from the dirt it was lying in for a minute too long. I don't like them anymore—the flower or my roommate.

In my second year of college, I decided to study art. My subjects were almost never people; they were predominantly flowers. Sketching was easy enough—just outline the shapes I've noticed since I could comprehend sight. Pointed ovals for the petals, thin skeleton-like cylinders for stems, and varying oval or circle shapes for leaves depending on the species. Painting was another thing entirely. The tones become muddy if I blend too much, the lines unsalvageable, colors sporadic and nonsensical. For some reason, this matured nicely into my signature, my style. A sort of abstract wonderland of colors that didn't make any sense with the objects they were paired with. Suddenly, my paintings boomed, catching the attention of an art professor and his network. I wasn't sure if this was a blessing or a curse, but I suppose, as long as I could earn good money, it didn't matter.

I had earned enough after an especially successful exhibit when I moved out from home for the last two years of college and a few years after that. I bought a lot of plants and flowers for my new apartment. They took up half of the living room, next to my sliding glass door that led to a balcony of even more greenery. It was my own household museum. I was the curator. Dark,

light, mid-toned, dark, light, mid-toned, dark. As long as this pattern wasn't interrupted, I could see them. Each and every one. I painted them from a variety of angles and arrangements to later be displayed in my public exhibits.

I started seeing her three years after I started publishing my art. We met at one of my exhibitions of a collection that I'd personally attended—I enjoyed after graduation freed my schedule of rigorous school projects and exams. She loved my work, asking about where I got my inspiration. I told her the truth: my plants. I had seen other people before, of course, but they had gotten tired of my obsessions with flowers, my obsession with work. But she—she was obsessed too. The first night together I watched her skin contrast with the roses covering my bedroom wall. She was beautiful. She told me I was too, as her eyes stared into my soul. Did I love her? I forgot about the roses that night.

She moved in a year later. The boxes overcrowded the living room, fighting with my plants for territory. I felt shy about them for the first time then. I apologized for the cramped space. I was ready to throw the lilies out of my balcony. She pet my head, making my tidied hair into a stringy mess. I didn't mind. She told me it was alright. She told me she liked it. She told me she loved me.

I told her I loved her the next Valentine's Day. We had gotten rid of some of the plants. Not all of them, not even the majority. Just a few, to make room for our dancing at night, with the best records, spinning on our turntable, lights off, the moon shining like a disco ball. We went out for a dinner date. But it rained and we didn't bring an umbrella, and the restaurant we wanted to go to needed a reservation and we didn't know. It was a disaster. I told her I was sorry, probably a million times, but she only laughed, took my hand, and led me to the nearest floral shop. She told me to pick out a flower, any flower. I stood there for a while, taking in the various shapes and sizes, until I picked a potted lipstick plant. It looked whimsical—like her. After we bought it, we ran like madmen through the rain and to our apartment. She helped take care of it.

She asked me to marry her two and a half years later. It wasn't exactly a surprise, but it was close enough. I suppose if you've been with someone that long, you'd know if they're planning an engagement. She took me to my favorite floral shop the week before, and asked for my favorite plant. Hydrangeas. The colors change based on the soil's pH. Purple and pink and blue, mixing like confetti and paint. They're supposed to be beautiful, and when I explained this to her I told her that I wanted nothing else but to be able to see it. She looked at me sadly, then. So sad it was almost endearing. So, she bought me a hydrangea, and coincidentally, there was a jewelry shop on the way home from the shop. She begged me to go in with her. We looked through the rows and rows of rings. She was so fixated on them, I found it hilarious how serious she was taking it. I told her I liked one ring, with the metal brought up and shaped like petals around a small gem. She nodded vigorously. The next week she proposed to me in our living room as the sun was setting, bathing us in a vivid curtain of light. She opened the ring box and revealed the ring I picked out. I kissed her, smiling ever so softly. She pulled back, asking what my answer was. I noted a hint of panic in her tone, and laughed. *Yes.*

She gave me the glasses a year after we eloped. We got married in the local courthouse. After it was over, I asked her if it was really okay not to hold a wedding with a ceremony and a reception

and months of planning. She said she was saving for something, and we could have the wedding later. What could have been so important to buy? It's an investment, she said. Looking back, I feel a bit bad, but she knew what she was doing. I can't really blame her. I can't even blame myself. I can only blame the hydrangeas. She handed them to me in a box during sunset again, in the living room again, surrounded by flowers again. I asked if this was another proposal, and she laughed, telling me to just open it. I examined the shiny black leather, the gold letters that spelled "OSMO." When I lifted the latch, I was confused. I already have reading glasses. I already have sunglasses. I looked up, and her hands were clasped under her chin, excitement exuding from her expression. She told me to put them on. Slowly, she cautioned. Hurry, she urged.

I saw her for the first time then. I saw her coral lips, peach skin, tan eyes with blue and green frilled around the edges, brown hair dyed a dark red with the roots grown in. I saw it all. Look around, she said. As I turned my head slowly, I took in the shades of green covering a fourth of the room, the bright yellow fading into a gradient of orange and pink and red scrambling through the window, the varying purples, blues, browns, yellows, reds, pinks, white, black. The shapes and sizes were suddenly unimportant, mushing together into a magnificent watercolor painting in my eyes as tears streamed down my face. She put her hands around my face to be parallel to hers. It's overwhelming, I know. She was crying too. You're beautiful, I whispered. We kissed and wept and loved each other; and when I woke up the next morning, I left her in the bedsheets to put on the glasses and face my hydrangeas on the balcony. One was green in the center and purple around the edges. The other transcended from swirls of light blue to deep shades of pink.

We held the ceremony six months after that. The venue was held outside in a fairytale-like garden, with bunches of varied flowers hung in an arch shape over the altar and stringed soft yellow lights following our guests and us from the thin, unpredictable ivy-green and walnut branches of the trees surrounding it. She went first with her father at the cue of the music, and as I prepared for my entry, I could feel my chest warm from the friction of my rapid heartbeat. I took a deep breath and pushed up my ironically black glasses to fit better over my eyes. I had to see all of this. I walked down a couple minutes after, by myself, over the stone path, never departing my eyes from my wife. God, she's beautiful. Her ivory dress framed her in such a glorious manner, everything else ebbed away into the background as I got closer. I clutched my bouquet of vibrant, red-orange lipstick flowers, dripping tears while we read our vows and put our rings on each other's fingers. When we kissed, she threw her bouquet, pulled my waist to hers, and met my lips with such colorful magic I knew then that I had surely been enchanted by her. As we prepared for reception, we walked back up the aisle, fingers intertwined. On the red carpet behind us, hydrangeas remained.