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Dahlia

By Christine Naff

"Pyracantha," my mother says. She lifts the picture frame from her new featureless bureau at the Morning Glory Memory Care Home. Her finger wavers above the photo, like a seabird looking to land, before she taps it down on the glass over the flushed face of her late husband, our father. "Pyracantha," she jabs at his face. "Firethorn," she taps the glass with the finality of a firm period at the end of an argument.

George stares out beyond the two of us from the photo—his young, thirty-something-self is centered between Mother and Dillon Forsythe, his research partner. Even then, the early days of his and Dillon's storied careers, George's face displayed the light-red tinge of inflammation in his cheeks and the tip of his nose. Anyone who knew him would recognize the thorny iron behind those dark brown eyes under the heavy black eyebrows. Firethorn, Genus Pyracantha. Mother knew her horticulture.

After George's death fifteen years ago, she threw her full energy—previously devoted to our father, the University, the friends and sadly, nearly all our shared memories—into her Master Gardener program, immersing herself into her garden and the local gardening community.

"I'm letting go of all the weary window dressing and staying in the garden," my sister Julia liked to mimic Mother's memorable announcement of her change of vocation, from University professor to community garden expert. We had watched her transformation with awe and, at least on my part, some sense of abandonment. Then, eighteen months ago another, less benign transformation began with the confusion, the anger, and the forgetting.

Mother's dogged attachment to this photographic artifact, and her insistent renaming of our father, George, after the firethorn bush, has been particularly unsettling amongst all the other baffling unsettlements of her steeper decline over this year. To distract her from an obsessive loop about Pyracantha-George in this moment, I hold up her favorite gardening sweater as enticement. "How about a little walk in the garden, Mom?"

She beams at me, her daughter, Candace, in the polite, practiced manner formerly reserved for cashiers, librarians, and servers at restaurants. "That would be lovely," she says. I resist the recurring urge to ask if she remembers me today; we won't—we can't—be strangers; we've never been strangers in our family, but I recognize the childish over-simplicity of such denial. I breathe out a soft sigh.

Julia and her husband, Scott, pay extra for the garden apartment. Mother's unit is the size of a standard hotel room, a sharp contrast to the family home sprawled on the wide suburban lane of Laurel Village. While they take care of the finances and some of the visits, I do more of the regular check-ins, our euphemism for "witness to Mother's growing absence." Currently, Mom is classified as high functioning dementia, meaning she's okay for her to have a door onto the garden, meaning she's not a flight risk, yet. *We should use it while we can,* Julia had reasoned. Indeed, air and space to move around have been essential to release whatever

distresses Mom any given day—and the ever-tightening knot of anxiety and grief building in me.

I guide her arms into the pilly, beloved wool sweater. "Here we go into the garden," I say as I rotate her toward the door. I hum a made-up tune because, I tell myself, music calms her. Because, I tell myself, my singing might help her remember just one of the many times I sang over the years. Might help her remember me.

The small patio opens into the Morning Glory's larger garden through a wooden gate that evokes delight for Mom. "Into our secret garden…" she does an off-key singsong riff on my humming as we approach the gate, evoking bittersweet memories for me of the favorite story she read us when we were kids. Each day I feel the disorientation that comes with Mother being in a new world, while I remain here on the other side with all the memories.

"Alright," I say, to steel myself. "Here we go." I open the latch and we enter. Her pace is all business along the median-shaped plantings behind the Morning Glory units. She issues instructions as she strolls through the spring beds.

"Get the men to plant bulbs for next year around this plot." She points imperiously for a small woman, toward a large potted display at a graveled path. She says, "This gardenia is not getting enough shade, see the leaves?"

As I am her only subject in this domain, I grunt, and nod along as needed. I've grown wearier the past few weeks. I feel guilty, and resentful at times, ascribing both sentiments to my being the first-born, which, when exposed to rational thinking, doesn't hold up.

When we turn down the tree-lined path toward the community hall, she gasps, just like yesterday, at the foxglove bed. "Poisonous," she says in her classic master-gardener tone—didactic, with a hint of chide. "The dog, or worse, one of you kids could die in the bushes. I keep tearing them out and they keep coming back."

"Mmm." I say. "That's terrible." If she heard the light sarcasm, it didn't show.

"She really just needs assurance and acceptance—no more right and wrong." Loretta, the day nurse (renamed Peony in Mother's universe) repeats this to us often since our arrival at the Morning Glory, when she noticed Julia and I were more upset at the upheaval of Mother's life than Mother seemed to be.

In the "Family Resources" material they gave us, I read: *Step into the world of your loved one, rather than insisting they return to yours.* The ex-military man down the hall from Mom's unit had returned to Viet Nam in his mind. Mother's garden world seemed infinitely more hospitable for the calm and comfort we wished for her in these last years, or months.

Around the time we realized the severity of her cognitive decline, Mom had stopped calling me by my real name, Candace. At first, we thought she was calling me Darling, then Dolly. A few weeks later Julia became Lobelia. After that, Julia deciphered the naming convention. "She's retreated into the garden, *Dahlia*." Julia had grinned with childhood glee of solving a puzzle before her older sister.

Dahlia. Not Dolly. I was astonished at how much sense it made, and how much relief I felt to assign some meaning to all the confusion. The revelation brought memories of my mother's showy dinner-plate dahlias cut from her garden and placed in bowls on the table for guests in the late summer. *Dahlia*. Mom's insistence to the very end that I would ultimately bloom into the lush show-off in the garden, rather than be the wilted pansy filler, before she leaves. She had always been that way, seeing more in me than I could see. I had rarely measured up for George, and Mother had defended me more often than she agreed with our father about my shortcomings.

Julia's cipher for mother's new world bolstered us through the transition to the Morning Glory. George the Firethorn: Pyracantha. Julia, dark-eyed and angular like George, less dainty than Mom, but graceful: Lobelia. Candace, the firstborn with freckles, larger bones, and unruly dark auburn hair, explained by a distant line of Scots in mothers' lineage: Dahlia.

Somehow our new names reactivated our latent sister-alliance and gave us room to renegotiate ourselves into a new team. Julia-Lobelia, the married pharmacist made lists and phone calls, while I, Candace-Dahlia-not-Dolly, the recently-single-again, vagabond, untenured professor graded papers quietly while Mother drifted off. My capacity for reading, slow-walking, and idleness tempered Julia's busy career and restlessness. Julia's love and trust in her older sister countered my fragility in the face of my mother's disappearance.

Those first few weeks when the stretches between Mother's lucid moments seemed to expand exponentially, the nonsense felt overwhelming. We strategized over wine late into the night through the struggles and steps that led to us here, to the Morning Glory. One day, before we set the date to move her, I met Julia at the door in a hot fury; the gap between what was happening and what I wished would happen had reached its zenith.

"I didn't get a single spark of connection today," I said. "I couldn't get her to do anything. She won't take her sweater off; and, she won't stop looking at that freaking graduate party picture," I barked, not even trying to hide my frustration.

Julia tugged me onto the top step of the porch, sat down, and put her arm around me. Instead of trying to talk me down or cajole me, she went into analysis mode, talking to herself as if she didn't expect me to converse in my current condition.

"She's condensing herself into her best parts: young graduate student and plant-lover," Julia said, her pensive, eyebrow-intensive face showing her arrival at a serious hypothesis. "It's almost like she's shedding the unnecessary parts, the past and the future."

As Julia talked through the first examples—Mom's reluctance to finish the books she asked to read, her unwillingness to return calls from friends, her disinterest in selecting her clothing for the day—my flare-up evaporated into sobs.

"She's *un-be-com-ing*." Julia said, enunciating each syllable in an exact imitation of our deceased father. I saw the former little-sister-imp appear in her face as she addressed me. She beamed.

Unbecoming. Julia had flipped George's trademark reprimand on its head with a new meaning. When we were kids, George's use of the word could induce lasting humiliation far exceeding the severity of any breach of conduct. He would launch these harsh, four-syllable criticisms with an intense stare over his reading glasses, down the aquiline nose and straight into one or three of our hearts with that simple phrase: "That is rather unbecoming."

None of us would dispute that I was the most frequent target, though Julia had not been immune to less harsh and less frequent censure. His barbs had been so devastating in our teens that we'd both limited our exposure in the later years. Mother had tried to soften his sting with me, "It's his high hopes for you, dear, and your misfortune of being the first born." I couldn't believe her, though. I had soured on George after I'd gone to grad school and moved away.

Now, *Un-becoming,* Julia's double-entendre reinterpretation marked the emergence of a family pun that sent us into recurring fits of hilarity, the kind that arrive when circumstances seem so hopeless that no other response makes sense. We'd used our new word a lot since then, as a buffer, an exploration into new territory. Pyracantha was gone. When he died, it had been over a year since I had seen him. Now Mother is leaving, too. With Mother's un-becoming, who are we?

Along the path, at the scent of the early apple buds, where we usually stop to examine the health of the trees, I see Mom's pace has accelerated in the absence of my attention. She is headed toward the front hedge where the large forsythia bush marks the front gate. I hear Loretta-Peony's warning in my head.

"Agitation is not our friend," Loretta reminds us regularly, as if we need reminding of this dementia fun fact, coming upon over a year of episodes.

The huge forsythia at the Morning Glory first popped into full golden bloom the week we moved her in. Though Julia broke the code to our new botanical names and mother's *unbecoming*, we are both at a loss regarding Mom's obsession with the flowering shrub other than its stark yellow brilliance in the awakening spring. Mother's laser-like focus on ideas and ideals that only she can see has created some memorable moments of agitation. "You can't push her." Loretta-Peony's voice reminds me. "Some days her mind will just set on something that makes no sense. To you."

Loretta's tutorials are matter-of-fact in tone, out of skilled practice from having repeated them, without a hint of judgment, to tens or hundreds of sons and daughters before us. I want to tell Loretta, agitation was never our friend. Even before the illness, the overpowering tension, ponderous silences, prickly bursts were the weather into which we had sprouted and were grown. Before, though, Mother provided the shelter; she was our buffer from the tempests.

Mom has relished the blossoms over the weeks, day-by-day, while I felt a growing dread at what might happen one day, today for example, when the last of the fallen flowers would blow away. I see her approaching the corner. The gardeners have obviously been at it with the hedge-trimmers and blowers. I scuttle to reach her before her impending meltdown, but she starts before I arrive. Mother halts.

"The forsythia," she cries. She grips her skirt, and sways—a new tic. Ahead, forsythia blossom stragglers left behind by the blowers dot the dirt path like shards of sunshine. The arching shrub, darling of the spring garden, is completely bare. I anticipate Mother will ratchet up into a wail, if the past few days are reliable indicators.

"It's gone," she sobs, moving from tears to hiccups in seconds.

"It's sad that the forsythia is over for this year. I'll miss it too." I say, adopting Loretta's tone for transitioning my mother out of these cruel squalls in her mind. *Agitation is not our friend. Just go to where she is. Don't try to bring her back to you,* I chant to myself like a mantra.

I try all my previously semi-successful moves to console her. "It'll be back next spring. Look at those hundreds of new leaf buds." I despise talking to my mother as though to a child; yet, I do. "Let's go check out the new roses." I wave toward the side path where the emerging yellow and pink rosebuds offer the greatest potential for distraction.

Mother doesn't budge from the flowerless bush. I choose a different tack and invoke my sister's flower-name for enticement. "Let's go back, Mom. I think Lobelia should be here," I say.

"Lobelia?" Her face lights up. She takes off toward her unit as though she's excited to see Julia. But when Julia-Lobelia meets us at the door, Mother makes a slow-speed beeline straight past her without greeting—straight toward her night table, to the treasured photo of her with her two young shrubs, Pyracantha and Forsythia.

"The forsythia blooms are gone," I tell Julia. "It was upsetting."

"Hi, Mother." Julia follows Mom and gives her a peck on the cheek. Julia lifts Mom's arm to take off the sweater while Mom pulls toward the night table, like a toddler. "Shall we take this off first?" Julia says, and slips it off.

Mom settles herself onto the bed, patting for us to sit down, almost as though she were suddenly *with us* in a rare moment when we're all together like before, and not in a crisis. She holds the frame in her lap with both hands, the way an elderly woman might clutch her purse on a crowded train. Julia sends me a lopsided smile, an attempt I read as appeasement or maybe conciliation.

Julia and I had our biggest disagreement (since Julia's teen experiments with smoking) the night before we moved mother. We'd laid out her small suitcase at the family dining table where we'd piled items for consideration to accompany Mom to her next, and probably last home.

We'd sat at this table for all the milestone celebrations of our lives—before I left for college, and when Julia was accepted into pharmacy school. Anniversaries. Birthdays. Mother sewed my ballet costume at this table when I was seven in defiance of George, who forbade ballet lessons as unsuitable for girls of intellect. I had a sense of unraveling as I examined the items Julia had assembled for Mother to take with her. I couldn't reconcile "home" with anywhere but our family home. I couldn't imagine her in a new place with only the pitiful pile of possessions we were sorting.

I lost my composure when Julia added the gilded ornamental frame of Mother, Father and Dillon, which served as centerpiece of the family photo history on the buffet amongst myriad photos, Mother in gowns, tennis clothing, and in the garden; Mother and George with girls; girls; girls turned young women—our family history, as I remembered it.

"What about baby photos? Graduation pictures? The one of us skiing in Vermont? We're not even in this one," I had said. I knew we weren't really arguing about what to take, but something deeper beneath the surface that neither of us would understand until later. "We're taking her away from her life with an old sweater, her shoes, a nightgown and no photos of us," I said, tossing the photo into the pile on the gardening sweater.

"It's the one she chose, her favorite," Julia said. "She doesn't remember the others. Go where she goes…" Julia put her hand on my arm—a consoling gesture, but I had not been consoled.

The last silver thread of Mother's lucidity appeared shortly after we moved her. One early evening during the inane fashion program she had insisted they watch, Mother had turned to Julia: "Jules, did I tell you I can't find my diamond earrings?"

Julia called me late after my class to share her excitement. She had been so shocked, she told me, that she forgot protocol and answered straight from the truth, "We left them back home, Mom, so they wouldn't get lost."

"Oh, yes, that's right," Mother had said. "What show are you watching, dear?"

"Then she was gone again, just like that," Julia reported. Still, we were buoyed for a week or so that the move might slow her decline, but there'd been no more hopeful surprises since then.

Now, as we sit shoulder to shoulder on the bed, I sense a shift in Mother's energy. She is focused not agitated, creating an expectancy in me. Mother lifts one hand to my knee, still clasping the photo in the other. The now familiar, deceptive glint of hope rises in me. Maybe

two dots were connected on the walk; maybe the oxygen fired up new synapses? It feels like we're here together to share something, like the old days.

Mother peers into the photo, the one framed memory she refused to leave behind: George in his flush glory; Mother blooming showily between George and Dillon.

Mom's index finger homes in on them, hovering above the glass. I stare at their young faces, the biology cohort. I can almost feel the energy of their youth, the excitement of being at the beginning with their full lives ahead of them. I can understand why she loves this photo the most. Whatever came between then and now, forgotten and remembered—this is where it began. George, Pyracantha, the senior advisor will marry Mother who has not assigned herself a plant name. Dillon Forsythe-named-Forsythia—either for that showy bright face and hair, or his last name (we will never know)—would be on their periphery for the years of their joint research, and then would drift from academia into commerce until his reappearance in our daily life as the hedge whose flowers are done for this season, Mother's last season.

Youth. Remembrance. In this frame she finds an important memory, lost on us.

Mother's finger stops its pecking and lands on Dillon.

"Your father," she turns to me as though to check for comprehension. She looks back to the photo and stabs at Dillon again. His blue-grey eyes are a few shades lighter than mine. His smile is in mid-laugh. He has more freckles than I do.

No, no, just more confusion, I tell myself, sensing an unbidden panic poking at my consciousness.

But as I look to Julia, I see in her face the kind of surprise you see in vintage shots of moviegoers at the climax of the film. Her dark eyes, dark like George's eyes, are as wide as I've ever seen them and brimming. Julia's lips, George's thin lips, form a perfect O.

I want to laugh at this, my own moment of un-becoming, but the concussive wave of Mother's disclosure reverberates, renders me speechless, as the truth I may have always known at some level settles around me like dust after the blast—everywhere.

It could all be nonsense, but now that it's before us, it would explain everything. *Your father*, *Dillon*.

Mother looks up from the youthful hedges, George and Dillon, and smiles straight into my eyes. "Dahlia. Don't give up on a bloomer. Replant, if they don't thrive where they are," she says in her master-gardener voice.

Unbecoming. Becoming. We're doing it every day: for this, for that, I reason to myself. I imagine I will move through and beyond these days of re-remembering and saying goodbye, into the feeling of unfurling. I imagine becoming Dahlia, the bright large blossom that is transplanted for more light.

Is this how it feels for my mother? Relief? Freedom, finally, after living a secret these many years, letting go of all pretense, as she glides into her garden? I know I will reassemble these moments in innumerable ways over the next many years.

Finished with the photo, Mother hands it to me and turns to Julia with the smile—the kind stranger smile. Julia-Lobelia purses her lips into her kid-like, sad face and gives me a private shrug.

She reaches behind Mom and puts her hand on my shoulder. She leans into our mother squeezing us all together, "How 'bout a little tea, Daisy?" she says to Mom.

"Daisy?" Mother laughs, a bell-like laugh. "Is that my name?"

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