

Petal Dust

Eli flicked his lighter open and shut as he walked down the street. Open, shut. Open, shut. *Click, click.* There was no chance of a flame; the thing had long since run out of fuel, but his father had given it to him. He couldn't just get rid of it.

Underneath the soothing *click, click* of the lighter was a swirl of sensations he was trying his best to block out. A throbbing headache and dry throat from dehydration, which he could probably fix by stopping at a store for a sip from a water fountain after his errand. A grumbling stomach-- that couldn't be addressed until that night when it was safe to go searching through dumpsters. Aching feet, dry eyes; from walking and sleeping on concrete, respectively. Again, after.

Right now he was dealing with something much more important.

He tucked the lighter into his pocket when he reached the familiar chain-link fence, common in these low-income suburbs. This place was a far way from his usual stomping grounds, but it was worth it. It was the only place that had what he needed.

After a quick glance around for safety, he clambered over the fence with practiced ease. The yard he landed in was gorgeous and well cared for, bushes and trees and flowers everywhere and arranged perfectly, a little gravel path running through it for a picturesque stroll for whoever had put so much effort and money into it. But as beautiful as it was, he wasn't interested in the rest of the garden. He was here for one thing and one thing only, something tucked away in the far left corner of the garden.

Eli picked his way across the yard, careful not to disturb any of the other plants, laser focused on his goal. There, in the back corner, was what he was looking for.

He came to a stop before the plant and knelt in the cultivated dirt, never minding the soil that would stain his jeans. After all, they were already plenty dirty. He devoted his full attention to the flower bush before him.

It grew thickly, little wooden stakes driven here and there to keep the blooms upright during storms. They were all a vibrant red with white centers, streaked and spotted in some places with black. Each stem held three flowers, and as usual he sought out the least beautiful, the one that would be about to wilt or already there, slightly graying around the edges; the one that was bringing the rest of them down with its gloom. That was the stem he selected, and with delicate fingers, pulled from its parent plant.

Just for a moment, he sat back on his heels to enjoy the aroma. These plants, if he remembered correctly, were *Alstroemeria*. He didn't know how long they bloomed for, but he was going to take advantage of them while he could.

After admiring it for a minute or two, Eli shook himself and got to his feet. As nice as it was here, he needed to go before the owner caught him trespassing. Back over the fence he went, though this time lightly gripping flowers between his fingers and trying his best not to crush them. The moment he was back on the street, his other hand sought out the lighter.

Click, click. Click, click. Open, shut. Open, shut.

It was a thirty minute walk from the flower house to Desert Dunes Cemetery. Like the house he'd just come from, the cemetery (despite its name) tried its best not to appear like a desert, covering the ground in transplanted turf and planting large oak trees to tower over the marble headstones, keeping them from blinding passersby with the light reflected by the desert sun. But they couldn't get rid of the smell of dust and hot rock, and that was what Eli breathed in rather than the scent of freshly-mown grass and tree bark.

The person he was looking for, like the flower he'd taken, was interred in the far left corner of the cemetery. He made it there just as the sun was going down, painting orange and red and pink over the simple stone placard. Here he knelt again, placed the lighter gingerly at his side, and scooped up the flower already resting on the gravestone, its stem weighted down by a small stone.

At two weeks old the other bloom had lost its color; it was almost as grey as the stone it had been laying on, and was dry and brittle to the touch. Eli cradled the flower in his hand and slowly curled his fingers over it.

He felt it fracture in his grip, dissolving under the faintest pressure that he applied. He rubbed the pads of his fingers over the shards for a few seconds, grinding them even finer, before opening his fist and letting the cool breeze carry them away from his palm.

He set the new flower on the headstone.

For a moment he paused, listening. The wind was moving in the trees. Cars barreled by on the highway next to the cemetery. Somewhere else there was music-- solemn and sad. Someone else was being interred. But no one would come over here, he was certain. And if they did they wouldn't look twice at the rumples, dirty teenager kneeling over a grave.

He swallowed hard and opened his mouth.

"Hi, dad."

The leaves rustled. He tried not to hear his father's voice in it, low and soothing and warm with the slight curl of the tongue on his r's.

"I know you're probably still mad at me for running away. I've been thinking about it for months, since I first came to visit you, but I can't convince myself to feel bad about it."

In the distance the music ceased.

“They’ve sent me to so many families. And this last one--” he stopped and shuddered, unable to continue with the phantom press of hands around his throat. After a few seconds of silence, he finished in a whisper, “I hope you can understand that, wherever you are.”

The sun dipped lower in the sky, the light dimming every moment he spent there, and the temperature dropped with it. Eli shivered in his threadbare hoodie, but he wasn’t ready to go yet. He wasn’t done.

“I miss you a lot. I don’t know how much you can see, how much you know, if anything. And I feel like a little kid when I do it, but every night when I fall asleep I wish you were here with me. To tell me what to do. Because I don’t know. I have no idea.”

Around him, crickets began to chirp. For a while he sat there in silence, not saying anything aloud, just thinking and hoping his father could still hear him. Remembering how his hand felt when it brushed his unruly bangs back from his forehead, the husk in his voice when he said ‘I love you’, and how much he’d missed that love in the last five years. A wound that never healed, just kept getting wider and deeper and hurting with a pain that would never stop. He sat there until the streetlights on the other side of the fence flickered on, cold and foreboding, and in the distance he heard the gate clanging as it closed and locked.

He collected his lighter and stood up.

“Bye dad. I love you. See you in a few weeks.”

He turned away and headed for the fence, shivering, palm wrapped around cold metal.

This fence wasn’t like the other one-- it was wrought iron bars instead of chain-link. Luckily it wasn’t too ornate, and he was scrawny enough to slip through the gap with minimal wiggling.

The moment he was back out on the street the lighter came back out, and as he walked away down the road, the noise bounced off of the stone buildings around him, sounding in his ears.

Click, click.

Open, shut.

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The bus ride back to his side of town was a long one. He waited at the stop until there were enough people for him to slip aboard unnoticed and sat in the back, keeping his head down. In his pocket the lighter clicked on, inaudible over the loud rumble of the bus.

It was full night by the time he got off. He spent most of his time on the far side of the city, where the most shelters and food pantries were; it was too late for him to try and get a spot tonight, but it wasn't cold enough for him to worry about it. It would be uncomfortable, but what else was new?

Eli was exhausted by the time he reached the alley where he'd hidden his things. He didn't have much: a backpack, a ragged sleeping bag, some basic toiletries given to him by shelters and sympathetic strangers. In an inside pocket he had some money hidden, but at the moment it wasn't much. He'd be going to bed hungry tonight.

The alley he'd chosen that morning as a hiding place was sandwiched between a restaurant and some kind of club. It had been quiet earlier, but was now pumping bass heavy drumbeats through the brick like a heartbeat. Against the back wall was a dumpster, behind which he'd stashed his backpack for the day. It was dangerous to leave your things unattended on the street-- it could be stolen or destroyed by cops-- but not having it made it easier to blend in when he went to visit the flower house.

He was halfway down the alley when a side door to the club swung open. Music poured out into the street for a few seconds, something techno without any lyrics, only to be abruptly cut off again when the person who had emerged closed the door. A figure with long red hair in a sparkly dress, breathing hard and taking greedy gulps of the cool night air like it was their last chance to taste it.

Eli dropped his eyes and made to stride past. Most people left him alone if he didn't make eye contact and just went about his business, but this time the woman waved a hand to get his attention. When he looked at her head on, he noticed the glitter on her eyelids, scattering the orange glow of the light above the door all around in colorful shards.

"Hey," she said with a broad, fake smile. "Got a light?" Her eyes flicked downwards, and with an internal curse, Eli closed his fist around the lighter. He'd taken it out again when he got off the bus, like an idiot.

"It doesn't work," he mumbled back, looking down at her strappy high heels rather than her face. "It's empty."

She gave an unimpressed scoff. "What's the point of carrying a lighter that's empty? Stupid kid." With a toss of her hair she marched off down the alley, towards the sidewalk and people with working lighters.

Eli sighed and pressed his hand into his pocket. Even then, he couldn't quite bring himself to let it go.

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Everything felt the same the next time he visited the garden. He snuck aboard the same bus to take him out of the city, walked the same route, dodged the same cracks and pitfalls in the sidewalk, vaulted the same fence. Clicked the same lighter open and shut.

But when he got to the flower bush, there was something new. The prettiest bloom had already been picked, but left on the smooth decorative rock beside the bush; just a few minutes before, if the freshness of the petals was anything to go by. Around the stem was wrapped a string, and at the end of that string, a little bit of paper. In black ink it read:

For the flower boy

Eli stood there for an age, just staring at the flower and its message. He thought he'd been fairly inconspicuous, he thought no one knew that he was stealing flowers from them. He even took the worst looking ones in the hopes that they wouldn't be missed. But he was wrong. He'd been noticed.

He almost didn't take it. What if it was a ploy? What if he was going to get in trouble for stealing now? Then again, it was addressed to him (unless this person had more than one tramp stealing flowers from them). And these ones were really nice, nicer than any of the other ones he'd brought his dad so far, and his dad deserved something nice after the disappointment Eli was turning out to be.

He took the offered stem and left before he could overthink it.

Next time there was a water bottle next to the offered bloom, with the same note attached. Two weeks after that was a thermos of soup, still warm, which he returned the next time when he came for a flower and got a whole bouquet, apparently made up from the fruit of the rest of the garden. It had the red Alstroemeria his father had loved so much, as well as blue tulips and a couple of large yellow sunflowers and some black poppies, all surrounded by a bed of clovers. In the center was a pink carnation.

Though regretting his lack of pen and paper to leave a thank you note, Eli took the bouquet to the cemetery, smiling so wide his cheeks hurt the way he'd forgotten they could.

“Look what I brought, dad,” he said to the grave when he got there. “They left this for me, the owner of the garden.” He carefully crumbled the old flower as he always did before laying down the bouquet-- so large it almost covered the entire slab of rock. “I don’t know if they know what I’m doing it for, but... they’re nice. I think. Would a person do this if they weren’t nice?”

That day he couldn’t sit still while he talked, and he reached for his lighter. *Click, click* it went, cutting his dialogue into small pieces. *Click, click*. Open, shut.

The next visit there wasn’t another bouquet, but there was still the prettiest *Alstroemeria* stem with the same note, *for the flower boy*, this time with a little smile drawn at the end. Eli took it happily, and that day he spent the better part of fifteen minutes crumbling the petals of the old bouquet and letting the wind blow them away.

A month and a half after the notes started, Eli climbed the fence into the garden and went to the back left corner, as usual, and as usual found his flower with its note. But sitting beside it on the rock was a person.

Eli immediately froze, sour fear coating his tongue. The person, a woman with long black hair, sat primly on the rock as though she’d been waiting, and Eli clenched his hand around the lighter in his pocket.

“Hello,” the woman said pleasantly, and Eli shuffled back a step. “You’re the flower boy, right?”

Eli was wary. He didn’t know this woman’s motives for being there, but still he found himself giving a tight nod while the back of his neck beaded with cold sweat.

The woman shifted and Eli's muscles tensed, ready for her to pull out a cell phone and call the police, ready to run, but she merely scooped up a water bottle at her side and sipped from it.

"You like the *Alstroemeria*?"

Another nod. The woman gave a gentle smile and picked up the flower.

"Well, here you are then," she said, holding it out to him. "This is what you're here for, yes?"

Trap trap trap! His brain screamed, but still Eli edged forward enough to pluck the stem from her hands and dart back out of reach. He was breathing hard through his nose in a vain attempt to prevent panic, but she didn't move or so much as twitch in his direction.

"I've noticed you always go the same direction after taking the flowers." She tilted her head. "What are you doing with them, if you don't mind me asking?"

Eli shook his head, mute. He was barely keeping himself from bolting like a startled deer, there was no way he could manage to string together a coherent sentence right now.

The expression on her face turned disappointed, but as far as he could tell, not dangerous-disappointed. Just plain old disappointed.

"Oh well, not my business I suppose." She shifted, beginning to stand up, and Eli skittered back a few more steps, but she didn't come forward. She just stood and smoothed her skirt, giving him a gentle smile. "Have a nice day. You can use the gate, just remember to close it on your way out." With that she walked away, following one of the little paths towards the house.

For a moment he stood where she'd left him, unsure of what to do. Many times he'd tried to imagine what would happen if he got caught, and most of those scenarios ended up with him being arrested. Not... whatever had just happened.

Eventually he remembered how to make his feet work and left the yard. He wasn't quite brave enough to use the gate.

That day his conversation with his father was full of anxious questions. "Can I trust her? Why is she being so nice to me? Should I stop coming here? What should I do?"

None of them got answers. Eli knelt there for almost an hour, murmuring, "What do I do?" and even watering the stone with a few confused tears. Still there was no sign, no indication that any answers were going to be given, and eventually he was forced by the impending sunset to leave the graveyard. Despite his apprehension, he still left the flower he'd been given on the gravestone.

Another two weeks passed. Up until the night before he'd convinced himself that he wasn't going to go, that it was too dangerous, that he could be caught out as a runaway and put back into foster care. But when the sun rose, he found that the thought of abandoning his ritual made his stomach twist in the worst way, so he bit the bullet and went.

The woman was in the garden again, sitting just as primly on the same rock. She gave him a pleasant wave and held out the flower she'd chosen for him that day, which Eli accepted just as skittishly as the weeks before. Thankfully she didn't try to come along this time. She asked only one question: "What is your name?"

Eli gulped and didn't answer immediately, so with a lazy brush of her hair over her shoulder, she said, "My name is Valentina." She said it with an Hispanic lilt, the same kind that his father used to have. It was that fact alone that got Eli to mumble out a reply.

“I’m Eli.”

She didn’t ask for a last name. She just smiled, ever so gently. “Nice to meet you, Eli.”

That day was the beginning of their rocky friendship. Eli never managed to convince himself to stop his ritual, and every two weeks when he returned to the garden Valentina would be waiting for him. Sometimes she’d have a plucked flower in her hand and a friendly smile on her lips, exchanging only a few sentences with him before going back inside. Other times she’d be on her knees in the dirt with a pair of gardening gloves and a big hat shading her as she weeded, or tended to a compost bin, or transplanted, or one of the hundreds of other activities she seemed to have lined up.

She always invited him to join her, and it didn’t take nearly as long as Eli expected before he started to agree. It was during these times when she was able to pry answers out of him, always softly, carefully, and not without revealing something of herself in return.

They were planting sunflowers when Valentina complained about her bad back and told him she was sixty three, and he answered that he was sixteen. Digging through soil for worms when he told her his father was dead. Thinning tender baby plants when they exchanged favorite colors: Eli’s maroon and Valentina’s dawn pink. Pruning branches off of a tree when they found neither of them had ever had a mother. Studying leaves for evidence of pests when he confided that the gunshots he’d heard the night before had frightened him.

On and on it went, and over time Eli realized he was growing to like this woman. He liked talking to someone who could talk back. He liked her motherly smile and her warm dark skin and her curly black hair that looked so much like his. He liked how her voice reminded him of his father.

They were watering the big rhododendrons when she asked again about his ritual. She'd learned that he didn't like speaking about it, that as close as they'd grown he still wasn't ready, and most days she ignored that topic and didn't question when he decided to set his tools aside and take the flower she offered him.

But this time she didn't ask who he was bringing them to, or where he was going, or what he did there. She simply said, breaking the comfortable silence they'd been working in, "Why two weeks?"

Eli's grip on the watering can slackened, just enough for the water to land on his shoe instead of the plant. He righted it quickly and Valentina didn't say anything about it-- it wasn't until they were watering the fifth and last of the bushes that he finally murmured an answer.

"It's how often my dad took me to botanical gardens, or the river. Every two weeks."

Valentina nodded, and they said nothing more about it.

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Eventually autumn came. On the last week of September he took the bus and entered the garden (through the gate, even) to find Valentina in her usual place. But the flower bush beside her was bare, and the bloom she held between her fingers like it was gilded in gold was beginning to wilt.

"The last *Alstroemeria* of the year," said Valentina, holding it out to him. "I have some winter flowers planted, but I'll understand if you stop coming."

Eli considered for a moment, one hand fidgeting with his lighter. In the beginning he'd thought that the sight of someone rough like him fiddling with a lighter would have scared her

off, but it hadn't. He was glad for the soothing *click, click* of it now while he made the decision. The last flower of the year. He should do something special for it.

"Come with me today," he found himself saying quietly. "So you can see what I do."

Her slightly sad expression brightened. "Are you sure?" He knew then that her curiosity had never died, but she'd been waiting for him. And now he felt ready. Ready to be vulnerable again. To trust again. So he nodded.

That wasn't to say he was entirely comfortable. He wasn't-- anxiety riddled his insides, like fruit infested with maggots, and even with the pattern of his lighter he could feel his hands trembling. Valentina followed him without question, even when they entered the cemetery, and didn't say anything when he led her to the far corner and knelt by his father's grave. He crumbled the old flower and watched the petals disintegrate, then placed the last flower in its place with a new reverence. Normally this is where he'd speak, but he couldn't find the words knowing that a pair of living eyes was watching him.

The sun was setting. The undersides of the clouds were painted purple, the reaching shadows of tree branches creeping across the grass. It wouldn't be long before the street lights clicked on in an echo of the sinking sun.

After some time of silence, Valentina moved forward. There were flecks of petal dust on her shoes.

"My father is buried here too," she murmured, "on the other side, near the front."

Eli worried his lower lip with his teeth and said nothing. She kept talking, in a low humming tone that sounded like prayer.

“When he died, I came here every day with an Alstroemeria. Then every week. Then a month. Then a year. I haven’t been back here for... God, it must have been almost twenty years ago.”

He didn’t know what to say to that. The quiet returned, and it was a long while before Eli could find the courage to risk a glance at her face.

To his surprise, she was smiling. Her eyes were glossy, but the smile she wore was genuine and kind, the same as all the smiles she’d ever given him. The breeze shifted a few locks of her hair, and she raised a hand to smooth it back as she spoke.

“I’m glad that my flowers are going to good use.”

He wasn’t sure what to do with the sudden bloom of warmth in his chest. And so, the same way he did whenever he was unsure, he picked up his lighter from where he’d set it down and began to flick it.

Open, shut.

Click, click.