

Marigold



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The flyscreen door creaks as I push it open and step out onto the back porch. She's sitting on one of the rickety garden chairs, undisturbed and peaceful. I walk over and drape a wool blanket over her legs.

"Morning, Mum," I say and pull up my own chair.

She nods and turns back to the meadow. Her grey-blond hair falls around her face as she stares intently at the bees dancing on the petals of a flower. The backyard meadow has always been a fixation for Mum. Ever since I was little this small patch of flowers and grass has been her pride and joy. I remember walking home from the bus stop to find her knee deep in soil and mulch. I remember hours spent out here playing my made-up games. Mum was fairy queen, and I was her loyal protector.

I look at her now. She doesn't burn as brightly as she used to, but I know she still loves this garden. The garden has seen better days; my dad isn't the kind of caretaker my mother was. Dead buds linger on their stems longer than they should and weeds are left to steal the water from the other plants. But Mum's touch remains in the way the lupine is as abundant as ever and how red clovers stand out amongst the other blooms.

"Hey Mum, why d'you love the garden so much?" I ask.

I've asked the question a million times.

Age 5

I burst through the front door after my first day of pre-primary. Mum's drinking a glass of lemonade and wiping the sweat off her brow. I run to her, and she wraps me in her arms.

"Hello love how was your first day of school?" she asks.

"Good, we read the Three Billy Goats Gruff and I made a sort-of friend," I ramble.

"Oh really? What's a sort-of friend?" Mum chuckles and squeezes me tighter.

"Well, her name's Tiana but because she's my sort-of friend I'm allowed to call her Tia," I smile thinking back to how we played in the sandpit that day.

"She sounds lovely. Now, my little Marigold, come and see what I've been doing in the garden."

Marigold was always her nickname for me. A play on words of my real name, Marion. She grew them in a small, secluded spot of the garden; she grew them just for me.

I accidentally slam the sliding door and wince; Mum turns around and gives me a knowing look. I squat in front of the patch of dark soil and wonder what will become of the little seedlings planted there.

"I'm trying my luck with strawberries, hopefully I'm planting them in the right season," Mum says beside me, "They'll be lovely with a scoop of ice-cream, what do you think?"

I smile thinking of strawberries and ice-cream on a hot summer's day.

"Why do you add new plants all the time?" I ask randomly.

Mum considers my question, "It's all part of tending to a garden. Sometimes plants die and new ones have to be added. Sometimes you plant new seeds just because...well, because you can."

She has this wistful look on her face, and I can tell that in this moment that Mum is truly happy.

Age 15

School was rubbish. I jam my set of house keys in the lock and twist them forcefully. They don't budge and I yank them out. I try again; still locked. I breathe in and out, like Dad says to do, and carefully slide the keys into the lock. The lock clicks and I open the door.

I stalk past the kitchen, not taking notice if Dad or Mum is there because right now, I couldn't care less. I drop my bag on the floor and flop on my bed. I think back to the group of girls giggling behind me. *'Marion', Ugh ew. She's got dirt under her nails. Oh my God, I bet she doesn't even wash. Do you think she can hear us?*

My door opens slightly, and Mum pokes her head into the room. I turn to face her. She's red-faced and smiley; the exact opposite of how I feel. She's still wearing her gardening gloves and now the doorknob is covered in soil.

"Mum you're still wearing your gloves," I sigh.

She raises her eyebrows, "Oh, I didn't even realise. Give me a minute."

She puts away the gloves and then sits on the bed beside me.

"How was school?" she asks cheerfully.

"Fine."

Her hand goes to stroke my head, but I duck. Her eyes are full of hurt as she pulls away. We sit in an awkward silence.

"How is Tiana?" Mum says, sounding strained.

"Fine," I say with gritted teeth.

She isn't having my attitude, "Marion, tell me what's wrong."

My anger bubbles to the surface; I'm livid. I keep my mouth closed in a tight line. I can't unleash on Mum; it wouldn't be fair. But she's the reason I'm being made fun of. She's the reason I have this

stupid name. I try to hold back but the lines between rationality have been blurred and I decide I don't care anymore.

"You can tell me anything, Marigold," Mum says. That's when I crack.

I turn to her and say with as much venom as I can, "Don't call me that."

My mistake is that I keep going.

"You want to know what's wrong? No one likes me! Tiana has all these new friends who are really cool, and they talk about movies I haven't seen and clothes I'll never buy. They don't talk to me because I'm just Tiana's weird clingy best friend in their eyes. I knew her before any of them! It's like she looks right through me. I'm not her best friend anymore. I'm a ghost to her."

I'm crying now and the words keep pouring out of me. I'm overflowing like a can of soft drink, and it feels good to get all this off my chest. Mum is silent apart from her hand on my knee.

"They make fun of me because of my name. It's not exactly a name from the 21st Century," She makes a face as if to say something but doesn't, "they say I'm dirty. Because of the soil under my nails and how I smell. I don't *get it*."

Mum pulls me into her arms, and I let her. I'm sniffing and the tears trailing down my cheeks are still hot. I let her shush me and wipe away my tears. We sit on my bed for what feels like ages. I'm slumped over her shoulder, and I feel light. Lighter than yesterday. Lighter than the first day of high school.

"Don't let other people decide who you are. That is up to you," she says, wisdom flowing from her mouth with ease.

"And if you really don't want me to call you Marigold then I won't," Mum whispers.

"Thanks," I say, and we don't speak on the subject anymore.

"Can you show me what you've been doing in the garden?"

Mum lights up and I slowly learn to accept that there will always be dirt under my nails.

Present, Age 40

Mum looks over at me. There is no recognition in her eyes. Everything has been going downhill ever since she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. She wasn't the same as she was last year. She's not the same as she was yesterday. The disease just takes and takes until all that is left is the shell of a lost woman.

She nervously picks at the lint on her blanket and asks, "Who are you?"

I have lost track of how many times she has asked me that question.

I used to reply with detailed summaries of our adventures together. How we had played, laughed, and cried. All the moments that we spent smiling and getting grubby in the dirt. Now all that is left are the moments that will be lost. Lost in her mind.

“Marigold,” I reply, using my old nickname.

Her eyes soften and she smiles and nods.

I point to a honeyeater sticking its beak into one of the flowers, trying to reach the nectar. Mum laughs and the corners of her eyes crinkle, but it doesn’t last. A dark cloud passes over her face, and she is no longer present.

“You always loved this garden,” I say pensively.

She stares out over what was once her kingdom, “Did I?”

I smile and put my arm around her, “Yeah. You did.”

The End