

1st Place
High School Grades 9-10

I Will Not Forget to Speak
By Madeleine Bradford

There is a simple melancholy that touches here, like fingers to lips when the librarians are telling you to be quiet. Again.

There used to be a church on this street- it wasn't much. I mean, it was grandiose. It was a church. But it wasn't much.

I used to go there every Friday to put new flowers on the alter, because I worked on Sundays. I figured if I could at least put flowers on the alter of god, this made me a little religious. As though holiness could ever sanction my wrapping it around my schedule rather than the other way around- but it was work. I needed money. I figured Jesus wouldn't mind.

I'm telling this to you, and I hope you understand that it's not because I like you, and I don't find you interesting at all. Maybe if you know this you will go away and let me talk to my wall in peace, and find out that the cracks in the wall are the cracks in my sanity. I will bleed everything honest, and you have no right to hear me.

Perhaps I'm being sinful.

Actually, I'm not too worried about sinning, or god, or church. And the alter flower thing was more of a habit than a prayer, more a meditation on the week than fervent dousing of doubt in the fires of- whatever. What I'm saying is, I could have stopped going to church, and I wouldn't have minded. I could never deal with sermons, anyway.

But I didn't get to choose.

I guess people stopped going, there, one way or another. I guess donations weren't enough to pay the bills, and religion doesn't have endless pockets, no matter what the total of religion owns, or maybe the bigwigs of the Church capital C decided that our little church wasn't worth the money. This is a little cruel of them, I think to myself. This is just another stab of hurt in a 'person well past caring'. If I was one of those. Which I'm not.

When people say that, I wonder what they're thinking. Seriously. Well past caring is a phrase only used by people who actually do care, really, much more than they want you to know. Or maybe, in a twisted way, they want you to know that they still care and use that pathetic little phrase to paper it over, so that you can peel it away and know their sorrows. Because that seems to be what people want, right? Resonance.

One of the Church Moms, and trust me, I say this with every stereotype of the phrase in mind (they had a knitting circle. A knitting circle!) took me aside one afternoon, one Friday afternoon, as I deposited my geraniums that were now- then- in season, and told me the church was going to close. She said it gently, as though she was terribly afraid I would be upset.

I had told a chorister once the reason why I didn't attend regular ceremonies like the rest of the knitting-needle gang. I suppose he spread the story, because everyone who I know from that church looks at me now as though I'm fragile, as though being poor makes me porcelain. Or worse, they assume it has hardened me, and I can take anything and roll with the punches, so they come up to me with a story about their aunt's dog and how it died when really *I don't want to deal with all of this!*

Perhaps they thought the church had become important to me. And it wasn't, it really wasn't. Actually, buying the flowers had become a bit of a bother, a bit of an annoyance, but I couldn't in good conscience stop bringing them. It's like, what if I abandon my post, and they can't find another flower-bringer? They won't have any flowers for the next service! So, okay, I'll bring double next time, and they can use the ones they don't use this week next week, and it'll be okay, right?

Wrong. Flowers wilt. But I never seemed to realize this. I think maybe I didn't want to realize this. I was the Flower Lady. No one called me that- in fact, I think only a handful of really conscientious grandmas and a few of the Moms really even knew my name, and then there was this one kid who was really nice and helped me unload the car for a couple of weeks, but kept calling me Jared, when I'm clearly female and my name doesn't even start with a J.

But, I was the Flower Lady. And there is power in a title, even if no one knows you have it. Even if no one knows you at all. It means that you have yourself. You can introduce yourself and then you will be a Courtney or a Maggot to whoever you have met, but you still know, secretly, inside yourself somewhere, there is always the Flower Lady.

Anyway, what if they couldn't find someone to do the job? Or worse, what if they found someone to do the job, and she brought the wrong things? I could just imagine it. Orchids out of season, primed to wilt before the mass was over. Daisies, with their meek faces and wimpy little stems, in vases too short for them, drooping like regrets over the side of the altar.

Maybe they wouldn't even know when there were deals on dahlias in the farmers market! Maybe they wouldn't go to the farmers market at all. Probably, they wouldn't. They would probably be a grocery market perfect-rose snob, when everyone knows that if you pick the unopened ones you get a fuller bloom.

It took a long time for them to talk about it, I guess. The plans dragged and dragged, and I think that one construction company canceled at some point. I never really thought it was

going to happen. There were posters everywhere (Sale In Store! Half Off Hymnals!) and they were there so long, they became like old friends. I would open the door, and there would be the crayon smiley face telling me I had a month to turn in my last donations, as though I was going to die, and these would be the last donations, ever, I turned in.

When it happened, it happened so quickly I hardly had time to miss my daily message of death. And I wouldn't be so upset by this, only, I just went to the farmers market and they were out of dahlias. And I have a vase on my counter for them, I picked it out last week, from the vases I now have time to use. And it's empty. I don't know what to do.

I made time for this. I scooped things out of the way- a meeting with a friend, a coffee break, a clandestine movie stolen from the hours I could be working, though those were few and strict. And now the time is like my empty vase, and the water in it is already waiting, and now if not for want of dahlias, my day would be complete. But I can't look out my window, because right now there is a space where a church should be.

No one ever really knew my name, and maybe it doesn't make sense that I care. Maybe in a way I have already started to become the funny smell and flickering lights down the street where no one goes. Should I be feeding pigeons?

I don't know. Pigeons have always seemed like the people in the hallways who push past instead of saying 'excuse me'. Which might seem like practically all of them these days, but it's not, not quite. There must be something redeeming in them, though- pigeons, I mean- otherwise I wouldn't be so fascinated. Maybe it's how dumb they are.

Don't look at me like that. It's true. You know it's true. Pigeons are fantastically dumb. I don't mean to badmouth birds that can't badmouth back, but you can just tell. I don't know how. Maybe it's a misconception. Maybe the way the folds of their skin fall above their beak and their eyes are so beady and set just so convinces us that pigeons are stupid.

"What are you doing here? Hiding?" My best friend asks me, but she's not really my friend. She just works a hot dog stand and invited herself into my house one day. She fought with her boyfriend, and I was a regular- but we won't go into that. Just say we're acquaintances. And, okay, maybe there was a tiny bit of a friendship thing going on. Anyway, she doesn't have anywhere else to go, alright?

"Yes," I say. It's true. I don't want to go back to the farmers market and see if, maybe, they have some other flowers that would fit my vase. I left right away when I heard the dahlias were gone. I don't want to try the grocery store, even though, logically, I know that Church Mom wouldn't be there, ready to force me to buy a bundle of perfect roses. Even if the perfect roses would look just gorgeous with my vase and its particular yellow.

If you buy them small, you get better blooms.

“Well, don’t you at least want to turn a light on?” She asks, and she doesn’t wait for an answer- she never does, that’s one of the things I like about her- just flips the switch. And it’s bright.

The table is shiny, and not just superfluously- the wood is glowing.

It should be. I cleaned it.

She’s not the sort of person who likes to clean things, but I kind of like that, too. It gives me something to do. It means I get to clean her house, when she’s not at mine. Mostly she’s here, though- eating my food and waiting for the Boyfriend. He is often late.

I also vacuumed the floor, though you can’t really tell. I get a feeling of accomplishment from this. It’s not, I cleaned the kitchen, it’s, I *cleaned* the *kitchen*, with an air of practiced nonchalance and a dishtowel draped inconspicuously over the shoulder. It’s a pride thing.

So it’s only natural that I cleaned the vase, too. But I wish I hadn’t. It’s being yellow at me. It’s not like I was going to use the thing, anyway. And it’s big and it takes up dish space and the glaze has a crack in the corner. And it’s so very *yellow*.

I’m dangerously close to standing up and getting my bike and riding to the market again, or maybe to the grocery store, just to prove to Church Mom that I can.

But I feel like maybe I should stop myself. I mean, maybe I should just wallow, for once. I’m always so active, I always have to be doing something- and it was an effort you wouldn’t believe that it took to clear this afternoon. Maybe I should take the time to, like- reflect, or something.

I’m already halfway out the door. “I’m going out,” I say, “Need anything?”

But I know already she won’t come with me- she’s getting ready for a date with boyfriend number two, and luck to them both, though anyone can see he has the wrong sort of nose. He’ll be a jealous phone monitor, just you wait. You can tell by the way his hand constantly strays to his pocket, and though he restrains himself from getting out his phone, the restraint is visible and taut, and likely to tear at any moment, and then she will be stuck boyfriendless, again.

It’s clear that the phone is his primary preoccupation, and Melanie is second. (Melanie is the acquaintance, by the way.) So, of course, the breakup is inevitable.

When I fall in love with someone, I have often told the stupid park pigeons, they will be mad for me. Nothing like this namby-pamby list business. There will be no priorities- only the stark ‘yes, this is it, this is her- groceries? What groceries? Buttons are used for texting? Who needs oxygen?.’

And I will know, because I'll feel it, too.

I'm not so sure anymore, though. I don't know if you can honestly be so levered by another person without losing something in the transition- like, if you suddenly find them, and your life tips all the way over, surely something is bound to fall off. Maybe priorities are important, more important than I think, and I should give Boyfriend 2 the benefit of the doubt. I won't, of course, but I kind of feel better for having realized I should.

So I'm alone as I unchain the bike. The apartment steps have this hideous black stain on them that I think is tar, and I make a mental note to have that checked out by the proprietor. It's been there for months. It's time somebody did something.

My shoes are all wrong for biking, but at this point I don't care. I can take a route without passing the church, I reason, if I turn left at the stoplight, and this is what I think for five blocks straight, like, Starbucks, remember to turn left, hi Mrs. Gossy, remember to turn left- but at the last second I decide I don't want to. I turn right.

And then it's there. The carcass of some huge leviathan, half melted in the sun- not implausible, for I have to say, the heat is deafening. It's a spring day that already feels like summer, and it's static to my skin, but I'm not listening right now. The whale's eyes are empty- someone took the stained glass out already, of course. That would be the first thing they did. Right?

It would if I were in charge. When wrecking balls are involved, stained glass doesn't fit the scene. And I remember nothing of which windows went where, or even what scenes were in them- not that it matters. I'm starting to wish I had taken pictures. Why did I never take pictures? I should have, I had enough warning. And now all I will ever know is what I remember. All I remember is that they were beautiful.

Stained glass. There's that stain again. Steps and glass- maybe I should just leave it, let it all be. Let it spread, let it stick, let it stay. Why should I care? It's just- surface. Glass, tar, vase, table, kitchen. Thin dye all over the hands of the city- thinner than blood, and for the comparison, still, somehow more disturbing. Maybe there's something wrong with me for thinking this. I'm terribly tempted to pull a Lady Macbeth, just yell, 'out, out damned spot!' until it goes away, but I'm not that kind of person. I will clean tables until they glow.

I probably do care.

The ribs are poking through, jagged metal ribs and aching stone flesh. I wonder how they kept it quiet, for surely it must have bellowed when it bled. I had been counting on the solidity of it- the crash. I had been sure it would wake me up one night, at midnight, and I would know, with some sort of mental click, the church was gone. I had been counting on that definitive lack, the solid evidence of noise to keep me sated as I starved for myself. I was the Flower Lady, and there was no need for me any more.

That had been when I had gotten it into my head that I could be a Flower Lady without a church. Of course I knew it was silly, but by the time I really realized this, it was too late. I had already lugged the vase out of the cupboard, I had already cleaned it, and it was already being viciously yellow. There was no hope for it at that point, of course. Once you start yellowing something, it's yellow all the way. There's something about the overt cheeriness of the color that just won't let you stop.

The grocery store had a special on dahlias, but I wasn't looking for them anymore. I mean- I saw them, but I wasn't looking for them, exactly. And they had a better deal on roses. I brought a bundle home, furtively, as though hoping someone would stop me and accuse me of buying the wrong type, make me bring them back. They were the wrong type. They were parchment-colored with bleeding pink edges, and although they were not perfect, they were already half open.

But they did look good in the vase.

