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## STEALING FLOWERS

I note the real estate sign in front of the green Victorian. Night wanders through on its path to the mountains, hiding my trespass through the wrought iron gate. Yet I watch my back as I strip the rosebush, spraying pink petals like fireworks.

Pink roses are easier to rip off than thorny suede-textured reds. Obstinate lilacs, too, grip their bush, making me twist their skinny tough wrists. Sometimes I hide kitchen shears in my purse, better for severing their amethyst cones.

Prudently I wait until night, or the April storm that banged down a screen of icy drops. In a late spring freeze, I thought, I'd preserve the brief drama of ephemeral plumes with my Great Lilac Heist. Passersby ducked their heads into wind-slanted streams. No one saw me yank and clip a heavy feather of white florets, its radiance wasted on a parking lot. I forgot my sopping wet shoes: a strange cry of joy, a rampaging Visigoth's guttural howl, rose in my throat.

I got the idea from Lalla, Michael Ondaatje's grandmother, who also stole flowers and died in a flood. When Ondaatje returned to Colombo to collect material for a family memoir, he learned that Lalla compulsively robbed blooms from churches and parks; she even picked bouquets for dinner parties in her hostess's flowerbeds. In the owner's presence, Ondaatje wrote, Lalla would pull a prize rose up by the roots and after gazing at it for a pleasurable moment, "swallowing its qualities whole," handed it over. She ravaged the best gardens and was banned from the parks. Like Lalla, I wanted to get locked outside picket fences, purloin the object of a ravenous gaze.

In real life I remained a dutiful university professor, who taught Ondaatje's lyrical book, *Running in the Family*, to her autobiographical writing classes. Yet in that high cold university town I first helped myself to neighbors' daffodils, gilding the leftover skin of snow. I snatched chilly tulips and mosque-shaped globes of ocher Iris, too.

Now living in a city that I hope to love I maintain some scruples: I don't cross occupied property lines or steal flowers proudly cultivated for impressive variety. Unlike Lalla, I'd never pluck a Black Baccara in the Botanical Gardens. In well-tended beds I only take time to sniff the roses—how I learned that award-winning beauties don't smell like raspberries and licorice as the catalogues said. The white ones are as odorless as sterilized cotton. Fiery orange and magenta divas are likely to evoke stale thyme, or Chanel No. 5 in a bottle unopened since 1925. But the rampant pink clusters, my favorite marks, spill into alleyways, perfumed like the bathwater of silent film stars.

Although my mother smuggled European seeds into the country in order to plant them, she would have thought ravaging another's garden for fun was akin to eating the apple in Eden. She earned beauty with labor, crouching in dirt, collecting fungus beneath her nails. She crow-barred gray stones, split by fire, into ledges that cradled waxy day lilies. She could coax rare yellow primroses from the Jersey soil. Her opaque Iris, like those I would steal, survived hungry deer beneath wire netting. Only after weeding, fertilizing, protecting, and pruning did she let herself reap the blooms, secure their magnificence in crystal vases with metal-pronged frogs.

When Mom emerged from the fatal coma I tried to bring her back to herself by placing an African Violet on her chest. Her thickened fingers, guided by a vestigial nurturing instinct, like hair that keeps growing after death, mechanically trimmed away a crisp brown leaf; but instead of the velvety magenta flower, her dimming eyes saw her father and brother, both long dead. I then understood the persistent power of her creative energy, my inheritance.

After she died I regretted my grumpy forbearance when she dragged me through her flowerbeds, calling her horticultural triumphs by their Latin names. "One day you won't have a mother," she'd sigh, kneeling before quilts of russet chrysanthemums. For years I associated gardening with the push and pull of our disparate ways. I forbade hopeful suitors to bring me bouquets.

Now witness the compromise inherent in personal change: captured wet lilacs, dripping on their reflection in the table's grey glass. And behold these tattered pink roses, saved from darkness, triumphantly jammed in a black deco vase!