

The flowers were trying to tell me something, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't speak their language. Every time I glanced back at them, they seemed to be saying something different. First hope, then desperation, now innocence. I couldn't work fast enough to capture their message on the canvas before me.

The delicate curve of the stems, the particular arrangement of the petals. It seemed so clear when it was sitting before me in the half light of the attic studio, yet every stroke of my brush rendered my translation more inaccurate.

Frustrated, I turned my back to the flowers, gazing instead at the studio. It was a small studio, oddly shaped and cluttered. Big empty canvases leaned like drunks against the walls, self-consciously blank. Tarps hung haphazardly behind precarious still life arrangements. There was one of rotting pieces of fruit cluttered around a pastel pitcher, another with a stout copper tea kettle that was tarnished on the handle, and everywhere flowers. Once-vibrant roses wilted in tall vases, crumpled lilacs rested on a table, delicate forget-me-nots spilled forth from a parchment cone. Their colors taunted my paints, their texture rejected my brush, and their meaning eluded my mind.

The studio was closing in on me; I needed to clear my mind. Giving the flowers one last disdainful glance, I left the studio, descended the stairs, and released myself into the streets of Paris. It was dusk, and the deserted streets of the *Marais* were bathed in a soft lavender light. Alone with my thoughts, I walked, catching glimpses of other lives through windows that glowed with warm golden light. Here, a man smoking a cigarette scribbles his next masterpiece in a tattered notebook. There, a woman cradling a violin strings together her next *concerto*.

Down the street I continued, peering into other lives, while my flowers back home infatuated my mind. Their presence in my thoughts was so dominating that it was several seconds before I realized I had stopped. Disoriented, I peered through at the scene inside.

A young girl with short amber hair and rosy cheeks, no older than five, wearing a nightgown and a content smile, breathed a cloud of fog onto the glass. As I watched, she used one tiny finger to trace a little daisy, one petal at a time. Droplets of condensation dotted the path she drew. First a small circle for the center of the flower, then five perfect petals. The strokes were so confident, so sure, so unapologetic. Dragging her finger carefully downwards, she added the finishing touch— a graceful curving stem— before her head turned in response to an unheard voice within, and she jumped down and disappeared. I stood, contemplating the little flower for long after, watching as the droplets broke free and carved uninterrupted streaks into the fog. It was so pure, so innocent, even as it was dripping away.

I returned to the studio. Standing before the unrelenting flowers, I saw the small girl tracing her perfection on the glass. And suddenly the studio felt obsolete. I went to the table with the still life of fruit on it, contemplating its existence, my head bowed. All of a sudden, a powerful yet helpless anger consumed me, and in one swift motion I swept the entire display onto floor. *Smash!* The pitcher shattered, sending jagged shards across the floor. *Thud!* The fruit plummeted to the ground and rolled away as if in fear. I crossed the room again to the next still life. *Bang!* The copper kettle. *Crash!* Another vase. I destroyed the other displays and shoved over the empty canvases. I hurled brushes, tore tarps, and upended tables. The sound was brilliant, the power revitalizing. Unremarkable objects were reduced irreversibly to abstract fragments in seconds, all by my own hand. Once a creator, I now found satisfaction in destruction.

And then, panting, I saw the merciless flowers, perched in the vase on the little stool, the only intact arrangement left. And I understood. The miracle of the flowers: unwavering beauty shining through the chaos and wreckage. In their desired context, the flowers told me their story, and I recorded it posthaste.

I turned the abstract pigments smeared on the canvas into something both new and familiar. My colors, in their freedom, told a story. My strokes became empowered with their new purpose. And when I had finished, I looked back at the flowers and saw that they were satisfied, and in realizing this, so was I.