

## Sweet Sentimentals

Going home has never felt like a comfort to me.

Whenever that time of the year comes around, I often hesitate, trying to avoid the topic in conversations with my mama, pretending like I don't know the days I'm *allowed* to leave, all in an effort to preserve myself from the anxiety it induces. The journey itself feels like a dream, one that slips into a nightmare upon arrival, an arrival followed by acts of redemption and absolution so that I may be allowed to leave once again. The leaving hurts too, don't get me wrong, but more so because of the guilt laid upon me everytime I end the farewell embrace and close the car door behind me.

It sounds rather dramatic on paper, so I will righteously admit that it is in no way all bad. I am reminded of this as I turn down N. Anita Lane, before turning into the second driveway on the right. As soon as I close the car door behind me, my grandmother runs out with open arms, greeting me excitedly with a long embrace among the colorful flower beds and birdbaths that surround her driveway. The hug alone is enough to almost bring me to tears. Oh, My Angel, I have missed you so, so much, she says. I ask her how she has been the past few months, and what she has been doing today, and she responds that she has been working on creating her calendar for the Master Gardener club, which she does every year, and has been spending some time at her sister and brother-in-law's house; those two just so happen to be her neighbors.

We immediately head into her backyard, her garden. My grandmother's garden is my favorite place on earth, with its infinite types of flowers and smells and the sound of the wind chimes. Everytime I walk into it, it feels like a deep breath, and I am able, at least for a moment, to be here with her.

We always do a lap around the garden. We walk past her green-house— filled to the brim with budding herbs and succulents— before heading back into the beds for tomatoes and compost, where the tomato vines reach up to the sun, spiraling as tall as my grandmother can reach. We head down the gravel path toward the main area of the garden where we began, but in that process we pass by the shack my grandfather built many years ago, around the time I was born. My cousins and I used to spend our summers in that shack in attempts to escape the Louisiana heat. It's the place where my grandfather worked on all of his various projects. Every time we walk past it, we give each other an unspoken side embrace; we both miss him so much.

Once we return to the main part of the garden, it is overwhelming for just half a moment, as there are so many different types of flowers that the mind can't even comprehend it. But that quickly slips into a feeling of serenity, as the flowers shake and dance in the wind, emitting all sorts of sweet and fruity smells. We walk all around these different flowers on stones that my cousins and I made when we were little, stones that have remained in the same place for fifteen years. Once we reach the perimeter, my grandmother interrupts by saying, Oh my gosh, look who it is! When I look, I see her other neighbor's cat (whom she has named Fluffy Cat) on the fence, looking at us with a menacing curiosity. My grandmother says, Hi there, Mr. Fluffy! But just like that, he's gone, which we share a prolonged laugh about.

We then reach my favorite part of her garden: her orange tree. You know, she always says, I've had this tree since your mama was a baby, and she loves the oranges so much that her mouth would become raw from all of the acid, but it was worth it for her because they were so good. Her orange tree was the first addition to her garden, and it has stood strongly for fifty years, withstanding all of the hurricanes and tropical storms. Just as my mama and uncle did when they were younger, my cousins and I sought delicious relief from the sweltering summer

heat with the sweet and sticky oranges, digging our thumbs into their rough and thick flesh until we reached the fruit inside, which we haphazardly tore at and apart before devouring the little slices of heaven.

Before heading inside, my grandmother and I picked some oranges from our tree so that we could enjoy them with our coffee. Our hands became so sticky from the sweating oranges that they started to adhere to our coffee cups, leaving an imprint of our memory and time together. As we open them up, the air becomes fragrant and misty from the expressed peel, filling the room with an aura that only adds to the comfort of her home. Before long, though, I begin to get tired from hours outside in her garden— the combination of the heat and the coffee sending me into a dream-like state. My grandmother can sense this, and she tells me to take a nap on her couch, and that she will wake me before it gets too late for me to drive home. I look briefly at my half-eaten orange on the table. As if she knows what I am about to say, she tells me not to worry, and that the orange will still be there when I wake up.

I move to the couch, then— the same one she has had since I was a child— and I sink into its cushion as if it were a cloud on a planet where nothing else mattered but this moment, and my family, and the orange that will wait for me when I wake up again, on the other side of this dream.