

petty theft | Melanie Datz

Drunk, we stumbled out of George's Tap and along the dark stretch of Linn Street. Pat and I leaned into each other; it was a humid summer night, and my head spun with beer and lust. Halfway to Pat's, he stopped before a narrow frame house with a forest of flowers in front. "Damn." He reached into his pocket.

"Help me."

"What?"

"The poppies." In the narrow strip between the sidewalk and a row of parked cars were hundreds of poppies, with their petals dropped away to reveal tight drum-shaped seed heads. Pat's Swiss Army knife flashed through the spiny stems. "Hold out your arms."

"It's stealing."

"They're flowers. They'll grow back."

I held out my arms. "What if someone sees?"

"Who's going to see?" There were no lights in the houses; most of the porch lights were off, too. He piled my arms full of poppies and left nothing but silver, serrated leaves.

The poppies scratched my skin. "What are you going to do with them?"

Pat pocketed his knife. "Have a tea party."

In the hot white light of his kitchen, Pat hunched over the poppies spread across the counter.

"Come on—leave those. Let's go to bed." I stripped to my pink and black bra.

"Not now. I can't believe my luck." He yanked a dog-eared *Harpers* from the trash can. The label was addressed to his next-door neighbor. He flipped the slick pages and held it out. "Look, an article on making opium tea. In *Harpers*. Can you believe it?"

I shrugged.

Pat rigged a line from a cabinet handle to the kitchen window. Using first clothespins, then binder clips, then safety pins, and finally string, he hung the poppies, seed heads down. He whistled while he worked.

I took off my jeans. "Come on, baby—you know what beer does to me."

"Later. I need to do this right."

I went to bed alone.

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Hung over, I stumbled down Linn Street to work. We'd dropped a few poppies, and I kicked them. A woman in a fuzzy robe, her gray hair in pink curlers, stood on the sidewalk in front of the flower-filled yard. She pointed a cane at the silvery leaves and the ragged stalks. "Who would do such a thing? They won't grow back next year." She wiped her pale blue eyes. "Damn dopeheads. No respect for others' hard work."

My head throbbed. I shrugged and kept walking, though my stomach churned with guilt.

"Just wait." Her face was pink and wrinkled. "You won't always be young."

At work, I slumped in my chair and wondered why I was dating a guy who'd rather mess with poppies than me. The old lady in her curlers resembled my Grandma. When I was in high school, Grandma paid me to pass trays at her Tupperware parties, where dressed-up old ladies drank a lot of Scotch, ignored the sales pitch, and let me sneak drinks. They gave me advice, too. "Keep your hair long," said Grandma's friend Helen, who had flat gray curls across her forehead. "Men like long hair."

"Ladies, if I can have your attention." The Tupperware lady waved a lid.

"She needs to show off her assets," Grandma said and pushed out her chest. "She inherited my bust, and Lord knows, I put it to good use." The old ladies cackled.

Grandma was dead, and I missed her with a physical jolt.

I laid my head on a stack of files and wondered where the old lady's grandkids were. If I apologized, would she adopt me?

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After work I found Pat bare-chested and sweating in his kitchen. His belly was bread-dough white. He aimed a hair dryer at the poppies and drank from a mug smuggled out of the Hamburg Inn. Pat never left a bar or diner without pocketing something. "I thought I'd help them along. Cut down the drying time." He had the oven on, too, with the door open. His dark hair was streaked with sweat.

It was my hair dryer. He'd taken it from my apartment. I yanked the plug from the socket and the dryer's high shriek ceased.

Pat turned. "I'm just borrowing it."

I said, "I'm breaking up with you."

"What? Why?" His mouth hung slack, his brown eyes went damp.

"Because you're a thief." I coiled the cord around the dryer. "Because my Grandma wouldn't approve."