Daffodils

by Keith Knight

Imogen alights awkwardly from the back seat of Mrs Cowper's big car, waving goodbye to her friend Caroline as she walks slowly up the garden path, dragging her school satchel unceremoniously along the ground. Her jaded progress from gate to door is indicative of her mood since it was explained to her that seven-year-olds are not allowed to give up school simply because the nice Miss Redwood had departed to be replaced by the not-so-nice Mrs Smith. To Imogen, the scholarly life should be fun and games, as it was with Miss Redwood, not learning and practising as is with Mrs Smith.

Her mother is concerned by her daughter's slide into peevish brooding, especially the uncommunicative posturing, and has tried various ploys to enliven her morale: a trip to the circus; regular meals at McDonalds; a day at the beach; and although each treat raised her spirits for a short while, she had quickly reverted to sulky and unresponsive. It has crossed her mind to take Imogen to a child psychologist but friends have dissuaded her, insisting such an action could make matters worse. "It will be the shock of not having daddy around," they unite in advising her, their understanding of the situation a screen for their curiosity.

"Hi," she cheerily greets her daughter, opening the door and taking possession of the abused satchel as the silent child tramps lethargically by.

Tomorrow's school clothes ironed, her mother drops the sweet-smelling basket into a corner, folding up the ironing board and placing it with the iron in the cupboard under the stairs. Switching on the kettle, she observes her only child fastidiously creating her picture and is filled with maternal pride to see that in art, at least, Imogen takes after her, even if the infuriating silences are a reminder of the father who walked out on his responsibilities in the worst possible way.

"Wasn't it a very good poem?" she asks, taunting Imogen into a riposte.

"Yes," she spouts, pursing her lips and raising her eyebrows as if in search of a more defining answer.

"Yes it was a good poem, or yes it was not a good poem? Make yourself understood, Imogen," she lightly scolds, pouring hot water into the tea-pot.

"Mrs Smith said it was like someone else's poem," she finally divulges, suddenly wanting to explain, wanting to demonstrate to her mother the depths of annoyance Mrs Smith puts her through. "She said a man a long time ago had written a poem about daffodils and that my poem was no good."

"Surely not. You must have misunderstood. I know Mrs Smith can be quite silly at times, but I am sure she wouldn't say your poem was no good," her mother humours her, hoping that Imogen will voluntarily vacate the kitchen table.

"She did," Imogen assures her, ignoring her mother as she tactfully lingers at the tables with knives and forks. "Mrs Smith said so." To stress her artistic disgust at her teacher's unwarranted criticism of her finest poem to date, she drops her paint brush into the jam-jar of water, causing a multi-coloured splash to spread across the table-cloth, sighing loudly and meaningfully, tossing her pony-tail with devil-may-care from one shoulder to the other.

"'I wander lonely as a cloud'," her mother recites as she mops up the spillage with a tea-towel. "Did Mrs Smith say that line to you?"

"Don't know," Imogen replies, remaining wilful. "She said some bits like that but I wasn’t listening. Caroline and me were watching a dog in the playground chasing leaves. It was funny."

Her mother shakes her head. She would like to hear the poem but she knows Imogen will be unresponsive. So, as Imogen blows out her cheeks and poses indignantly once more, she quickly gathers-up the jam-jar to take it to the comparative safety of the draining board.

"Why did you decide to write about daffodils?" she asks, placing a plate of beans and chips in front of her. "After all, it is summer now."

Imogen puffs out her cheeks, spearing a long chip with her fork and inserting it sideways into her mouth, allowing the annoying question to dangle in mid-air, the look on her face suggesting she is in search of the most enlightening answer imaginable. Her mother waits, and waits some more, before sitting at the table with her green salad, resigned to being ignored.

They eat without the accompaniment of conversation, the silence overlaid with the ticking of the clock, the traffic in the street and Imogen's noisy mastication and intermittent sighs which escape from her necessary reticence.

The consensus amongst their relatives is that mother and daughter are alike. Both have brown eyes, a rounded face, auburn hair and dark skin, though the difference in their table etiquette is plain for all to see. Imogen eats with the gusto of a lorry driver; another reminder of her father.

"I'm sure Mrs Smith didn't mean to infer your poem was no good," she tries again. "I should think she was complimenting you on being clever enough to write a poem which reminded her of a more famous poem."

Imogen cannot be bought with flattery. She slips from her chair, wanting to flee the endless interrogation. As she skulks away to the living room, her shoulders slump as if disappointment weighs as heavy as potato sacks on her.

"If you like," her mother suggests, halting Imogen in her tracks even before she has made the door, "why don't you tell me about it while you help me clear away the plates?"

Affecting the stance of the martyr she sighs a sigh mined from somewhere near her toes, causing her small body to droop with the utter exhaustion of her life. Obligingly she picks up her plate from the table. "Miss Redwood," she explains, nostalgia ringing like a steeple bell in her tone, "wouldn’t have said it was like a poem written long ago." She proffers the plate to her mother, waiting until it is secured in the dishwasher before continuing. "Miss Redwood would have said 'that is very good, Imogen. I do like the bit about daffodils dancing with the breeze. That shows cleverness.' Mrs Smith never says nice things like that. Never. Not even to Judith Williamson and she is really, really clever."

"'Daffodils dancing with the breeze.' Did you write that?" her mother enquires, thoughtful, recollecting a family trip to the woods, the last images she has of the three of them, a complete family, gazing across a glade of daffodils swaying gently under a warm sun in the April breeze.

"I remembered it," Imogen answers, her chest swelling with pride, her face sliding with majestic ease from downtrodden to wistful self-esteem.

"We had a nice time, didn’t we, that day? We will go again."

For a moment their eyes meet and they both recognise the disruption of loss, knowing they can never replicate that day.

"Go and watch telly, love," she tells her in a sudden and concessionary tone, relieving Imogen of her nightly chore. "Your programme will be on in a few minutes."

With the dishwasher full and ready to be switched on, with her daughter engrossed by the television, she sits down at the kitchen table and allows the fragment of poetry – daffodils dancing with the breeze – free rein to pull dark memories from the corners of her mind. It is not the innocent voice of her daughter who recites the words, or the stentorian voice of Mrs Smith, but the treacherous accent of Imogen's father, a line of poetry he softly repeated the night he tucked his daughter in and kissed her goodnight before picking up his suitcase and C.D. collection and walking out of her life; the felony compounded the next day by Imogen skipping cheerfully off to school safe in the belief that her daddy was in his lorry on the way to the continent, only to discover that Miss Redwood was not in class to greet her and Mrs Smith was in her place.

Tears well in her eyes and, fearful that she will be discovered, she goes to the conservatory. Glancing down, ostensibly to re-direct her thoughts to the pot plants she is growing for the forthcoming fete, she sees Imogen’s picture. Picking it up, in need of assessing her daughter's artistic development, she must catch her breath as a monstrous anomaly rises from the paper.

It is clear that the house and daffodils are well-drawn for a seven-year-old, but it is the man and woman who are the main subjects of the painting. The man is obviously Imogen's father; she has painted him wearing his favourite cowboy shirt. But the woman has yellow hair like Miss Redwood. And Imogen has painted them holding hands.

Shocked by the imagery which confronts her like an adversary, she drops the picture and slumps on to the sun-lounger. As her nerves begin to settle and her heart stops wanting to exit her chest, she decides it would perhaps benefit Imogen if she were to see a psychologist, if only to determine whether she is being a satisfactory mother. And whether it is in her best interests to visit her daddy now that he has set up home with the so-very-nice Miss Redwood?

THE END

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