

**Lilac Ashes**

Life Experience

By Lisa Roszler

## Lilac Ashes

I stood on the lawn, looking up at my bedroom window.

It had taken fifty years to return here; fifty years and a four-hour drive followed by an early morning flight over half the country and another two hour drive in a rental car with my sisters. And my mother. Or what remained of her.

This had been her house, her favorite house-- the one she dreamed about; the one of which she had commissioned a painting; the one that hosted parties, neighbors and a senator; the one that she cried over when my father's infidelity with the boss' daughter necessitated a new job in a new state.

I imagine she often visited the house in her mind, walking the flocked-wallpaper hallways, fingering the old crystal doorknobs, gazing out the wavy glass of the kitchen window into the back yard. It was her wish to have her ashes scattered there, beneath the lilac bush.

In some ways, it was as if time had not moved. The house still stood as it had for more than a century, with its white siding and narrow windows and steeply pitched roof. I closed my eyes and breathed in the thick July heat that radiated from the painted wood and rose in waves from the fragrant black soil. For a moment, I was that child again, the one who wove clover chains in the grass and tunneled hideaways in the spirea and read books in the cherry tree.

But the cherry tree was gone, as was the lilac.

As was Mother.

For me, she had been gone a long time.

I struggled to remember who she had been in those Kansas years, before her marriage finally succumbed to its inevitable death by transgressions. She'd been a wounded child, abandoned by her parents. The empty places within her had hollowed and hardened her heart until a pervasive bitterness rooted itself in the ashes so deeply that it became self-infectious. Cancerous.

To disagree with her was tantamount to disloyalty, and disloyalty was treason. Treason was treated with detachment and, finally, with disowning.

I had disappointed her too much. Disagreed with her plan for my life. She had admitted that she considered me to be dead, had flown into raging fits when there arose evidence to the contrary, and at the end, had asked the hospital chaplain if a mother could go to heaven after writing off her child.

Mother never called for me on her death bed.

In her final minutes, my sister held a phone to my mother's ear. I thanked her for all her sacrifices and the hardships she endured to raise us on her own. I told her I loved her and asked

her to trust Jesus, that He loves perfectly even while we are imperfect, and that everything was alright, and that I would remember her in the lilacs and the sunflowers and the lace curtains.

A year had passed between that day and this one. My sisters had taken turns, roaming the yard, sprinkling here and there to honor this memory or that, in the absence of the lilac. My turn came, and I was at a loss.

I stood beneath the window and turned to scan the yard. There, time had moved on. I had to smile at the irony: where I had climbed the cherry tree now stood a treehouse-style fort with a climbing wall. Next to it, a swing set sat on the spot where I'd first grown my very own garden. Beyond that, probably a couple of decades old, grew a hedge with familiar glossy green leaves. Upon further inspection, I found spent panicles and smooth brown seed pods.

They were lilacs.

And they were, in all likelihood, the daughters of our original.

I looked down at the cylinder in my hands, at the gray powder that was my mother. I said a prayer. And then I poured out the ashes at the base of the bushes and poured out my heart in hopes that she was finally happy, that she was finally at peace, that she finally knew love.

There, in the deep shadow, the ashes took on a gentle hue, the color of spring and hope: lilac.