

Never Mind the Dream

by Deborah Jiang-Stein

Flowers are all I ever wanted, from the time I turned fourteen and quit school up until the day the police thought I needed a rest in the psych wing of the prison.

They called it an evaluation. I call it a rest. Like the rest of them can go to hell. That kind of rest. They evaluated me for twenty years off and on. You'd think they'd have their answers by now. You'd think they have enough on me.

All along, I knew two things since, well, forever. First, one day I'd work at the Public Market down near Puget Sound in downtown Seattle, and second, I'd either turn into a flower or sell flowers.

When I tried to defect into a flower, it didn't work to collect a clump of my favorite pansies, the purple and yellow ones, and sprinkle and dust myself all over with pollen and petals. It didn't work to press pollen into my hair and eyebrows, either.

I figured if I left the pollen on me long enough, it'd soak into my pores and hair follicles and then I'd grow tiny little buds and blossoms of pansies. I even covered my eyebrows with petals so sweat from my forehead wouldn't drip and wash away the pollen.

When all failed, I tried again only this time I stayed horizontal so the pollen and petals wouldn't fall off. I lay flat on my back for one whole day. No food, not even a pee. I should have done it for seven days. Didn't it take God seven days to make the world? I figure a flower needs at least God's time to sprout out of me. I was just six days short of turning into a flower but I couldn't take lying down day after day.

"Never mind the dream," I thought, "if I can't turn into a flower, why

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not sell them?"

Nothing better for a perfect flower stand than my bicycle wheels for a base. I never biked much anyway. All it took then, I broke into a basement in the alley behind the market and scavenged some bleached barn wood.

For a Lucky Tomorrow Buy a Flower Today painted in fancy scroll script in big red letters for my sign to hang on the side of my flower cart, stationed right at the Market's First Avenue entry. My cart sign worked, about a lucky tomorrow. Life's all about luck, which is what I sold. My lucky flowers. First flowers, then the truth and a little luck. If you ask me anything, you get truth.

I painted *Franki's Flowers* on the side opposite my *Lucky Tomorrow* sign. I was supposed to be a boy, so they nick-named me Franklin. Was supposed to be a lot of things. Aren't we all.

How my parents got Franklin from the name on my birth certificate, Esther Levin, I have no idea. They're dead so I can't ask. All I know is no one ever called me Esther.

These here cocktail napkins I stole from the coffee shop across the street. Stuffed a stack in my pocket so I can sketch on them. Just because I sell flowers doesn't mean I get enough of them. I draw petal shapes and bouquets and single stems in a vase, all with color pencils. Mostly pastels. Have to sketch lightly or the napkins tear, just like oil paint brush strokes ruin cocktail napkin into shreds. Isn't the fancy art in Europe all painted in oil?

Who knows, maybe one day I'll get a gallery show of my napkin sketches. I've got hundreds of them, shoebox after shoebox packed full of my pastel colored pencil napkin art.

Flowers are all that's anchored in this world, even though not for

long. The best part, they root. I wish I could. You can trust a flower, even trust it to disappear. Always a treasure at first, a flower's destined to droop. I figure a flower is what's constant in this world if nothing else.

Can't count on much more. No one believed me when I said I had a rock star in me about to be born. Jimi Hendrix's brother got me pregnant in ninth grade. I forget his name because it was just a thing in the park in front of the Market one night, that stand-up sex when you're too high to do it any other way.

My parents thought I was just plain old pregnant and ought to terminate, but I knew she was a rock star in me. So they didn't leave me any choice but to run away and have the baby on my own. What was I supposed to do?

Turns out the psych wing is no place for a baby.

That's why I store a list in my head. Five ways how you look for someone you've lost, someone you need to find. I keep my list posted right on the backside of my forehead, up high inside like a billboard. All I have to do is close my eyes and look up inside my head and there's my list whenever I need it.

Why stuff a paper list in my pocket like everyone else does? Those always get lost, or crumpled and ragged on the edges. When you look for someone you've lost, it's way too important for a ripped piece of paper.

FIVE WAYS TO LOOK FOR SOMEONE YOU LOST

1. Keep your eyes looking sideways.
2. Remember how things smell.
3. Just trust.

4. Test yourself.
5. Never forget.

Only room up there for five things on my list. Sometimes, even with my eyes open, I glance up at my list as a reminder about my purpose. If people look at me funny, with my eyes rolled up, who cares? Meet my baby girl some day, this's the dream I keep.

Right next to my list on the back of my forehead, I set out a violet-colored pansy in a blue vase, and off to the side, one of my framed napkin drawings, a boat in full sail across Puget Sound. On the outside, left and right, my ears hold my head together. When I was in the psych wing, I bound those fleshy flaps with rubber bands, folded each in half.

My rubber-banded ears kept out the nurse, her whispers that always interrupted the buzz in the back of my head. She reminded me of when I was five, as soft as ears myself, and a neighbor woman nibbled my ear tips. Never a bite, she'd chew and coo. A strange and startling flash of laughter in her voice, the neighbor squealed how she loved me. The nurse says the same.

In the silence at the top of my head where ears can't hear, when a rustle stirs in my cells, all I crave is just deep dreamless sleep. I can't stop the ear dreams. Ears stacked upon ears, in my dream. They rest in a corner of a jail cell where they dissolve, then re-make themselves into a two new fleshy masses, like elephant-shaped ear flaps.

Once, not in a dream, two stiff leathery ears sprouted from my hipbones and they slid on a track up and down the side of my almost six-foot frame, raced down to my ankles, then zipped straight up to my head where ears belong.

Never mind the dreams I can't stop. Tonight I'll spoon feed letters and the alphabet into my ears and build stories in my head. After my ears assemble their own words, I'll pack them into a velvet-lined blue suitcase with pansy petals sprinkled inside to cover the secrets and stories, a suitcase tight enough to suffocate them all.

