

First Love

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

If you can bear with me a couple of minutes, I'll tell you the story of my little brother Jett. It seems quite trivial, but actually it has left a mark on me and might even touch a cynical person. I took the time, with his help, to recollect it just for the memory of our childhood, Jett's and mine.

When he was six, he fell in love with a peony flower. Lucette was a name I gave it. He loved it for its red-heart dot on one of its petals, and decided right from the start he would protect it, give it extra care and praise. He checked it every morning, and with his box of crayons drew the whole shrub in pink and green, redrew it the following week and compared his drawing with the preceding one for signs of growth. I made a washable tattoo on his shoulder, using one of his drawings. One day he'd want a real one right on his heart, he had said, the thrill of a six-year old in his eyes.

When Lucette was finally wide open and multi-petalled, Jett picked it and kissed it on its red heart before putting it into a vase on his bedside table. Under the lamp he told the flower stories and showed it paintings and sketches of famous peonies.

Before Lucette withered in the vase he had a talk with it. To keep it forever, he would have to dry its petals, first pluck them one by one, lay them out on a plate in the sun. He'd then collect them after school, put them in a bowl, add a drop of my peony essence before tossing them. He would slip them into a sachet on which he'd have already drawn Lucette, and tie it with a ribbon matching its colours before pushing it under his pillow. In the evening, in his bed, he'd sing a song or write a story for his flower. Those were his excited plans.

When the time for drying had come, he left the petals on the plate getting shrivelled and went to school. Soon the wind rose and a storm got up, carrying heavy rain, playing havoc with the petals. They flew in the air, away from the garden. One of them, one only,

the one with the heart, remained suspended, far above the plate now empty and wet.

This is how he recalled it, and it seems no less real after the years. Jett remembered that when he came home, he saw the petal up there, in a diminished shape, looking down at his disappointment and listening to his cries. In the wind it performed a quick dance as he called and called: come back! come back! Lucette! Lucette! with his distraught face pleading and his hands waving desperately at his peony heart.

