

Sunflowers

by Jowell Tan

When I was young, I lived with my aunt. My parents were on the brink of divorce and shouting at each other all the time, so my mother decided to leave me with her sister so that I wouldn't be traumatised by the sight of their arguing. Of course, she didn't know that I had already known of their marital problems - late at night they argued, thinking that I was fast asleep, when in fact I was wide awake, ear pressed against the wooden door, intercepting every vicious word that passed between them. My mother would leave me with my aunt, claiming that she had to go to work or that they couldn't find a sitter for me, and I pretended to believe her, knowing even at my young age not to aggravate my mother any further than she already was.

My aunt was a devout Christian who attended Mass every Sunday without fail. She lived in a 3-room HDB flat with a balcony. On that balcony, on every other day, she practised her other, more worldly religion - gardening, specifically sunflowers. Every time I slept over at her home, I would wake up in the morning to find her in her mini-garden of sorts, tending to her sunflowers. Some days she would be watering them with a small watering can, other days she would be removing the weeds that taken up residence in the soil. On the afternoons she would always be by the balcony, staring out into the horizon while a humming a melody to herself and her plants, rubbing a petal between her thumb and index finger.

I believe she had always known about our problems at home, but she never mentioned a word of it either to me or anyone else.

One day, I was at her place after my parents had a particularly fierce fight that I had overheard. When my mother dropped me off, I headed straight to the couch and sat there, motionless. That fight was the fight that ended it for our family, and I knew it. I was sitting there trying my hardest not to break down and accept that fact. Deep down I was hoping that we could still all be together. That was

when my aunt came and sat next to me, sunflower in hand. She told me a story:

"Audrey, do you know why God created the sunflower?"

I looked at her and shook my head.

"Well in the beginning, when God created the Earth, it was dark and scary. It's like when you turn off the lights in your bedroom - it's very dark, right? You can't see your fingers in front of you? So God decided to bring some light into the world, and he created the sun to do so. Without fail, the sun will rise up from its resting place, high into the sky, driving away the scary darkness and shining brightly onto everything on this earth, so that we would be able to view God's creation and call it good, just like He did when He created it Himself, so many years ago. He also knew that although the sun in the sky would be able to drive away the darkness covering the earth, it wouldn't be able to drive the darkness in us that takes over sometimes and hides us from His presence.

"So He created the sunflower as a mini-sun, so that when we see it, we would be able to conquer the fear and darkness within us and be happy wherever we are."

She handed me the sunflower.

"Try it," She said. *"Look hard at the sunflower and be happy."*

So I did. And as I did, the most wonderful thing happened - I started to feel better. It was as if there was this heavy burden upon me that was now lifted and I was floating, light as a cloud, happy and carefree.

I was ecstatic. *"It works, it works!"* I shouted in joy and smiled widely at her. she greeted me with a smile of her own, not as wide or childish as my 6-year-old smile, but one of wisdom and satisfaction, and of true happiness. She didn't say anything, but she didn't have to - that day she changed my life.

My aunt died five years ago, when I was twenty-eight. I don't remember a lot of things about that day - I don't remember the colour of her clothes, for instance - but I still remember the story that she told me in that flat. Even till this day, whenever I am stressed out or feeling sad, I buy a sunflower. I grip that sunflower

tightly and look intensely into it. And just like on that day on that couch in that HDB flat twenty-two years ago, I feel my troubles melt away, and in its place I feel peace.

