

Smoke

by Peggy Duffy

When I was nine, I lost my sense of smell. I'd been sick for weeks. My mother brought me sugary tea and coke to drink between my bouts of shaking and sweating, lowering her lips to check my feverish brow. Through my clogged and swollen nasal passages, I could still sniff the tangy scent of her breath laced with mentholated smoke. One day, she threw open the window, her gaze following the gentle movement of air into the room. I lifted my head to inhale the sweetness of the cherry blossoms while she lit a cigarette. I drew in only a cool and brittle draft.

We both lost our appetites, her sense of taste destroyed by the tide of smoke sweeping across her tongue, wiping out her taste buds. Mine was limited to the four tastes the tongue alone could discern, no longer peppered with the aroma of food. We'd pick at our meals, her smoldering cigarette scalding my eyes and nostrils, sometimes drying their membranes, other times causing them to weep. Her eyes itched from allergies. Spring came early and lasted long in Washington D.C., the air adrift with pollens which set off her symptoms. She claimed she was scent-sensitive. I remembered the pungent cigarette odor with a mixture of wistful longing, a sense of loss and bitterness.

I became a florist, selecting, snipping and cutting nature's bounty, arranging the mass of blooms into decorative displays, delivering bouquets whose sweet perfume I cannot discern into the lives of others. Once a week, I minister to my own mother, bound to her wheelchair in the confines of a nursing home not far from where she raised me. Flowers would make her eyes red and runny. I slip into her room, empty-armed, lean down and brush my cheek against her good one. The other side of her face lies slack, her paralyzed arm held against her waist at an odd and rigid angle. I take her walking around the halls, chattering away. We stop in the smoking room for a

break. She sits still, expressionless. I light a cigarette, draw in the dusty odorless vapor, and blow through my pursed lips into her unmoving ones, her eyes momentarily bright.

