

## All the Daisies and Daffodils

Our world was sunshine. Our yard was small, and yet, on the pathetic patch of grass we could afford, Celine insisted we plant flowers. Daffodils and daisies, she said, flowers of life and innocence. So, for months, we coaxed the sunny flowers from the earth, and on the day they bloomed, I had never seen Celine happier. You loved them too. The day we took you home from the hospital, you couldn't take your eyes off the daffodils. That was a blissful spring, where we laughed and smiled and grew daisies in the sun.

“Progeria,” the doctor said. “She won't live to be 15 years old. Essentially, her body will never grow, but age faster than the average kid. You'll start to see the symptoms soon, such as stunted growth, abnormal head growth, heart disease...” Celine couldn't stop crying as we struggled to keep your hair from falling out. You grew frail and older, like the daffodils who wilted in the summer heat. But we loved you still. Despite your sickly aging body, those sweet eyes stared back, and smiled.

We sat in the hospital as they gave you treatment. Tick, tick, tick, tick, the clocks mocked me. Tick, tick, tick, tick. “12 years left, eh?” They taunted. I fought the urge to throw up, fighting to breathe as time lost its meaning and the world tried to swallow me whole. Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. Save her, save her, time is running out! They laughed. Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, look, see how old she looks,”the clocks chuckled. I shuddered, until I felt you hold my hand.

“Daddy? Mommy says it's time to go!” I forced a smile as I stood. I still have 12 years, don't I?

“Daddy, why can't I go to school?” Those innocent eyes bored into me, as I, helpless, fought tears. Why couldn't you go to school? I mumbled some dumb response and ushered you into bed. You were hardly out of sight when I broke down, sobbing. 10 years left, the clocks smirked. This wasn't meant to happen. My dear Daisy, I never meant any of this for you...

It was winter, and we couldn't see the daffodils. I heard a thud upstairs, and my heart sank as I sprinted up the stairs. I carried you to the car, biting my lip at how light you had grown, before speeding away to the hospital. "Tick, tick, 8 years left," the grandfather clock giggled. You still smiled.

"It's April again," you stated, glancing out the window. I can still picture you now, primly pulling the papery hospital sheets over your lap, a shiny yellow bow, messily tied by you, wrapped around your hairless head. But you shone; the light from the window painted you like an angel as you turned to smile at me. "Can you bring one of the daffodils?"

Your request haunted me. Every week, I clipped a daffodil from the wilting flower bed and rushed it to you. For a moment you were like any other 7 year old, smiling at a present from her father, blooming like the daffodil. But they would always wilt. I never gave up, even when April passed and I could only find the elusive flowers in stores. I carried them to you, glad for that short lived moment of sunshine. They it never lasted.

Celine fought for you. She worked 3 jobs just to keep the daisies and daffodils alive. We both worked just for that spring, so rare, that reminded us that our world had been sunshine. That it still was. I visited seven different middle schools, arguing, yelling at the headmasters who refused to take you.

"We're sorry, Mr. Green, Daisy's appearance is a little... distracting. Perhaps she should try homeschooling?"

I yelled. I yelled and yelled, just wanting everything to be okay. I don't know if I was more upset that they wouldn't take you, or that you weren't normal. And I hated it, that I could hate this flower, my little daisy, just because you weren't normal. I still hope you'll forgive me soon. "5 years left, tick tick tick tick tick tick," the school bell snarled as I hurriedly stepped out of its halls. Time is running out.

“I’m going to school?” Your face lit up, the cornflakes you were lifting up to your mouth with your spoon sloppily splattering onto your clothes as you gaped at me, dumbfounded. The house radiated with spring as you darted around, prattling about what dress you would wear, what kind of teachers you would have, what kind of other little girls would be there. Celine laughed as you danced around her, hopping in your favorite white sneakers and same old yellow bow wrapped around your smooth head. We hadn’t seen you so happy in so long...

“Why do I look like this?” You dragged your backpack behind you, your sneakers coated with dirt, your bow glittering all the more yellow in the autumn sunset. Celine and I exchanged glances, our eyes filled with terror and shame. I never felt so helpless. Tears glittered on your aged cheeks, that body that didn’t belong to you. Your condition hadn’t bothered you before. Now, as you stared at me, your question bored into my mind. “Why do I look like this?”

I held her and didn’t let go. We were all so terrified of the coming winter, the one she didn’t even know was coming. “4 years left,” the grandfather clock giggled.

Things got better. The first days were the hardest, but after a while, you came to enjoy school. You craved the normalcy of it, scurrying to class with the masses of students, being lost in a crowd rather than being gawked and stared at. Girls were drawn to you, for you had and always will have the most beautiful smile, and you comforted anyone and everyone who seemed down. You were their angel. Celine and I were both shocked to see you carry home a violin one day and declare your determination to play it. So you did. Those months were noisy, uneasy, but happy ones. We were all so afraid to be happy, because who could tell when it would be taken from us again?

As I was shopping for a Christmas tree, hoping to surprise you when you got home, I got the call. I reeled and struggled to stay upright, gasping as I stumbled to my truck and sped away to the hospital. “Tick, 2 years left,” the radio clock grinned at me. Why don’t you save her if you love

her? I remember stumbling into the room, gagging at the yellow wallpaper and the daffodils swollen with water in the vase by your table, near collapsed, and grotesquely limp. And surrounded by it all was you, sinking in that sickly yellow. We held your hand as the doctors told us the news. I remember it shaking, but still hardly weighing an ounce.

“She has no more than a year left. Less, if you don’t take it easy. Just remember that any actions you take now are just prolonging the inevitable.” I bit my tongue to keep from yelling. You’re a doctor! I wanted to scream. Your job is to heal people. Why can’t you heal her, just let her be normal! But we were too busy holding you as you shook with tears. You clenched the sheets between your fists, gasping for breath.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” you whispered. “I wish I had known...I wish I could’ve...” We just held you and cried, because we wished we could’ve too. I wished I could’ve taught you how to drive, then scold you for staying out past your bedtime. Celine wished she could’ve dressed your hair for prom, and gone dress shopping with you. I wish I could’ve walked you down the aisle and watch my grandchildren grow up, your children grow up. We all wish we could’ve done something.

You were helping me in the garden. It was going to be a surprise for Celine when she got home that we had planted a new flower bed near our bedroom window. You tripped, dizzy, vomiting and shaking, groaning as I scooped you up and ran you to the car. That last time I hugged you, you smiled a little as you snuggled closer to my chest. Perhaps you knew. Perhaps we all did, but desperately didn’t want to.

The last petal on the daisies fell. We had paced the waiting room for hours, but deep down we knew. The doctors came to meet us, but no Daisy. As soon as Celine didn’t see you, she screamed and collapsed. The clocks suffocated us, giggling and snickering, because they knew it was coming. We yelled. At each other, at God, at family. We yelled and yelled until we could only cry. Celine refused to go outside. I understood. The air, the grass, the sunshine, all of it was

filled with memories of you. Our garden shrivelled and died, parched and barren. The clocks wouldn't leave us alone, laughingly pointing to the pile of bills who perched quietly on the dinner table.

“How can we pay these off?” Celine turned to me, tears in her eyes.

The churchyard was quiet, but a huge crowd packed in, faces I didn't recognise. Their words sounded faint to me, as if I was being dragged underwater, choking, dying. As my Daisy was lowered deeper and deeper, my heart went with you, and together we sunk to the bottom of the earth. When Celine and I turned to walk away, a shout rang out and the pastor bounded up to us.

“All these people here are friends of Daisy, people she met, or inspired. They heard about the bill situation, and they contributed a fund to help with the medical costs. They're all really thankful for how y'all took care of Daisy, and let me tell you, that girl...”

I couldn't hear the rest of what he said. That wasn't what really happened. We never took so good of care of you as you took care of us, my dear. Even now, I can hear your little voice scolding me. “Don't cry, Daddy, I'm alright.” Celine and I could only hold each other and cry.

I looked to the field beyond, and stifled a gasp as the pastor's voice droned on behind me. Dew peppered the ground, coating the wild grass in a shimmering layer of freshness. The late morning light danced lightly on its surface, saturating the rich color of the unkempt grass below. On top of it all, the knoll was covered with swathes of newly budded white daisies.