

A Mirror of Flowers

Evelyn knelt in a patch of sunset marigolds, the pink of her gloves a bright punctuation against dark soil. A bead of sweat slid from her hairline and caught in the curl of her braid, which clung damp and heavy to the pale skin at her neck. She lifted her face and offered a practiced smile to people passing on the path—women in spring dresses that flared like petals as they moved. Above them a plane cut the sky, its shadow swept the park like a slow hand, and the marigolds trembled in its wake. Evelyn paused mid-sweep of her trowel, breath held until the shadow passed, then let it out with a small, private marvel at how the world kept its timing.

Evelyn knelt in the dirt each morning, soil dark under her fingers and the hem of her skirt. She smoothed the beds in a steady, practiced rhythm—one sweep, another—like a small litany, as if the motion might call him back. The park felt quieter today; even the usual chatter thinned into a hush. A headline lay folded on a bench: the battle was closing in. Children had been sent away to farms; the town felt lighter when they were gone.

She should have left too. Instead, she crossed the street from her little apartment, into the park and set to work. She tended the flowers, offered a polite smile to neighbours who passed, and let the sun warm the back of her neck for as long as it would. It was the same routine as the other women who stayed—an ordinary choreography against an extraordinary worry.

Evelyn's hands stilled in the soil. A cold knot of unease slid up her spine as women around the park abandoned baskets and prams and ran for the road. Her stomach flipped—fear braided with a strange, electric anticipation—and she kept her face bent over the orange blossoms, fingers frozen in a half sweep.

A low grumble grew into the clatter of trucks. The smell of diesel hit her first, sharp and metallic, and then the backs of the lorries opened like mouths. Men tumbled out: some laughing, some blinking against the light, some wrapped in sudden, clumsy embraces. Faces spilled into the street—faces Evelyn knew better than anyone's in the park. A neighbour's laugh cut through the noise, she didn't need to turn to place it. A sad smile pulled at Evelyn's lips as she watched the reunion play itself out in the same, terrible sequence.

He saw her then, and Ethan's grin split his face. Before she could think, her feet were moving, soil smearing the hem of her skirt, breath coming quick and hot, until she was running toward him. They collided on the path, a tangle of arms, a laugh that turned into a sob, a kiss that tasted of smoke and soap. His hands found her back, fingers urgent and

trembling, she buried her face in his coat and drank him in. The salt of his skin, the faint diesel on his sleeve. Around them the park blurred into colour and noise, but Evelyn catalogued him in small, fierce details, the nick at his knuckle, the way his left eyebrow lifted when he smiled, the callus on his thumb. She pressed her palms to him as if she could press the memory into her skin.

'We haven't much time,' Evelyn breathed, eyes flicking between his face and the road as if the distance could be measured in heartbeats.

'We have all the time in the world,' Ethan said, smiling, and the way he said it, soft, certain, made her chest ache. 'I've been placed on leave.'

She tried anyway. She hooked her fingers in the cuff of his coat and began to tug him toward the trees; toward the thin shelter she'd always imagined. Her feet scraped the path, her voice rose into a half-plea. For a second his hand tightened around hers and she felt the world tilt toward safety.

Then orange exploded across her vision, bright as the marigolds at her knees, and a sound like a tearing sky filled her ears. Her scream ripped out of her before she could shape it.

When the light and noise receded, she was back in the dim room. The mirror held her reflection pale and raw. She brushed the wetness from her cheeks and pressed both palms to the glass until the cool bit into her skin. At the window a small flash of blue caught her eye: a bird on the sill, head tilted as if listening, its bright back echoing the bell-shaped flowers she loved and the blue of Ethan's eyes. For one breath before she dived, the ordinary thing felt like a promise, and she let that impossible colour steady her as she sank back into the past.

The ground shuddered under her knees. Damp gloves clung to her fingers; numbness crawled up from the tips of her hands. She had only just been here, it was too soon, the aftertaste of the last return sat like metal at the back of her mouth. Quick trips always left small debts in the present: a clock that stopped, a petal on the sill where none had been, a bruise that had no story. Sometimes only Evelyn noticed; sometimes the town itself rearranged around the change.

Gunfire snapped through the air, sharp and close. She had landed at the wrong moment. A ruby curl had come loose and plastered to her cheek; sweat stung her eyes. Ethan—she had to find him. There was always a chance, in any loop. She ripped her hands

from the cold soil, gloves snagged and left behind and ran toward the street where the trucks would be.

Evelyn stumbled as the park dissolved into smoke and ash. Her foot caught on something soft; a hand clamped around her ankle and a woman's scream split the air. The woman turned toward her, skin blistered and hair singed, and the hot, metallic tang of smoke-filled Evelyn's mouth. The neighbour clawed at her hem, fingers frantic, voice raw with pleading; she hadn't made it to the road, hadn't reached her husband. Evelyn lurched free and rolled onto the grass, the woman's grip slipping like a wet thing, the sound of her begging following Evelyn as she hauled herself up and ran, lungs burning, eyes stinging with smoke.

'Get off me!' Evelyn screamed, driving her heel into the woman's hand until fingers loosened and slid away. The neighbour collapsed back, coughing, clutching at her singed dress; Evelyn didn't spare her a look. There was no time for mercy—only one way out of this: find Ethan and end the jump. She pushed through the grey, choking cloud, scanning for the flash of blond hair amid the smoke and bodies.

'Oh, Ethan!'

Blue eyes found her as she pushed forward; relief rose in her throat as she reached for him. Cold fingers clamped her shoulder. Pain flared in her stomach as the bright face resolved into a soldier's—black hair, pale skin, a sneer—and the bayonet drove in deeper. Evelyn's nails raked at the man's sleeve; his skin caught under her fingertips. He wrenched the blade free and moved on.

She sank to her knees. Warmth spread under her palms, sticky and sudden, and she pressed her hands to the wound as if pressure could stitch the world back together.

'Ethan,' she whispered, voice thin. Her vision blurred at the edges; the park narrowed to a ring of smoke and sound. The pain burned through her like a slow fire while the red darkened across her white dress, and she waited for the dim room to take her back.

A metallic taste lingered at the back of Evelyn's tongue and a dull ache hummed under her ribs. Rain spattered inside, running down the wall and pooling on the wooden floor; the park beyond was a soft, indistinct smear. Evelyn wheeled her chair along the well-worn path between the mirror and the window, leaned her forehead against the cool pane, and splayed her fingers over the pain. From down the hall came the faint rustle of fabric and the scuff of wet boots on carpet. The bluebells in the flowerbox outside her window bowed in the rain, faces dulled, petals folded as if sleeping, their tired colour answering the blue of Ethan's

eyes. Evelyn watched them for a long, held breath, her fingers reaching out to touch their sleep.

The red gloves felt wrong in her hands—too bright, too new—so that every small movement made Evelyn notice them. She planted the trowel between two bluebells and let her fingers rest on the damp earth, feeling the cool grit under the seams of the leather. The bluebells nodded in the warm spring light, a softer company than the usual sunset marigolds, but their bell-shapes only sharpened the gloves' harshness.

Voices drifted from the grass where a few children still played, a thin, ordinary sound that should have steadied her. Instead, it made her glance around, uneasy, as if the park were holding its breath. Her hands moved with the old, patient certainty—one sweep, another—because she had tended this patch so long, she could name the soil by smell and the insects by the way they landed. Knowing the garden so well made the red gloves feel like an intruder on a map she'd drawn herself.

Today she felt more optimistic than most, though she didn't know why. Birds threaded the air above the beds, their bright notes a companion to the bluebells nodding in the warm light. A plane cut the sky; its shadow swept the flowers dull for a breath and moved on. She lifted her hat, letting curls spill to her shoulders, and let out a soft sigh. The thaw had turned the soil to a clinging mush that tugged at her knees; the white dress at her waist would be soiled by noon. White, of all colours—soft green suited her better—but she sank to her work and smoothed the earth as if colour could wait.

Soot prickled at the tip of her nose before she saw the trucks—an acrid breath that rode the rumble into the street. The children's laughter cut off like a snapped thread as mothers dropped toys and ran, feet thudding on the path. Evelyn closed her eyes and let the sound of reunions wash over her: high, delighted squeals, the low, relieved sobs, the small, private noises people make when they find one another again.

A laugh she knew—bright and rolling like a kookaburra—rose above the clamour. Her neighbour's voice, finding her husband, and for a breath Evelyn felt something like contentment. Long ago she had been the one racing down the road, searching the crowd for those blue eyes she loved, and the memory settled in her chest like a warm stone.

'Evie.' The name landed like a small, bright stone. Prickles ran up her arms; tears pooled at the rims of her eyes and trembled on her pale cheeks. She had only just seen him,

and yet the moment stretched like a remembered ache. 'I've been looking for you,' he said, voice rough with something that might have been relief.

'Ethan.' She didn't flinch as he dropped to his knees and folded her into his arms. Heat pressed through his coat; he smelled of smoke and the faint, stubborn tang of tobacco he always promised to quit. She let herself lean into that warmth, into the familiar weight of him, and for an instant the park narrowed to the press of his chest and the steady beat beneath her ear.

'I've missed you.' His lips pressed into the hollow behind her ear; the scent of the perfume he'd bought her—soft, floral, impossibly familiar—rose around them. She felt it like a small, private proof that this was real.

'We don't have much time.' The words slipped out before she could catch them, a reflex honed by too many returns. Routine steadied her: the quick, efficient motions that had become a map through chaos. She let the urgency sit between them, a thin, bright wire, and folded herself into the moment anyway, breathing him in, memorising the weight of his arms, counting the seconds as if they might be enough.

He rose and hauled her up as if he could lift time itself. His palms were warm at her waist; for a moment the world narrowed to the press of his jacket and the steady thud of his heart.

'I've been placed on leave,' he said, voice low and urgent, and the words landed like a promise and a warning at once. Evelyn searched his face for the rest of the truth—something she'd learned to read in the set of his jaw, the quick blink—but found only a tired, fierce smile.

'We have all the time in the world,' he added, and she let the lie and the longing sit together between them.

Evelyn turned into him; his blue eyes smiled—blue as the bellflowers at their feet. He stood there, unaware, and for a moment the world narrowed to the warmth of his chest and the steady press of his hands. She tilted her head and looked past his shoulder to the trees she always tried to drag him toward. The birds were singing. Her brow tightened—birds did not sing here—but the sound was bright and ordinary, and it made the moment feel less like a trap and more like a promise.

They did not move from the patch of bluebells. Evelyn closed her eyes and let the sun and the perfume and the weight of him settle around her. She waited, as she always had, for the familiar rupture: for the ache in her stomach to ease, for heat to bloom and throw her

across the grass, for white to meet red and for everything to break. Instead, the minutes held like beads on a string.

Under her palms the thud she'd felt a moment before thinned, as if heard from far away. The bluebells bowed; the plane's shadow passed and the flowers shivered. Somewhere beyond the ring of her certainty a voice said a name she did not place at first, then louder, practical and close. A gloved hand brushed her wrist, a softer hand smoothed hair from her forehead. The white at her hem darkened where it met the grass.

Evelyn smiled, small and certain, and let herself believe. Around her the park kept its ordinary noises—children laughing, neighbours calling—while the world narrowed to the blue of Ethan's eyes and the bell-shaped curve of the flowers, and the birds kept singing.