

Scattered Fake Sunflowers

He remembered walking away. So sure of himself, so sure he was meant for better things, Sully packed his favorite clothes, his baseball with signatures, and his signed photo of Richard Petty, and left everything else. What did he need with hand-me-down boots and work gloves? He was having no more of that kind of life. He was going to build things and make his name bigger than Frank Lloyd Wright's.

Yes, he was quite determined never to return. He was so determined, in fact, that before shoving through the swinging gate – 'cause if you didn't shove it, the crookedness wouldn't let it open – he proved his determination not to return by stomping down all of the mostly blooming sunflowers planted along the fence.

He almost felt guilty, knowing how his momma had spent so much time keeping the bugs from eating their leaves and staking them when they seemed ready to bend too far and watering them with water she had to hand pump from the well during the drought while their neighbors said it was a waste to throw water onto scraggly flowers when it could be better used elsewhere. Yes, he was almost guilty, but he wasn't quite. After all, she had smashed his dreams, too. She said he wasn't, either, too good to get his hands dirty pulling weeds from the garden or to have to smell the nasty old cows while he raked their mess from beneath them. What did she know? He would prove it. He would prove he was, too, better than that.

Putting on his brother's jacket and the hat his grandpa left him for when "he was man enough to fill it," Sully grabbed his suitcase (that it was his uncle's suitcase his momma had borrowed to go visit her only friend who didn't live within walking distance didn't register as stealing since he would give it back when he had money to buy a hundred just like it) and crept out the back door. His poppa was out in the field, too far away to see him. Momma was taking care of the baby who would never stop crying. Grams never saw nothin' but who was in her fridge.

He closed the old screen door carefully so it wouldn't bang and slipped around to the side of the house with no windows. From there, he would make it to the road easy. Anyone stopping to ask where he was headin' would be told it was none of their business and he would keep walking like he knew where he was going.

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Dropping his head on his hands, Sully closed his eyes against the scene and against the shiny varnish covering the mahogany desk. He had been so proud of the day he finished buffing the final coat of varnish and moved it into the house. Violet didn't understand why he couldn't make a simple desk of cheap pine instead. It would work the same, she kept insisting while he figured the price of the lumber against what they had in their bank account. It wouldn't work the same. Cheap pine looked ... cheap ... and pine. When he had clients over to discuss plans he'd worked up for their million dollar homes, he couldn't have a cheap pine desk. He also couldn't have them sit in a corner of a crowded living room. He had to have the garage turned into an office so they wouldn't have to go through the house full of cheap furniture.

"To make money, you have to spend money." He kept telling her it was true. If she'd only believed, it would have been easier to keep believing it himself. Never mind that he didn't have clients yet. He would have. And then she would see.

If they had let him go, he would've made it. Sully knew the day he'd been found walking along the road, suitcase in hand, that if they'd let him alone, he would've turned into the man he was supposed to be instead of one who had nothing but things holding him back. He knew it all started there. The sunflowers were planted again the next year, and every year after, like nothing happened, but he kept getting smashed down.

They should have let him go. Never mind he was only ten. He was old enough for ten and they had plenty of other kids to do the nasty work. They didn't have to hold him down.

Pulling back from his lapse into a childhood he tried to forget, Sully picked up his drawing pen. Moving aside the bank statements and calculator, he began covering the newsprint pad he used as a desk mat with lines and angles, doors, windows, a sunken living room ... and he stopped. It was the house again – the house he built for her, although he had to admit Violet was partially right. It wasn't for his wife, his now ex-wife. It wasn't really for him, either. It was only for the design; the design had planted itself in his brain and wouldn't let go. So he'd built it, against Violet's wishes and against his brain telling him they couldn't afford it, he built it anyway, because it needed to be built.

And it was sold as part of their settlement.

Luckily, the effort wasn't wasted and it sold well. With the part of the profit that was his to keep, he bought the small lot next to his creation and put a trailer on it. He couldn't resist chuckling at the absurdity. Who in their right mind would hire an architect who lived in a trailer? No one would. And no one did. He'd had to resort to what he'd learned other than architecture – throwing his six years of school down the drain and grabbing any job he could get as a gardener.

At first, he resented it terribly. He was better than that. If they hadn't smashed him down enough for his confidence to wane when putting in bids on jobs, he would be at the top of the Chamber of Commerce's list of recommended businesses, not tending the yard and gardens around their building.

Sighing, he dropped his pen and pushed out of his chair. The desk was all he had left. Violet had snickered when she agreed it shouldn't go to auction. She wanted him to have it as a memory.

Violet was a woman as pretty as her name, but heartless. At least she was heartless when it came to dreams. She believed in hard work. She believed in rules. She believed in attending dinner parties that would let them socialize with anyone who might have any type of well-paying job for him. She didn't, however, believe in dreams.

Since pacing around the trailer helped nothing, Sully grabbed the keys to his old jeep and headed out the door. Possibly, he would wander the garden store in the next town and try to overhear customers who might need work done. Or, he would go to the city. He hadn't been to the city in ages.

Out of habit, he looked over at his meticulously-designed big house with its front porch as he pulled out. Marion waved a brief greeting. He waved back and shook his head about her husband leaving her. A fine woman she was, rather plain and straight-laced, but fine enough not to walk out on. Marion paid well for him to care for her yard she didn't know used to be his, and her cookies and cakes were nice bonuses when she decided to bring them to his door.

Not content to stop at town, he went on into the city. Aimless, as he had no plans other than to feel a real part of things, he circled the streets he knew well and nearly ran into the car in front of him when he glanced into the window of a little art gallery. It was his vase.

Pulling into the nearest parking space, Sully nearly flew out of the car and back down the sidewalk to the gallery. He stared through the window. It was his vase, or rather, the match to his vase.

Its lines were unmistakable: the soft curves formed into a female, but in a surreal way so as not to make it graphic or inappropriate for a public window display. Barely able to make out the beginnings of the back side, where if it was indeed the match, he would find a colorful painting, he fought himself about whether to go in.

His vase was unsigned. Sully used to spend much time at the library looking for anything that would give him a clue as to its artist. He took it to several dealers who pronounced it "worthless" by an "unknown" who didn't know enough to sign his work.

It was far from worthless. Granted, he found it at a thrift store, left there by some idiot who didn't realize a thrift store was no place for such a truly expressive and unique piece.

"Would you like to come in and look? We're open."

Sully turned to the friendly woman's voice as she stood holding the door for him. He nearly refused. But it was his vase. He hoped.

Acting as though it was the only piece in the gallery, Sully knew it was rude not to speak to the girl, but he couldn't. Not until he knew. His hands became tacky despite the chill while he paced up to the vase in question. It was there, the painting of the fairy, though a different fairy: a male, with translucent wings. His arm reached out in the opposite direction than did the female fairy on his male vase.

Forcing his hands not to shake, he carefully picked up the vase to turn it. It was signed.

Marion

Nothing more than that. Just Marion. It couldn't be the same Marion. The one who stayed to herself other than bringing him desserts and sometimes a casserole and a rare occasion when she sat on her porch and chatted with him while he worked on her garden.

"Do you happen to know where this artist is from? Is she local? Or he? Is it a he or a she?"

The girl grinned. "She is local, in a neighboring town, but I can't say more than that."

"How much is it?" Sully scanned for a price on the vase's stand.

"I'm afraid it's not for sale. It's display only. However, we do have several more of her pieces over here if you'd like to look."

Display only. With a frown, he set it down and followed the girl. There was a whole section of Marion's work in the gallery. Any of them, he would love to have, but not nearly as much as he wanted that vase. He picked up another, one that was best in his price range, and turned it over. It was unsigned. He tried two or three more. "No artist signature."

"No." The girl returned to his side from where she'd been politely wandering in order to leave him to admire the art alone. "She doesn't. She says it's her signature not to sign her work, other than that one vase. That's why it's not for sale. I guess there's a match for it somewhere she's hoping to find."

"Yes. That would be a rare find, indeed." Sully thanked the girl and said he would be back.

On the long drive back to town, Sully pondered the vases and the artist. What did Marion do with her days? He knew she'd had a career at some point, that she gave it up for the now ex-husband after he nagged her too much about not being available, but if he remembered, it had something to do with office work. Nothing artistic. The vase artist couldn't be his Marion. His neighbor, Marion.

Too deep in thought for someone who was behind the wheel of a car, Sully was yanked to the present by bits of bright yellow dotting the gray-brown ditch. Sunflowers. Fake sunflowers, scattered along the edge of the road. Where had they come from? There were no houses nearby. It was much like the dirt road he had taken when trying to escape his parents all those years ago ... long, straight, and leading nowhere. Except, back to the place that reminded him of elusive dreams meant for others but not for him. The sunflowers on their sides flashed the memory of his mother's mashed garden. Except hers were real. These were more fitting for him. Fake, scattered, in the middle of nowhere.

Sully forced himself to keep his mind on his driving and eventually got to the gravel lane that split in one direction toward the house that was his dream and in the other to the one representing his life. He stopped at the edge of right or left and let the engine run.

It was his choice. He had taken the path that scattered his life, choosing it over the beauty of natural, blooming reality. Marion knew. She had unscattered her life by moving with the flow that put her into his dream. The vases said the artist was there – hidden maybe, but fully intact. They had to be hers. She adored the artistry of his house that now belonged to her. She'd said so more than once. Appreciating the artistry. The vases had to be hers.

Sully hoped it was recent, the new vase. He hoped the hidden artist was still blooming, growing ... and willing to share whatever it was that kept her inspired through her reality.

Releasing the brake, Sully let his car roll toward his house, the one his dreams built. In the spring, he would plant her the largest garden of sunflowers he had ever seen.

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*This story is the beginning of a series titled Nature's Molding. It is a free read on Smashwords but may only be shared by sending others to find it on the site. The series is in progress as of February 2010 and will be available on Smashwords upon completion.*

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