

Finding amazing Grace in the language of flowers

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Clamatis paniculata...Phlox divaricata... Euonymus japonicus. Before I found my way to Shakespeare and Keats and F. Scott Fitzgerald, I first fell in love with the language of flowers. The names, with their odd aural contours and their syllabic mysteries, made a kind of music I'd never heard before. To fall in love with these Latin words was to fall in love with language itself. And for this, I owe my mother everything.

She had learned the Latin names from her mother-in-law, my grandmother, who was both a gardener and a wordsmith with a published novel and a televised play to her credit. My mother would never admit to being a wordsmith herself, but she is the finest letter writer I know. She is also a veteran crossword puzzler and a Scrabblor non pareil. For my grandmother, a Protestant, and my mother, a Catholic, gardening was a common language.

It was from her own mother that my mother's love of flowers first sprang. My maternal grandmother, a tiny Irishwoman who died at the age of 95 still laughing at a joke she'd just made, turned her tiny backyard on Staten Island into an oasis of color.

I remember the flowers as much as the chocolate eggs she hid under the bushes every Easter. As a young girl, my mother fell in love with a tiny, white, flowering shrub that grew beside her house. My grandmother allowed her to cut sprigs of it every May to take to school, but my mother never knew the name of the shrub. After she married and moved into a house of her own, she often looked for the tiny, white, flowering shrub. Last year my mother, whose name is Grace, finally found it. The name of the shrub, she was astonished to learn, was *Deutzia gracilis*.

When my maternal grandmother was approaching 70 years old and no longer able to garden, she passed on to my mother her two-volume, 1944 edition of "A Thousand Gardening Questions." My mother still faithfully consults the books, though her Jamesburg garden is much smaller than the one I grew up with in Scotch Plains. The pages of the two-book set are worn, yellowed and smudged with Jersey dirt. Just like I remember them.

I also remember vividly how every spring how my mother would retrieve her old garden gloves from the corner of the garage, where they'd grown stiff and crusty during the winter, and make her way to the backyard, trowel in hand. There, in the garden beds, she spent hours with her perennials, vines and flowering shrubs. And when she got up, the knees of her pants damp with grass stains, the back of her neck was always bright

red from the sun.

I never paid much attention to the actual planting process that so deeply engaged my mother, and I still couldn't tell you what flowers bloom when. But I still know the names: Hollyhock...Lantana...Weigela...Each spring I'd ask my mother to name them again for me, after which I would repeat the names carefully, drawing out the syllables slowly so that the words, strung together, made a kind of poetry.

I thought Latin, which my mother studied in high school and which I would study in college, was the most beautiful, most exotic language in the world.

My three sisters picked up a host of practical things from my mother. They are all excellent cooks, just as she is, whereas I am wedded to a microwave and frozen fish sticks.

They can all tell you what a valance is, or a finial. I can direct you to the window, or the bedroom.

My mother is so organized that she cooks a week's worth of dinners and freezes them ahead of time for our family vacation - just so no one has to waste precious beach-time in the kitchen.

For their part, my sisters make lists and sub-lists; have a calendar in every room; and produce enough thank-you notes to break a postman's back.

I make lists and lose them; write down appointments, but forget to look in my book; and frequent the belated-greeting-card section of my local pharmacy.

Unfortunately, I've never shown much of a facility for gardening, or even for growing things. I live in an apartment where I enjoy the fragrance of a lilac bush that has taken hold all on its own in the front yard. A few years back I purchased an indoor plant, a hardy ivy. It died so fast there wasn't even time to launch a conspiracy theory. I'm content now to keep dried flowers on my mantelpiece, and in the spring to stop and smell the lilac bush at least once a day.

If my mother did not succeed in giving me a green thumb, she did succeed in passing on to me a love of all things green - and a love of their names. In my bookcase, wedged between the "Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens" and Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," is a thick 480-page illustrated volume that is as treasured as any I own: "Taylor's Guide to Shrubs." I visit the book often, imagining my mother in her garden, names tumbling dreamily off her tongue...Vanhoutte Spirea...Goldfinger Potentilla...Coreopsis Moonbeam...