

wilted lilies

“Meemaw said I was an old soul. Mamma always said I had the shine. Papa...” The light-eyed girl picked at something invisible on her skirt. “Papa was afraid of me.

“You see, I knew things. I don’t know how. I just did. Mamma says I been like that since I was little. Oh I didn’t know nothing useful. Didn’t know the lotto numbers or how many gumballs were in the jar at the fair. But I knew when people was gonna pass.” She leaned closer and whispered, “And I could hear things.”

She licked her lips and stared at the pattern in her skirt. The man could see she was remembering rather than talking. He had learned long ago, silence would get people to open up much easier than asking. He waited.

“If I let my insides get real, real quiet, I could hear what people were thinking... It’s like they was thinking too loud when they was in turmoil or hurtin’. I didn’t mean to. And I didn’t want to. But I couldn’t turn it off. Fact is, when I was little I thought everyone could do it. I thought it was normal.

“It wasn’t anything close to normal. And Sussex County is the last place you wanna be different. It’s too small. Too tight. I don’t have no friends—not ‘cos the kids don’t like me, but ‘cos

their folks don't want 'em near me. My family was shunned because of me. Mamma and Papa and Meemaw with me. But they were okay with that, mostly."

Her fingers went up to a closed locket hanging on a tarnished chain around her neck.

"I suppose you want to know about that Jenkins boy, though."

He nodded, leaning closer to the tape recorder between them.

"It started in church." She sat back and closed her eyes, smiling as if she could see something beautiful and peaceful behind those lids.

"I was singing the praises of the Lord at the top of my lungs. I wasn't singing in church, you see, I was singing beyond the church, towards heaven, so's He could hear my voice above the rest. It was a warm spring day, and I was wearing a new dress. It was perfect. And then I heard it.

"In the middle of the second hallelujah, clear as if it was whispered right into my ear, someone said 'I'm going to kill her.' I stopped singing. I looked around, wondering who could think such a thing during church—and during praise. I felt real funny. Like my insides were twisting in on themselves and my heart was pounding too hard but too slow. That was the last inside voice I heard from the living."

The girl opened her eyes, wet with glassy tears. She wasn't necessarily crying, but

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brimming with emotion like some do at a wedding, or when remembering someone who's been gone for too long. She caught his gaze and held him there, trapped, even though her focus was past him into something only she could see.

Her body frame and posture were true to her young age, but those silver eyes held years far beyond her own. It was like staring at the moon, and he couldn't decide if they were an extremely light blue or truly silver in nature. Her bottom lip quivered, and she broke the unintentional stare.

“World went quiet that day. Too quiet... It had been noisy for so very long. So noisy, I took to wandering the woods behind our house when I was just little, to be alone, to find quiet. I spent all my fifteen years on this earth tryin' ta' hide from everyone's insides tryin' to get out. To get away from their thoughts and fears and anger. You see, I didn't always get the happy thoughts. I rarely got to hear about love. But longing? Oh, I knew about longing. I knew who missed who, who wanted who, and it weren't always the right people. Longing is strong when folk think too loud. But fear and anger? They were always so much louder. Longing is like a whisper tickling me. Anger? Fear? Those dragged me out of whatever else I was doing and came on like unannounced dinner guests. Shucks, I used to answer my papa all the time before I realized he was thinking those thoughts and not actually

sayin' 'em out loud."

She shook her head, as if she were trying to stop herself from remembering something. Or sharing it.

"Loneliness can be both. Sometimes it's just a whimper. Sometimes it's like someone's yellin' "Fire!" in a crowded church. It'll get your attention, but it's hard to tell where it's coming from. I knew exactly who it was the day Mrs. Miller tried to kill herself. That was the first time I told what someone was thinking.

The girl paused, and he waited, adjusting the recorder. He couldn't tell if she was trying to remember or trying to forget, and before he could prod her to continue, she spoke.

"I was walking home from school. Head down like I do, hoping if I didn't notice nobody, then their insides wouldn't notice me. But as I passed Mrs. Miller's front stoop, I heard her clear as a spring peeper's call. Thinking how she was gonna finish hanging the clothes out on the line, tidy up a bit, and then go down into the root cellar and hang herself. I had heard some awful stuff but that one scared me. I tried to keep walking and pretend maybe I heard it wrong. But by the time I got home I was crying something fierce, convinced God would blame me if I didn't stop her. I tried to talk to my papa, but he shushed me away and opened another beer. I found Mamma hanging our own clothes out back and ran to her. I told her what I heard

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and she tried to calm me and tell me it couldn't be right, that Mrs. Miller would never do that."

The girl looked up at him, truly looked at him, as if to make sure he was paying attention.

"You see, Mrs. Miller's son died the summer before. Him and his new souped-up Charger went 'round the bend by the quarry way too fast and the only thing to stop 'em both was a big ol' pine. Then her husband up and left town with some waitress, leaving her all alone—in her woes, as Mamma calls it. She was a kind lady, always nice to me. And a good God-fearing woman, too. But everyone has their breaking point. And I 'spect she'd reached hers that day. I was afraid she would go straight to hell, taking me with her for not stopping her. 'Cos if I can't believe God made me this way on purpose, to do His work, then I'm nothing but a freak—or worse, a devil child like my papa used to think.

"I was hysterical by the time Papa put his beer down and come outside to see what my screaming was all about. He slapped me across the face. Hard. I don't know if it was to get my attention and calm me, or just because he'd been waiting for a chance to do it. But it worked. I stopped screaming. I cried and pleaded with Mamma, knowin' Papa was there but not really 'specting him to do nothing 'bout it. Shocked me when he said he'd go check on Mrs. Miller if it would shut me up."

The girl's tiny hand went to her chest, and

she grimaced more than smiled.

“Papa got there right as she was climbing up on the chair, noose already dangling above her. I saved her, but I lost something that day. Papa was even meaner to me after that, like the proof I heard things drove home his feelings for me. It wasn’t that he hated me, but his fear was so bad I might as well have been the devil himself. And Mrs. Miller? They took her away to the hospital for a bit, and when she got out she didn’t thank me at all. Her thoughts were always cloudy around me, like she was blocking me out—but they cleared on occasion, and I knew she was upset I had stopped her and forced her to keep on living. She rectified that a couple years later by swallowing all them pills she got from those doctors. I still wonder why God wanted me to save her. Maybe she did something in them two years that changed someone else. I don’t know. I just don’t.

“But that was the first time I told anyone what I heard. Oh everyone knew I could hear ‘em. But now I had gone and shared a secret. Shared their inner whispers. It didn’t matter I did it to save someone. And that was when everyone really started looking at me funny and keeping their young’uns away. That was when everything changed the first time. But in the church, when it went all quiet, that was different. I was glad for the quiet, but it also scared me. It was strange to me, like being deaf

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all of a sudden. And worse, I had heard someone threaten someone else and didn't know who it was. I was panicked. I was about to be a murderer, 'cos knowing and not doing anythin' 'bout it was just as good as doin' it myself.

She grabbed her skirt in her fingers and pinched at the material as she twisted it. She swallowed audibly.

"Do you want a glass of water, hon?" He raised an eyebrow and waited to see if she remembered he was sitting there.

She shook her head. "No, I just want to be done with it."

"Okay. Can you tell me when you started hearing the other voices?"

She nodded, swallowed hard again, and sighed.

"Weren't long after that day in church when I started hearing other things. See, after Sunday services we all gather in the church basement for a big lunch. Then the kids go out and play in the front yard. I usually end up walking through the graves out back to find quiet. At least, I used to. The quiet had been so loud after a couple days, it was almost normal at that point. I was almost used to it. But at the back of the graves, where the daisies start tangling with the honeysuckle and brambles, it was anything but quiet. I could hear things again all of a sudden, like when your ears pop and everything seems really loud. I looked around the cemetery to try and find

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who I was hearing.”

Her eyes got wider as she spoke, and she stopped abruptly, snapping her head up at him.

“But I suppose I have ta’ tell you ‘bout the Jenkins boy first, so’s you understand what came after.”

He nodded and glanced at the clock on the wall before eyeballing the recorder between them.

“After the county fair packed up and left town the summer before that day in church, the cleanup crew found little Tommy Jenkins dead. It was a heck of a shock to everyone. But it wasn’t just that he was dead, laying facedown among the trash and weeds in the trampled field. It was that this was the second time he was found dead.”

This has been an exerpt of book 1 of the Wilted Lily series, available in ebook and paperback.

The story continues in book 2: Passages...

Visit her official website for more information on this series and other fiction by Kelli Owen.