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SUNFLOWERS

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Photo by Namelas Frade

On a late Thursday afternoon in January of 1968, a trumpet teacher molested my brother. Or so I think—I'm not sure exactly what happened. I never asked my brother directly, maybe to preserve his innocence, in case he wasn't molested. I was only a child myself, so I didn't know how to approach this, what I should have done.

My ability to appreciate sunflowers was never the same after this incident.

A second-rate copy of the *Sunflowers* painting by Van Gogh was hanging on the wall in the same room where my brother was taking his lesson. We lived in a split-level home in a neighborhood of split-levels, each one looking exactly like the other. My parents chose an orange shag carpet for the floor under the painting. I'm not sure what they were thinking. The rug was made of wool. It was rough to walk on in bare feet, like walking on tree roots.

When Van Gogh painted *Sunflowers* in 1889, he happily wrote a letter to his brother Theo, and said:

"I am working with the enthusiasm of a man from Marseilles eating bouillabaisse, which shouldn't come as a surprise to you because I am busy painting sunflowers."

Van Gogh named the painting *Tournesols*, which is the French name for "sunflowers." His purpose was to decorate a room where his friend Paul Gauguin would stay when he arrived in Arles.

My brother was wearing shorts and red sneakers that day, despite the fact that it was winter. His legs looked like toothpicks sticking out of those shorts, reminding me of a character in a children's book, not meant to look real. The teacher, what was his name? I don't remember, but let's think of him as Walter. He had dirty blond, greasy hair with brown work pants, and a button-down shirt that was an ugly shade of gray from too much use. I think there was a ballpoint pen with a metal clip attached to a pocket protector. He gave trumpet lessons on the side, after his day job, whatever that was.

I had been upstairs in the living room with my friend Molly, trying to figure out how to make a thumbhole in a pair of mittens I was knitting. I wasn't having much luck and Molly was of little help. She was knitting a scarf, adding stitches one row after

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the other, a simple stockinette.

“Why don’t you drop a couple of stitches, to make a hole?” she said.

Molly was my best friend, and I usually appreciated her advice, but she was also a little flighty, and in my opinion, dropping stitches on purpose was just plain calling for trouble.

“I don’t know,” I said as I held the red yarn closer to examine what the heck to do. “Everyone I ever heard talk about knitting tells you that dropping stitches is bad.”

We went back to our knitting, and that’s when I noticed there hadn’t been any music coming from the basement for a while. I didn’t hear voices either. Earlier my brother had been learning something called “Marche Militaire” which was very steady, like the sound of fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Even though Molly was flighty, she had moments of keen sensitivity and empathy. So I said to her, “Do you think it’s weird that there hasn’t been any sound coming from the basement for a while?”

Molly’s face changed. Her lips curved downward, and she said, “What do you mean?”

I put my knitting down and said, “I mean maybe I should go down there and see what’s going on.”

My mother was in the house, up in her bedroom, where she usually was, after work and before dinner, probably doing a crossword puzzle on her bed, with the TV running. Going up to her didn’t occur to me.

“I should go too,” Molly said, trying to be helpful.

Molly’s life was different from mine. Her parents got her gifts of charm bracelets, and hoop earrings, even when it wasn’t her birthday. They went on vacations together, to resorts in the Poconos where adults played canasta and the kids performed in talent shows. I felt protective of Molly and was worried about her going down to the basement with me, so I made her stay upstairs.

Sunflowers are one of the fastest growing plants in North America. They can grow eight to twelve feet tall within a six-month period. From planting to maturity, there are few other flowers in the world that develop so quickly. When you get too close to them, their size can freak you out.

Before I went downstairs, I took my shoes off. I wanted to be careful not to make any noise. When I got to the bottom of the stairs, and my feet touched the linoleum floor, they were already cold. I just stood there, at the far end of the room. They didn’t see me; there was a wooden divider between where I stood and where my brother was, with cutouts. If you didn’t know to look in my direction, there would have been no reason to do so.

The scientific name for sunflower is *Helia Anthus*. *Helia* for sun and *anthus* for flower. The flowering head tracks the sun’s movement, a phenomenon known as heliotropism. Sunflowers are not passive. They start their day facing east; and they end it facing west.

They leer at you.

I saw that my brother was sitting on Walter’s lap. Even though he was a seven- year-old kid, I knew he was too old for that.

I didn’t know the sunflowers in my basement were a copy of a renowned painting, not then, at the age of nine. I thought they were unique to our house, and when I saw them in a textbook as a teenager, I felt it strange that they were famous. My parents are not art lovers, not at all, so I don’t know what possessed them to buy the painting.

As I stood on the basement floor just after the steps, I noticed how yellow and orange those sunflowers were on the fake wood-paneled wall. I concentrated on the January sun slanting in through the sliding glass door, and just for a moment, the picture seemed three dimensional to me, so that I could walk right into it and away from what was happening. But then the sun moved, and the flowers lost their luminosity, and I was back in the basement, the cold air gathering around me.

Did my brother look at those sunflowers when he was told to sit on Walter’s lap? Did he try to fix on something familiar,

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something other than his immediate situation? Did he register their presence, or were they part of a blurry background?

The pigments Van Gogh used in the painting were newly invented, and made new colors possible. All of a sudden a part of the yellow spectrum was seen like never before.

I didn't walk over the rug; it would've been too obvious, too aggressive for me. So I stood at the edge of the room, at the bottom of the stairs, paralyzed in a certain sense. At the same time I refused to retreat, not while my brother was on that teacher's lap. I just stared, trying to figure out what I should do.

Then he saw me, my brother, that is. And immediately I knew from the tightening of the muscles around his mouth, his discomfort, his embarrassment. I'm not sure if I made a conscious decision to move my leg near the typewriter chair, but it made a scraping sound, and the teacher saw me. He glared at me and lifted my brother off his lap, as if he were a rag doll. My brother ran past me, up the steps, and I heard Molly say in an anxious voice, "Hi Paul." He didn't respond.

He just kept moving.

Walter didn't say a word to me. He walked past, importantly, looking like he was some kind of victim. He smelled like tin that hadn't been polished. I don't know what my brother told my parents, but Walter never came back to our house.

Sunflower heads consist of one to two thousand individual flowers joined together by a receptacle base. So many flowers on one plant strikes me as unnatural. They flout their bounty when they would do better to reign themselves in. I know that florists will tell you people buy sunflowers when they want to be carefree, to add cheer to a summer's dinner, or whimsy to a new romance, but to me they will always be ostentatious, their thick hairy stems supporting heads that enjoy hanging over fences, waiting to touch you when you walk by.

Debra Fox has published poems in various haiku journals, a short story in *Hyperlexia Literary Journal*, another in *Blue Lyra Review*, another in *Squalorly*, and an essay in *The Meadow*. She is a lawyer, and the director of an adoption agency. She lives just outside Philadelphia with her family. In her spare time she loves to dance.

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