

Daffodils – Hetty Lau

It is a tradition in my family to grow daffodils during Chinese New Year.

None of us are great gardeners, although years of practice makes progress, if not perfection. But Grandma was the one who truly perfected the art. She always said daffodils tend to grow better if no human intervention is involved—do not make any cuts on the bulb, be patient, and with enough natural sunlight and water the daffodils will eventually bloom with the perfect stem-to-flower proportion. Every time relatives come to visit, Grandma would excitedly show off the daffodils, pointing out *The light fragrance! Look how the petals are so pure and white and translucent! It must be a great year ahead for the family!*

The daffodil bulbs were potted and placed in the living room. Every time Grandma went past the plants, she would gently caress them. Among the bright-colored orchids and peonies, I could not really understand why Grandma would take a special liking towards the small white flowers.

Every year, the entire family would go to the flower market to pick out some daffodil bulbs to grow at home. Since her stay at the hospital after sustaining a fall, Grandma had trouble walking, often requiring rests when the distance is too great. From then on, she had to use the wheelchair, but we brought her along to the flower market. She insisted on visiting the flower market as it was *tradition*, stopping every now and then to peer closely at the displayed daffodils to pick the perfect one to bring home.

Muimui, she would sit me down and lightly fan the flowers so I can smell the aroma, *Flowers can only grow when you plant them with love.*

One afternoon, she slipped and fell over. She was rushed into the hospital again. This time, she was much more impacted by the fall. She was much weaker. She was not awake half the time we visited her, barely responding to anything. We consulted several doctors on

Grandma's condition and started to plan how to assist her when she can finally come home. Every day, we would simply wake up early in the morning to go to the hospital and accompany her for as long as the hospital visiting time allowed, waiting for her condition to improve and return home someday.

On certain days when her condition was better, the nurses would allow us to help her eat. She would mumble and protest weakly, *I don't feel hungry, I don't want to eat; I just want to go home, I just want to leave*, and we pleaded her to eat so she would get better and be able to go home eventually. One day, her meal consisted of steamed egg whites. And it reminded us of the daffodil bulbs that we all had left forgotten in the living room.

We returned home and started working on the daffodil bulbs again. How hard can it be? Surely they just need some more water and sunlight. Yet not a single bud had appeared over the past days. So we decided to forget about our usual practice, as we no longer had the supervision from Grandma. We tried cutting the bulbs, repotting the plants, and adding fertilizers. But the attempts were all ineffective—only the stems of the daffodils kept growing, no buds ever evolved into blossoms. The stems just kept growing and growing, to the point that the stems were so tall they started limping over.

Grandma's condition was not very positive, improving one day but worsening another day. I held her hand when she was asleep, and almost jumped at the touch—her wrinkly hands are cold, with only the faintest warmth coming from deep within. I asked the nurse to give her more blankets and clutched her hands ever so tightly, but the warmth seemed to be receding, almost escaping from my grasp. I tried to persuade myself that it was only my imagination, like the phantom aroma I can still smell on her hands.

Discussions on changing hospitals, or even hiring private nurses were made, but the time was up sooner than we had thought. The monitor was ringing ominously, and then it never rang anymore. She did not live to see the blossoms in spring.

The pot of daffodils was still placed in the living room although there were no flowers. The stems were arching over due to their weight, almost tipping over, so we bundled up the stems and propped it up straight with wooden sticks for support.

One day, we heard a splash—the entire plant gave in to gravity, falling out of its shallow pot and crashed onto the concrete ground. The stems were forcefully bent in angles that not even spring onions would be forced to bend. Picking up the plant from the ground, it was clear that it was too hurt beyond healing, no amount of careful repotting or fertilizers could save it, not to mention that we are only amateurs who never learned to properly garden. So we had to throw the plant away.

Sometimes the question of whether we should have intervened sooner came up. If we had started planning or helping with the situation sooner, would the present be different? Is there an alternate universe where Grandma is still here with us, appreciating the daffodils during the Chinese New Year? But we could never figure out the answer. Truth is, we can never know for sure whether intervention is going to solve our problems. And to wallow in these questions would mean that we are not facing the reality we are in now.

We have been growing daffodils for years, and it really should not surprise us that some daffodils just might not bloom. You just have to let the universe take its course, because you can never fight the inevitable. Like how flowers have their seasons. Like how Grandma must leave us someday, and we too must leave our loved ones someday. And we can only love and appreciate the flowers while they last.