

❖ ALICE WALKER<sup>1</sup>

## The Flowers

It seemed to Myop as she skipped lightly from hen house to pigpen to smokehouse that the days had never been as beautiful as these. The air held a keenness that made her nose twitch. The harvesting of the corn and cotton, peanuts and squash, made each day a golden surprise that caused excited little tremors to run up her jaws.

Myop carried a short, knobby stick. She struck out at random at chickens she liked, and worked out the beat of a song on the fence around the pigpen. She felt light and good in the warm sun. She was ten, and nothing existed for her but her song, the stick clutched in her dark brown hand, and the tat-de-ta-ta-ta of accompaniment.

Turning her back on the rusty boards of her family's sharecropper cabin, Myop walked along the fence till it ran into the stream made by the spring. Around the spring, where the family got drinking water, silver ferns and wildflowers grew. Along the shallow banks pigs rooted. Myop watched the tiny white bubbles disrupt the thin black scale of soil and the water that silently rose and slid away down the stream.

She had explored the woods behind the house many times. Often, in late autumn, her mother took her to gather nuts among the fallen leaves. Today she made her own path, bounding this way and that way, vaguely keeping an eye out for snakes. She found, in addition to various common but pretty ferns and leaves, an armful of strange blue flowers with velvety ridges and a sweetsuds bush full of the brown, fragrant buds.

By twelve o'clock, her arms laden with sprigs of her findings, she was a mile or more from home. She had often been as far before, but the strangeness of the land made it not as pleasant as her usual haunts. It seemed gloomy in the little cove in which she found herself. The air was damp, the silence close and deep.

Myop began to circle back to the house, back to the peacefulness of the morning. It was then she stepped smack into his eyes. Her heel became lodged in the broken ridge between brow and nose, and she reached down quickly, unafraid, to free herself. It was only when she saw his naked grin that she gave a little yelp of surprise.

He had been a tall man. From feet to neck covered a long space. His head lay

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<sup>1</sup>Alice Walker (1944– ) was born in Eatonton, Georgia, the eighth daughter of a family of sharecroppers. She attended Spelman College in Atlanta and then went to Sarah Lawrence College in New York. She became an instructor at Jackson State University in Mississippi in 1968, during the height of the civil rights movement, in which she was an active participant, registering voters and working in the Head Start program. She has since taught at Tougaloo College, Wellesley College, the University of Massachusetts at Boston, the University of California at Berkeley, and Brandeis University. Hers is a most authoritative voice on the problems faced by black women in our society. Her novels include *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* (1982, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature and was made into a movie), and *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989). Her stories have been collected in *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973, which includes "The Flowers") and *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981). She has also published volumes of poems, essays, and a children's biography of the great black writer Langston Hughes and edited an anthology of the writings of Zora Neale Hurston.

beside him. When she pushed back the leaves and layers of earth and debris Myop saw that he'd had large white teeth, all of them cracked or broken, long fingers, and very big bones. All his clothes had rotted away except some threads of blue denim from his overalls. The buckles of the overalls had turned green.

Myop gazed around the spot with interest. Very near where she'd stepped into the head was a wild pink rose. As she picked it to add to her bundle she noticed a raised mound, a ring, around the rose's root. It was the rotted remains of a noose, a bit of shredding plowline, now blending benignly into the soil. Around an overhanging limb of a great spreading oak clung another piece. Frayed, rotted, bleached, and frazzled—barely there—but spinning restlessly in the breeze. Myop laid down her flowers.

And the summer was over.

(1973)