



A Yellow Hyacinth

Or the story of:

—A stepmother—

—Texas—

—& A yellow hyacinth—

Once upon a time, there was a young girl with dark, curly hair and bright, intelligent eyes who lived in rural Texas. This was not, it must be admitted, by choice. In fact, she hated Texas. She hated the big trucks and bigger drivers, barreling down the dusty roads. She hated the boiling afternoons, a heat so deep that it ate into her bones, and the rows of tract houses. She hated that the women wore eyeliner and lipstick and mascara and earrings everywhere. Did they *sleep* with it on? She hated that girls never played sports, preferring to gossip and gab idly. Most of all, she hated Jeanne Hammonds.

Jeanne *was* Texas. Her nails were perfectly manicured. Her skin was smooth and white. Her voice was a slow drawl, sliding thickly through the hot, balmy air. “Y’all want another glass of lemonade? You wait there. I’ll fix yeh somethin’ cool.”

When she walked, she sashayed. Her jeans clung tightly to her hips and thighs and calves, seemingly painted on. Her feet were invariably stuffed into cowboy boots, red ones with a leather fringe and a stubby heel. And her hair was, well, Maddie had seen *skyscrapers* that were smaller.

Her father had been a goner from the very beginning. The moment that they had seen Miss Hammonds, taking calls at the Watson travel agency, he had stopped and stared. Catching his gaze through the window, those plump, red lips had smiled broadly. The blonde hair had flashed. And that, well, had been that.

The next Thursday, her father and Jeanne had gone on a date. It had been nothing too fancy, little more than dinner and a movie. But the entire time, Maddie had been in misery. She had lain on her bed, thinking about them. What were they were doing now? Were they kissing? Were they holding hands? At the very thought, she grew sick. The woman had no *right!* Jeanne had no *right!* And *he* had no right to be kissing *her*.

“What about mommy?” Maddie had demanded the next day. They were sitting at the table, eating a breakfast of cereal and toast. A carton of milk sat between them.

Her father waved his spoon at her Cheerios. “You’d better finish up. You’ll be late for school.”

Maddie narrowed her eyes. “I asked you a question.”

He sighed.

“What?” Maddie snapped.

“It’s been two years.”

“So? What does that matter? Didn’t you love her?”

At that, her father looked at her. And for a moment, just a moment, silence fell between them. Then, without bothering to reply, he stood up. “Come on. I’ll drive you to school.”

In the car, Maddie opened her window and stuck her head outside. In just moments, the whole car was filled with heat, thick and sticky like New England maple syrup.

Feeling it, her father frowned. “Close that and I’ll put on the A.C.”

Maddie shook her head. “Mommy hated the A.C.”

“That was in Massachusetts.” He paused. “This is Texas.”

Maddie ignored him. The window stayed down.

That day, Maddie had the same day that she *always* had. She shuffled into the dusty schoolhouse, carting a nylon backpack of textbooks and wrinkled notebooks. She slid into the last row, dumping her pencils and erasers loudly onto her desk. Over the next few hours, she did like the others, filling in worksheets and reciting poems and doodling on notebook paper. And then recess came. Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and marched onto the kickball field.

“Can I play?” Maddie asked.

The boys looked at her, jaws dropping agape. “Whaddya wanna do that for?”

Maddie frowned. “What do you mean? I feel like playing.”

Hearing this, the boys sniggered. “This ain’t a game for girls.”

“Why not?” Maddie asked stubbornly.

“It just isn’t.” Saying that, they shifted slightly, glancing impatiently at the other girls. Time was ticking by. Recess was only so long. “Why don’t you just go play hopscotch or something? Let us alone.”

Maddie frowned again. “But I don’t like hopscotch.”

They shrugged. Whether or not she liked hopscotch was hardly *their* problem. At the moment, *she* was their problem. And so they turned away.

“How was school today?” Mr. Pearsall asked later on. She and her father were eating a dinner of canned soup and overcooked pasta. It was, in fact, the same dinner that they had had each night that week. Maddie prodded a rubbery noodle, not quite meeting his eyes. “Fine.”

“You don’t look fine. Is everything okay?”

She nudged the noodle onto the wooden tabletop, watching it give a weird bounce. Noodles were not, she felt, supposed to bounce like that. She sighed. “It’s my clothes.”

Her father frowned. “What about them?”

“I hate them.”

“Why?” Mr. Pearsall asked, not understanding. “You love that shirt.”

How could she explain? She *did* love the shirt. But out here, well, girls never wore pants. They wore flouncy skirts with flowers and stripes. They wore ruffled blouses and had stud earrings. Some even wore makeup. In any case, they *certainly* never wore ripped jeans and Mickey Mouse tees.

Mr. Pearsall shrugged. “So we’ll get you some more. No big deal.” Saying this, he paused, his face smooth. “Do you know what? I bet that Jeanne would love to take you. Why don’t you—”

“No!” Maddie said instantly, laying down her fork.

“Keep it down!” Mr. Pearsall snapped in reply. “I’ve just about had enough of that. You can’t keep this up forever! It’s been two years.”

He was right. It had been exactly two years since she had sat in the hospital lobby, baking under the fluorescent lights and citrus smell. It had been two years since a nurse walked up, looking white and blue and not very real.

“Mr. Pearsall? They’re ready for you.” So the unreal nurse had said, nodding toward a hallway.

Her father stood up instantly. “How is she? How does it look?”

There was a long silence. Then the unreal nurse nodded toward the hall. “Would you come with me?”

“She’ll be fine.” Even as her father followed the unreal nurse, his arms aquiver and his face pale, he kept saying the words over and over. “She’s a fighter. She’ll be fine.”

The unreal nurse just kept walking.

It had been just less than two years since her grandmother had come to see them, bringing Good Housekeeping magazines and a smell of lilac perfume. “Maddie!” Grandma Pearsall had cried again and again, her voice exasperated. “Would you stop playing in the dirt? When *will* you grow up?” And to Mr. Pearsall—“You can’t stay here forever. It’s not good for you.”

When she said that, he gazed at the comfortable sofas and chairs and vases that filled their house, apparently seeing them for the first time. Not a thing had been touched. Even then, three months later, her imprint was everywhere. It creased the throw blankets and lined the bookcases. It squatted thickly in the bursting garden, still overflowing with the vibrant roses and lilies and hyacinth that she had loved so much.

When he was skeptical, Grandma Pearsall had gently touched his arm and nodded at Maddie. “It’s not for you. It’s for her.”

No one had ever asked Maddie.

Yes, he was right that it had been two years. It had been two years since Grandma Pearsall and her perfume, arguing that Mr. Pearsall and Maddie should leave, and it had been six months since he had given in. It had been six months since the movers had come, carefully stacking endless knickknacks and embroidered pillows into wooden crates. It had been six months since the Ryder truck had been fully loaded, ready and waiting to take them here, far from Massachusetts and Sunday pancakes and everything that Maddie knew.

“Are you ready?” Mr. Pearsall had asked quietly, touching her shoulder. They were sitting on the porch then. Although her face was pale, her eyes, like his, were dry.

She said nothing.

Mr. Pearsall sighed slightly, letting his hand drop. “Come on. It’s time.”

Maddie got numbly into the Ryder truck, bucking her seatbelt. Then, through the window, she surveyed the empty house and overgrown garden a final time. Just before her father pulled away, however, something made her start.

“Wait!” Maddie yelled, undoing her seatbelt. “WAIT!”

“What is it?” Mr. Pearsall asked instantly, cutting the engine.

Without answering him, Maddie leapt from the truck, bursting into the garden.

“Maddie!” Mr. Pearsall called. “*Maddie!*”

There was no stopping now. Maddie raced down the little walkways and through the overgrown weeds and between the flowerbeds. She had seen it! Yes! There it was!

There, nestled amidst the sprawling weeds, there was something small and yellow and bright. Somehow, against all odds, it had survived the weeds and rubble. There it was, not unlike a tiny drop of sunshine, the buttery petals of a yellow hyacinth.

In a moment, Maddie gently grabbed a stalk and shoved it into a plastic bucket that she found nearby. Then she packed dirt around its base, not carrying when it turned her fingers black. And she returned to the truck.

“What was that about?” Mr. Pearsall asked her, his expression curious.

Maddie, the little plant clutched in her lap, lifted her chin. “It was her favorite.”

“What was that?” Mr. Pearsall asked, bending toward her.

So Maddie said it again, louder this time. “Yellow hyacinth was her favorite.”

Yes, it had been six months since they left, father and daughter smushed into the Ryder, and it had been five months and three weeks since they had arrived, pulling into little house that looked like a box. And it had been five months exactly since he had met Jeanne.

Here and now, he was still talking about her, saying the same thing that he had been saying for months. “You’ve got to warm up to her. She’s doing everything that she can. Just give her a chance.”

But this time, like the ones before, she was unwilling to listen. “No!” Maddie yelled, leaping up. “I won’t! I *won’t!*” And dropping her spoon, she ran from the kitchen, sprinted into her room. A few moments later, the door slammed shut.

There, in her room, she stood perfectly still. She looked at the little hyacinth, drooping dully near the window, and there was a tightness in her throat. *No!* Maddie thought, biting it back. Her fists clenched together. She would not! She would *not!* After all, she was a fighter. She was a fighter just like her mother had been. And fighters never cried.

So the months dragged on. In her notebook, her doodles grew more and more elaborate. Her attempts at kickball stopped entirely. At lunch, she sat and ate alone.

“How was school?” Mr. Pearsall would ask at dinner.

She would shrug. “Can I be excused?”

“Yeah.” Sigh. “Sure.”

Then the bruises started. “Have you been fighting?” Mr. Pearsall asked suspiciously, seeing them for the first time.

In reply, Maddie would raise her chin and look away. “No.”

But the bruises grew worse. And when Mr. Pearsall was called to see the school principal, he would just sit there, confused, scared and pale. “She never used to do this.” So he would tell Dr. Rainey, twisting his fingers in his lap. “You must understand that—”

Dr. Rainey had heard this before. “Yes, yes, I know. I know all about her situation.” He sighed, his gaze shifting to Maddie. “But it needs to stop.”

On the ride home, the car was deathly silent. Not looking at her father, Maddie just stared at the dusty plains. Texas was so, well, big. There was so much of everything. She hated it here.

When Mr. Pearsall spoke, his jaw was tight. He, like her, was staring at the road. “You can’t fight everyone.”

Maddie shrugged. “Mom was a fighter. You said so yourself.”

Mr. Pearsall frowned, glancing sharply at his daughter. “Not that kind of fighter.”

Maddie said nothing. The next afternoon, however, she found a Macys bag on her bed. “What’s this?” Maddie demanded, bringing it into the kitchen.

Her father barely looked at her. “They’re from Jeanne.”

Returning to her room, Maddie dumped the contents onto the bed. And there, spilling onto the quilt like a fabric rainbow, she found skirts and blouses and slippers and even a tiny headband. She threw the headband into the trash instantly. But the rest of the garments, well, she kept. The bruises stopped.

And then, about month later, it happened. Although Maddie had known that it would, she had somehow refused to believe it. But then, before she was ready, he was sitting at the table, breaking the news like he had two years ago. Not once did he meet her gaze.

“You’re kidding!” Maddie yelled, leaping from her chair. “How could you? How *could* you?”

Her father said nothing. He was tired of fighting her.

“Do you even remember her? Do you even remember mom?” Maddie screamed, angry not only because she hated him, but because, even hating him, she missed him. She missed talking to him. She missed hugging him. “Do you remember anything about her? *Do you even remember what color her eyes were?*”

Saying this, Maddie stormed away, flying into her room. When her door slammed, the yellow hyacinth shook slightly, unhappy in a pot that had grown too small. Here, even hyacinths apparently grew to an abnormal size.

Looking at the flower, Maddie threw herself on her bed and bit the covers, desperately keeping it in. That is, keeping *everything* in. *I won't! I won't! I won't!* Maddie yelled silently. After all, real fighters never cried.

Not long after, there came a knock at the door. A moment later, her father entered, taking a seat stiffly on her bed. For a long time, there was silence between them. And then Mr. Pearsall said perhaps the last thing that Maddie was expecting. "They were blue."

Startled, Maddie looked at him, really looked at him. And when she did so, she realized that his eyes were wet.

"Do you want to know how I remember that?" Mr. Pearsall asked quietly.

"How?"

"I remember it whenever I look at you."

Maddie just stared at him.

He smiled. "You've got her eyes." With this, he slowly reached into his pocket and withdrew a battered picture. As he did so, he cleared his throat. "Maybe this is my fault. Maybe it was too soon. Maybe I just—" He stopped himself, shaking his head. Then he dropped the little picture onto the bed and stood up.

"Do you love her?" Maddie asked suddenly, her voice flat.

Mr. Pearsall paused at the door, his back to her. "I do." Though his voice was soft, there was no hesitation.

Maddie nodded and her father closed the door.

When she picked up the photograph, she saw that her father was right. She and her mother did have the same eyes, big and round and blue like a Massachusetts beach. And then and there, deep in Texas, land of the dusty and hot and far too much, she began to cry.

The next day was Saturday. Jeanne was in the garden, planting a bed of roses, her hair tied with a red kerchief. Maddie was doing homework at the kitchen table.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?" Mr. Pearsall asked her, examining her over some envelopes.

Maddie nodded. They were supposed to meet Mr. and Mrs. Hammonds, the future grandparents.

"We'll leave at ten o'clock." Mr. Pearsall was speaking quickly, the words blurred together. He always did that when he was nervous. "It shouldn't be too bad. They'll love you. Are you ready? Jeanne selected an outfit for you."

Maddie blinked, his words sinking in. "What?"

"She left it on your bed."

"What is it?" Maddie asked, curious now.

Mr. Pearsall shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Maddie sighed. She had grown used to skirts. She had even started to consider makeup and pierced ears. Okay, maybe not yet, but eventually. “She didn’t need to do that.”

She wandered into her room, more curious by the minute. But when she did so, the sight momentarily stunned her. Folded neatly on the bedspread, looking faded and worn but clean and neat, were the jeans and Mickey Mouse tee of long ago.

For a very, very long time, Maddie said and did nothing. Then she quietly walked outside.

“What are you doing?” Maddie asked, walking to Jeanne.

Jeanne, blonde underneath the red kerchief, smiled at her. “Planting another rosebush. Want to help?”

Maddie nodded and dropped to her knees, not minding about the dirt. Texas or no, she knew how to garden.

As they, Jeanne talked. She described her plans for the garden, things like where she wanted a fountain and another patch of lilies and a little bridge. “We just need one more plant. Somethin’ that can go next to the bench there. I was thinkin’—”

Maddie, who had been listening vaguely, stopped quite suddenly. “Wait a moment!” And quite suddenly, she raced inside the house. She ran into her bedroom. She grabbed the yellow hyacinth, still drooping in its pot. And then she flew outside again.

“What’s that?” Jeanne asked, looking at the yellow hyacinth.

Maddie grinned. “The missing plant.” And she handed the plant to Jeanne.

Jeanne smiled back, gently setting the pot on the Texas ground. “It’s beautiful.”

Maddie nodded. It *was*. But it was much more than that. “It’s magic.”