

FLASH FICTION

Summer in the Heart

by Christina Dax



"Spring Day" by Hyewon Cho

The lights were flickering. On and off and on and off and on, and then, finally, they went out once and for all. Moira let out a deep sigh and pulled her thick woolen blanket up right under her eyes, almost completely covering her wrinkled face and her matted gray hair. This was the sixth power outage this week.

She'd have to light her last candle if she didn't want to sit in the dark for the rest of the day. Snuggled into her worn armchair and muffled up in a hooded jacket, she spent each and every day listening to the howling wind whirling around everything that was not nailed down and covering the world with an impenetrable layer of damp, heavy snow. The only other sound occasionally to be heard was Moira's grumbling stomach — evidence of her bare pantry. There was nothing left in there, except for some dry tea leaves, a few slices of hard bread, a can of green beans and a single candle, all of which she had gotten hold of at the market this week.

If she wanted to survive until the market would open again next week, she needed some light and some warmth. Ponderously, she stood up. The tiny candle in her hand, Moira slowly inched her way towards the middle of the living room. Striking a match, she took a look out of the window. Nothing to be seen, just like every day for the last sixty years. The ceaseless storm had veiled everything in snow. The boisterous wind was rattling at the window shutters; she could feel the cold air creeping through the cracks in the window glass. With goosebumps all over her arms, Moira returned to her armchair. This was such a sad time: much sorrow, little food and no laughter. Covered up again, she gazed longingly at the fireplace. How many years must have passed since the last fire had burned in there...

Moira was the last person in the village who remembered a world before the long winter — a world with abundant food, ample firewood and reliable electricity. When she was a schoolgirl, snow was something she would look forward to. Building snowmen, having snowball fights, counting snowflakes. It was a welcome change to picking wild flowers and bathing in chilly creeks every summer. Today, it was monotonous. Her children, her grandchildren, her grand-grandchildren had known nothing but snow. Perpetual snow. Oh, how she wished they could experience how it felt to run barefoot over rough terrains and smooth grounds while letting the sun warm and tan their skin. One day, she thought, one day. And then, just after the candlewick flashed up for the last time, Moira's eyelids closed. Dark smoke ascended from the hot wax and vanished in the air.

What a hopeful life this lady must have led, the undertaker thought as he lowered the coffin into the grave. When searching her house after she was taken to the funeral hall, they had found nothing of value. But he would never forget the moment when he entered the

basement. Right upon stepping into the room, he laid eyes on a breathtaking sight: mason jars full of dried field flowers in vibrant colors, scrapbooks filled with the most stunningly patterned butterflies, cardboard boxes overflowing with feathers of nightingales, grosbeaks and other singing birds. He also recalled the smell down there; it was a divine mixture of sweet and pure scents that he had never encountered before, the aroma of what he imagined a field of flowers in full bloom to smell like. With his eyes closed, he could almost hear the voices of birds that were long gone but whose feathering lived on in this old lady's cellar. It was as if she had conserved the season she always hoped would come back. She had always kept summer in her home, and she had always kept summer in her heart.

Trudging home through the slushy, ankle-deep snow, his face reddened by the piercing cold, he was still immersed in his thoughts. Everything he knew about summer, he knew from Moira. When he was a child, they would gather around her armchair and listen to stories about warmer times. It had left a lasting impression on him that an old lady had so many hopeful things to tell when his own parents were permanently depressed, dejected and desperate. Moira must have always thought better times would come again someday. And deep in his heart, he wished that one day he, too, could witness a season of green meadows, blue rivers and red poppies.

At this very moment, a faint sound arose from somewhere far, far away. Through the thick hat that covered his ears, he couldn't hear the soft chant. But that didn't stop the blackbird from singing again and again, infusing the heart of the forest with a long-lost song...