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Tea Party

by Julia van der Ryn

It was 1966 and I was seven years old. We lived in Berkeley, California. I was dressed up for a birthday party. I had on a white dress with frills around the sleeves and the hem. My white socks were ringed at the top with a thin strip of lace. I had folded them down so that the lace neatly encircled my ankle, right above my black patent-leather mary janes. I even had on my best underwear that had fringes of lace all across the bottom.

My parents were driving me to the party. They said that we would leave the house a little bit early because they had to stop somewhere on the way. They were not dressed up like I was. They both wore jeans and sandals. It didn't matter to me, I was the only one going to the party.

I was nervous about getting there on time. I hated to be late, to draw attention to myself by walking into a room already full of people.

In the car I held the present on my lap. My mother had helped me wrap it in bright sheets of tissue paper. She had showed me how to make the bow by wrapping figure-eight's of ribbon around her thumb and forefinger, then securing them in the middle with another wrap of ribbon. She took it off her fingers and pulled out the layers of ribbons until they plumped up nicely around the center. We taped this to the package with a hidden circle of tape. Then she made curly-cues by dragging the tails of the bow swiftly across the inside sharp edge of the scissors. If it didn't work the first time she did it again until it made a perfect spiral. I loved these tricks, they seemed like magic.

We drove to the other side of Berkeley where the neighborhoods thinned out and the atmosphere became more industrial. We went under the freeway overpass, towards the San Francisco Bay. Finally we came to our destination, the railroad tracks.

My father parked our black convertible V.W. bug. I loved this car and would gladly have just stayed sitting in it. I saw a large group of people gathered around the train tracks. They were all sloppily dressed like my parents.

My mother explained to me, "This is a protest against the war. The government is making men go to war who don't want to fight."

The men who were now soldiers would be coming through on a train on their way to an army camp. These people were gathered with signs and bullhorns to show that they thought that fighting was not the way to solve problems. No one should be forced into

fighting. I didn't understand who it was that could make grown-ups do things that they didn't want to do. But I did understand these men not wanting to be soldiers, having to cut their hair short, wear uniforms, and maybe die.

From the freeway, I had seen the gigantic graveyard on the outskirts of San Francisco. There were thousands of rows of white tombstones. I couldn't even see where they ended as they went up over the grassy hills. Passing by quickly in the car, my eyes would make designs as the acres of evenly spaced markers blurred in a geometric display. I couldn't believe that underneath the grass the ground was filled with dead bodies, one for each white rectangle. It was impossible to comprehend that so many people could die in a war.

Every night on the news, Walter Cronkite (my dad called him "Uncle Walt" and I thought he and Walt Disney were the same man) would recite how many casualties there had been in the Vietnam War that day. When I found out that casualties meant people who had been killed, nobody could convince me that Uncle Walt's huge numbers could be correct.

It just didn't make any sense. Did one country win a war when everyone else on the other side was dead? I couldn't picture it. I couldn't imagine the once alive people that these numbers represented.

At the railroad tracks the demonstration against the war was loud and disorganized. The train didn't seem to be on schedule. I knew I would be late for my party. While they waited for the train full of soldiers, some people gave speeches through bullhorns, played guitars, or drummed on whatever was handy, and sang. Maybe this was the first time I heard the song, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?". This song taught me about the cycles of life and death, about how something beautiful can come from something sad. The last lines say, "Where have all the soldiers gone? Gone to flowers, every one."

I took this concept very literally. I thought of fields of yellow flowers sprouting up over the graves of soldiers. Beautiful meadows of flowers fertilized by the decomposing bodies. I wondered why people always bring flowers to cemeteries. I figured there should be flowers growing wild everywhere there were dead people.

Still waiting for the train and thinking my own thoughts, I began to feel very conspicuous in my frilly cute dress. I had worn the same dress as a flower girl in my aunt's wedding and had thought I looked fantastic. But here nobody was dressed nicely at all. No one looked like they cared at all about how they dressed or whether or not their hair was parted, or even brushed. I was afraid that everyone was looking at me and wondering if I was silly enough to have gotten all dressed up for this dusty and serious event. Men were on their way to war and it looked like all I cared about was wearing pretty clothes.

I was upset about my parents making me late for the party but I felt worse for looking so out of place in this crowd. I longed for my own jeans and sandals, but I was stuck.

When the train finally came it just passed by. The police made everyone who was trying to stop it get off the tracks. I thought that they would be able to stop the train and set all the soldiers free but it didn't work that way. I saw some soldiers with crew cuts in the train windows. I didn't want to have to connect them with the numbers that Uncle Walt quoted on the nightly news; or with the infinity of white markers. In my mind I saw them all planted like seeds. In fast motion they sprouted and bloomed into fields of yellow flowers waving in the wind. I could almost smell their fresh sweetness and feel the velvet-smooth petals, soft and delicate as a new baby's head.

I was worried they might look out into the crowd and see me in my party dress and think I was there to celebrate. I didn't want them to think I was from the other side, the wrong side that was sending them off to such a frightening place.

Eventually my parents were ready to leave. I had lost all desire to go to the party. My mother told me that no one would care that I was a little late. She would walk me to the door and explain for me, ease over my awkwardness. So I wiped off my shoes and tried to make them shiny again. My anklets were brown with dust and beyond help.

At the party all the girls were dressed up also. I was glad to fit in on the outside, even if on the inside I felt strange. I gave the birthday girl her present and she tore off the wrapping without even noticing how beautiful it was.

With the cake, the mother served us tea. This seemed very pleasingly grown-up. I made the mistake of putting both lemon and milk in mine. The lemon curdled the milk, it looked like cottage cheese. I tried to drink the tea anyway but the lumps made me feel sick. I was given a fresh cup. This time I just added sugar, teaspoon after teaspoon of sugar. I watched it melt off the spoon like magic.

My tea was sweet and soothing. I pretended it was a special syrupy medicine. As I swallowed, it seemed to coat my insides, even my brain. For a moment it helped me forget the way some things that should go together don't, like lemon and milk. And the way that other things that should never belong together do. I kept drinking my tea hoping to stop all the lovely flowers from blooming behind my eyes every time I thought of the soldiers on the train.