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[See table of contents](#)

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Daughter of the Iris

Micaela Edelson

The glory of grape-scented irises flavored my childhood. Purple sprouting in late spring, announcing another year gone, announcing triumph and resiliency over winter's bite. While irises decorate fields from Holland to Colorado in shades of maroons, whites, blacks, and peaches, the irises in my Oregon yard dare not stray from purple. Their color is more vibrant than the eggplant or cabbage, more permeating than the seashells, more enduring than the sky's sunset, more steadfast in its purple than any other purple the natural world has yet to show me. These irises are unique. These irises were my grandmother's.

Sixty years ago, my grandmother planted a patch of friend-given bulbs in her Minnesotan garden and reveled as they emerged each spring. Passing her legacy to her two daughters, they each stewarded their own patch of perennials, sharing with the bees and nourishing the microorganisms of the soil, imparting their floral appreciation on me and my siblings.

Entering into my grandmother's home, there was no doubt that she was of the iris. The flower decorated her walls in needlepoints, photographs, and watercolors. A glass table sprouting several painted irises held her keys at the door front. I cannot say how many shirts boasted her love for the purple flower.

I had always associated my grandmother with the purple petals and strong, green stalks, but before her passing, I knew them just as an iris. I knew her just as a grandmother. I had yet to compose meaning and significance of the iris beyond its familial familiarity, beyond its grape aroma and visual vibrancy; I had yet to appreciate my grandmother for more than her jellybeans and genes.

* * *

The iris, in its alternative meaning, marks the painted portion surrounding the blackness of the pupil, hues of browns, greens, and blues, grays, golds, and, in some cases, reds. The iris displays a multitudinous rainbow sheltering the portal of our most trusted sense. The iris is not the pupil. It is not the actual portal for our vision. It is only what makes the pupil worth looking into, enticing the lover, offering compassion to the frightened, expressing trust when words are too shallow.

How fitting for the iris and its two meanings, the flower so aptly named as the portal through which I can see the natural world; through which I can see the inextricable links between the bulb, the microorganisms, the soil, and the sun that work tirelessly to produce the petals; through which I can see life recede with the winter and regenerate each spring, displaying its pollen to

the bees in an aromatic and visual display of prosperity—for what bee doesn't like the smell of grapes in the summertime?

The iris flower was named for the Greek messenger of the gods. Iris herself is a namesake of the Greek word “rainbow,” referencing the light refractions over which she crosses. How fitting for the flower and eye structure to also offer so many colors of the spectrum. As the eyes carry messages like the goddess, can the flower as well? Could my familiar purple flower be a message of comfort in the wake of loss? Was Iris present to carry my grandmother across the rainbow bridge like so many of our ancestors before her?

My thoughts splinter like roots working to construct meaning in the flower she loved, searching for significance in the iris while my pupil just emits blackness. These meanings and symbols are constructed. My questions are unanswerable. Like our anthropocentric valuation of life and the repugnancy of death, our constructions are not always healthy nor do they always align with the natural world. Flowers can just be flowers, grandmothers can just be grandmothers; they bring life, they share beauty, and they die.

* * *

Half of the iris's petals shelter the pollen at the core. The remaining petals splay outwards, tempting the pollinators, inviting them to intermingle and help steward new life.

My grandmother was quick to make friends, albeit through the organizations in which she was active, or through simply standing in the grocery line, always eager to extend a petal for those in want. But like the inner petals folded delicately over the stamen of the center, my grandmother was a fierce foundation for her family, protecting and advocating for them and many others. She left her unstable and erratic husband at a time when most women would not; she raised her two daughters to be strong and independent despite their shared petite statures and existence in a strong patriarchy; she advocated for vulnerable children as a child protective services worker and as a social worker at a group home for adolescent girls; she embraced her step-children and step-grandchildren as if there were no difference.

The iris can only survive through so many rainstorms. I saw the weighted heart of my grandma as her family tree slowly shrunk. I saw the sparkle dim when she spoke of Cousin X's gambling addiction or Uncle Y's mental illnesses. My close family saw her frustration as her intelligence and capabilities made way to the blight that was dementia. Perhaps, the cost of the closed iris is that many cannot see a threat's full debilitation when it stays on the inside.

My grandmother passed in January 2021. As I waited for her to complete the crocheted baby blanket before making my grand entrance into the world 26 years ago, she waited for me to make the 2-day road trip from Colorado to Minnesota for one last farewell before departing.

* * *

In January, the iris is sheltered in the soil, hidden from the scolding snow and callous cold. Perhaps my grandmother's bulb, buried by the political upheaval, a global pandemic, her own demented frustration, held her too deep, suffocating in the soil, not knowing there will be light in the spring. In reality, her bulb had stayed buried in the earth years before her winter departure, withering slowly in a dementia so cruel, it would be hard for anyone to bloom.

Like my grandmother, I too am of the iris. Buried deep, deep into the earth each winter, I shelter from the frigidity of the surface, from the rigidity of adulthood, from the crushing weight of political polarization and societal dissent. The soil compacts heavily atop my bulb, so protective over the fragility of the core from whence my petals will bloom. How much harder is it to seek out the light and return to the air each year when the soil compacts so securely? How insular does the bulb need to be to survive the bitter frost of winter but to not forget to come back up in spring?

January 2021: the winter to be all winters. Compiling socio-political unrest, familial death, societal death, promises of environmental collapse converging on the heart as a late frost frightens the sprouting bulb. I held so much dread before it even began.

Yet despite the cold, my basil plant flourished. My Pilea plant, with her dark, waxy leaves turned towards the Southern exposure, and the spider plant persisted despite the browned edges of her long and narrow leaves. They oxygenate my apartment. The basil, rosemary, cilantro, and green onions grow and nourish me. The green in the face of white and gray remind me of the resilience and persistence of life: regardless of the turmoil of society, the atmospheric catastrophe, a global pandemic, plants still grow, irises still grow. If only I could be so patient to see the irises' resilience in June.

* * *

February 2021: one month after her passing. Winter's departure announced with three consecutive days of sunlight, the sun poking through the shades with the sensation of erasure of frigidness and fragility. Three days of warm hugs and vitamin D and movement towards winter's end. Three days to feel the weight of the year's termination shedding like skin cells. Stretching after grieving. Another chance to bloom. Renewed light: shine, penetrate, help me grow.

As winter yields to fresh sun, the slowly-accumulated layers of emotional security suddenly show their weight. How easy is it to bloom again against a solar embrace? I will soon regrow stalks, and by spring yield the fearless flower as I announce another year's triumph in a grape-flavored fervor, only hoping for milder winters in the future.

Because my grandmother sprouted each spring, passing on her strength, I too hold the resilience of the iris. As my mother tends to the flower patch each year, separating the bulbs and easing their multiplication, twice my grandmother's bulb laid in the soil before multiplying into a new bloom: my mother and my aunt. Twice my mother's bulb laid in the soil before reaching fruition into the petals of my sister and me. Can my bulb hope to replicate the cycle that keeps life on living? Too many irises in the garden can spoil the lot.

* * *

Daughter of the iris knows life by show tunes and chocolate, knows laughter through dirty jokes at family game nights, knows when to leave someone alone and when to give someone a hug. Daughter of the iris has sleepless nights rife with anxiety and pillow-flipping. Daughter of the iris has poor hearing and a small bladder and buries the fear of a dementia-tainted future deep, deep into the soil. Daughter of the iris smelling of grape, emerge from the garden bed with stares of fertility, ignore them, embrace your own petals. Grandmother of the iris, sing to me in my sleep. I long to hear your raspy, love-filled voice tell me you love me. Mother of the iris, cradle me as the pain of blooming overwhelms. Tell me the soil will moisten and the rains will come.

I think of how, despite my loss, the irises will still sprout, the smell will still sensate, and the bees will still pollinate. And while the physicality of the flowers remains, the energy and legacy of my grandmother will forever be embedded in the purple petals, the green stalks, the yellow stamen, the resilient bulb. Forever anchored in my heart, hidden with the grief of her passing every January, blooming with her birthday each June.

Daughter of the iris, smell my flower, hear me sing

Daughter of the iris sprout softly in the spring.

Entice the bees for nature's one true call,

But shelter the stamen behind purple petal walls.

Mother of the iris, hold the bulb in the soil

Shelter her from rainstorms and from sprouting's hard toil.

Teach her to stand with her stalks to the sky.

Teach her of cycles as autumnal petals die.

Grandmother of the iris, allow your petals to rest

How many years have you stood, only given your best?
Release your burden, return to the earth,
From you and your givings, new life will be birthed.

Sisters of the iris, lay in your grave.
We know of the love and the compassion you gave.
Grown from the soil, simply to return.
Each petal will fall, like us all, in our turn.