

CEMETERY CLOVERS

I mark the end of my childhood with the day my mother told me the red flowers on the side of the road were actually weeds. Clovers, to be exact, but I had been delicately plucking them from the field at my grandparents' house for as long as I could remember. They were beautiful, and while I'd like to say they were reminiscent of something I'd loved once before, they were not. In fact, they were the root of my memory: the thing I would reminisce upon.

They grew alongside dandelions, in perfect harmony with caterpillars and the prairie blue-eyed grass that always bore tiny white flowers - maybe those were weeds too - but I don't care. They traced the edges of the woodline, where the blackberries and honeysuckles grew tall for the native bees or butterflies.

I remember when I stopped going outside; it was sometime between the day my mother told me my clothes were too expensive to get dirty and the day she finally let friends sleep over at the house. I had no reason to go outside, if only to get sunburned and tired.

So, my best friend and I spent the next 11 years alternating between the same three movies, and I never saw a caterpillar again. In the car, I noticed the red clovers on the side of the highway, right in front of the crosses that appear every so often. I would tell myself they're just monuments of Mississippi's most common religion, and I kept telling myself that until I finally began to believe they were anything but a roadside memorial.

On one particular day, I hadn't been back to my hometown in a while. I spent all of my time at school, doing God knows what, anything but keeping in touch with my past. I'd moved on to bigger, better things: my writing experience, my new(ish) relationship, the amazing friends I'd made, and the pure bliss that I knew awaited me in my future somewhere. Within those confines, I found myself in the passenger's seat of a small white car, staring out of the window into the dust the backroads inevitably kicked up.

It was almost time for him to go home; we had maybe an hour left, and I thought about getting him to drive me back to my own home, but I didn't. I asked him to stop at a church, one that I'd never stepped foot into and probably never will. He pulled into the parking lot, and I kept staring out of the windows at the little red clovers in the grass, cultivated by the morning's rain and whatever was living or decomposing in the soil. I said not a word to him, but maybe that gave the wrong impression.

He asked what I was doing, so I stepped out of the car. I walked around to the driver's side and held his hand to guide him out. I reached under his seat to find a warm can of Bud Light and held it in my other hand. He closed the car door and followed my lead.

My shoes weren't built for the muddy mess that became of the ground, so they were covered and soaked through by the time we reached where I led him. On the walk, I plucked the clovers and the dandelions and the honeysuckles, just as I had as a child. That evening, though, I took the pink ribbon from my wrist and wrapped it around the stems, careful not to press the petals.

I sat cross-legged in the mud, right beside my brother's grave. I felt a gentle palm on my shoulder as I poured the entire can of beer onto the grass just in front of the headstone. I placed the empty can onto the stone itself, then used the can to hold the flowers. They weren't flowers; they were weeds.