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**If You Should Want
Flowers for Your Table
(Advice to a Daughter)**

First, you must gather, gather. A small garden patch to call your own is lovely, but even a sad, weed-choked spot near the highway will yield plenty. Look carefully.

Harvest in the morning, if possible, when both you and the flowers are clear-eyed. A clean cut is better than a ragged tearing away. Bring a coffee can filled with water so as not to parch the blooms as you wander, since you are prone to distraction when confronted with the hard work of choosing.

Do not discount the trees. Even a single branch of birch the width of your thumb can bow gracefully to guests without interrupting conversation. Its heart-shaped leaves will quiver charmingly in the heat of candlelight; its velvet yellow catkins dangle like earrings.

If you are lucky enough to have lilacs, do not be seduced into cutting them unless you have developed the patience to coddle them. They must bathe in water up to their necks for hours before they are ready for display. Otherwise, they resemble those awful, high-maintenance women who wear too much perfume and fail to feed themselves before they drink. They will wilt before the entrée is served, flopping their fragrant heads into someone's salad. If you cannot resist them, peel the lower two inches of bark from their stems, then snip a vertical *X* in the exposed flesh; they will behave beautifully for a day. (In your grandmother's time, the woody stems were mashed with a hammer to open their pores, but such violent measures are unnecessary.)

Do not, under any circumstances, no matter how broke or sorely tempted, pick flowers from shared public spaces, especially cemeteries. It matters. Do not snatch from the neighbors who are never, ever home. Not even one head of hydrangea. You must trust me on this.

In a pinch, you can march a line of old bottles down your table and place a single flower in each—tulips if you can afford them, Queen Anne's lace if you can't. Or dress a jelly jar in a bandanna and plop in a

fistful of dog daisies you have plucked from a ditch. Float flower heads in garage-sale fishbowls.

Last week I veered off the road near that custard stand you loved, parked the car on the shoulder, and waded into a riotous patch of wild sweet peas, all tangled tendrils and wiry stems, reminding me of the way you looked as a child when you slept. I wrestled an armful from the slippery bank, and later they blushed on my table, paling from hot pink to bleached lavender almost before my eyes. If you pursue the wild things, love, look out for bad drivers and poison ivy. Be careful. Be careful. They give a few days pleasure, is all. They are not worth risking your neck for.

There is nothing quite so sad as spent flowers unrelieved of their duties. Be grateful for all they have given you and gather them up in your hands. Sweep the fallen petals from your table with the care you would give a shattered vase. Then put them in some barren place with the eggshells and coffee grounds, where they can mellow and someday feed another garden. The next morning, when you are clear-eyed, go outside and begin again. Begin again.