

Something Ancient, Something Blue

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“**W**hat kind of flower is that one?”
“Which one?”

“The sort of yellow-y, small...well, maybe it’s not a flower.”

My friend Hannah was poking with interest at a sprouted cluster of golden yellow buds woven into the flower crown I wore for my wedding. I had opted to use dried flowers to make all the arrangements, and the crown now hung as a wreath over my writing desk, an emblem to early summer, meanwhile the opalescent snow floated outside the window.

“It’s a kind of grass. I think. I don’t remember what it was called.”

I could easily name all the others--tea roses, billy balls, globe thistles, daisies, strawflowers, French lavender, and pale green pepper grass--but somehow this name alluded me. The little golden buds were like seeds, set in tiny green crowns atop long smooth stems, deceptively delicate. While other dried flowers can be brittle to the touch, crumbling at the slightest resistance, these blooms were surprisingly durable and forgiving, perfect for weaving the crowns, bouquets, and boutonnieres that were meant to survive a night of dancing on a windy beach. It was windy and we did dance, and still, here they are, intact.

Conversation wandered elsewhere, but the gap in my memory nagged at my mind for the rest of the afternoon and all the next day. At the next opportunity I went through my receipts, looking for the name the flower seller used. The online order read: *preserved green flax bunch/ flax/ preserved grains/ dried grains/ dried flax*.

Flax, or linseed, I knew, is the fiber used to make linen fabric. The scientific name of the flax flower is *Linum usitatissimum*, which translates to the phrase “linen most useful.” Indeed, linen was everywhere in our wedding: the bridesmaid dresses, my husband’s suit, the ribbons, the bowties, the table runners, and now I realized, in all the flowers in our hair, our hands, on the tables, on Aaron’s lapel. At this revelation, I felt like a small bridge of meaning had presented itself where I had not recognized one before. I did not know how the plant became the soft, airy material known as linen, and I decided to find out more about this little bud that had so thoroughly surrounded us as we exchanged vows.

Our plan had been a June wedding at a campground by the ocean in Maine, but like a flower losing its petals, our plans fell apart in the face of a dangerous global pandemic. Notes and ideas were set aside, saved in a hefty planner, and tucked away on the shelf. Aaron and I decided to elope at home in Vermont in our own woods, and held a perfectly tiny, private ceremony. Still, it was important to me that this brought both of our families together, too, so one year later we took the chance on trying again for the wedding we thought we might have.

In a burst of optimism, I ordered dried flowers in bulk from a woman out in Minnesota: pink, yellow, dusty blue, white, orange, lavender, bunches of green, but what I ordered the most of was the dried flax buds. Aaron and I both felt a warm, uplifting color should characterize our wedding, and decided on a deep mustard yellow; the preserved flax was the right ochre-honey hue. While a fragile plant like the foamy pepper grass was lovely to look at, it left a thousand tiny seeds spread through our apartment like glitter confetti. The other florals presented similar difficulties: strawflowers and dried daisies lose their heads, lavender loses its buds, thistles are surprisingly sharp, and billy balls cover everything around them in pollen dust. Flax, meanwhile, is pliable and smooth, durable but dainty, and wraps obediently around the frame of a flower crown without breaking. There was no great theory behind my floral favoritism towards the flax flower at the time of my crafting.

I made no connection between the linen we would be wearing on our shoulders and the elegant little plant I was wrangling into place; all I cared about was whether the flower would keep its head when the wind blew off the Atlantic Ocean.

It makes perfect sense now that the flax buds held up as well as they did. As I recently learned, it is one of the oldest and most versatile crops on the planet.

Every part of the plant can be utilized for something. The seeds can be eaten like a grain or pressed to create linseed oil, both highly nutritious, and the lining around the core of the stem, called the bast, contains the fiber that can be processed into durable linen thread and woven in various ways to create a material that can be either as thick and heavy as canvas or as fine and airy as gauze. The material is used for everything from paper, twine, rope, towels, and bed linens to art canvases, printing materials, heavy work clothes and the flowing fabric ribbon I used to tie my wedding bouquet together.

The Common Flax flower is a summer-blooming annual that grows best in temperate climates with cool, dewy springs and warm, dry summers. In other words, a place with all four changing seasons. The stalks can grow to be nearly four feet tall, crowned with five bluebird-blue petals, usually planted densely together to avoid too much branching and to encourage the growth of lengthy stalks that will be spun into lengthy threads. It is not a flower that boasts a decadence of petals like floribunda roses or peonies, nor does it have the notable scent of an herb like mint or rosemary or thyme, but even so, it is no stranger to displays of abundance. Fields of flax as it buds look like a patch of earth fixed in an eternal golden hour, and in full bloom a flax field will make you believe the pure blue sky itself can be planted and grown out of the ground. As I scoured the internet for photos of these fields in places like Ireland and Lithuania, I was amazed that fields of flax are not sought after by travelers the way fields of lavender and sunflowers are. They were just as lush and dreamy, just as beautiful.

Preparing the flax for spinning is a complicated process that still requires much of the work to be done by hand. Unlike other crops, flax must be pulled from the ground with the root intact to gather the full length of the stem. I watched a short film explaining the process, where little old Irishmen and women in their caps and sweaters walked among the damp, rich fields wresting the stalks from the earth with

a very specific twisting motion, repeatedly, using a few loose stalks to tie up a bundle and tossing them into the horse-drawn wagon that followed close behind the farmers. In the brassy twilight glow, it all looked like a long-lost dance. Harvesting the flax was a communal event; it was physical, slow, steady, shared. All of these qualities were so far removed from what life was like for so many of us during the pandemic.

Following the harvest, the seeds are removed through a process called threshing and winnowing that is used in the harvesting of many kinds of grain. The stalks are then “retted” -- fermented in water so that fungi will gently eat away at the sticky pectin on the outer epidermis of the stem without disturbing the valuable inner bast where the strong, silky fiber resides. There are multiple retting methods, whether submerging the stalks in a stream held down by stones, or sunken in a metal drum. To achieve the most refined linen thread, the method is “dew retting,” where the stalks are spread out across an open grassy field to gather dew in the cool twilights and pinkish dawns and to dry in the hot daytime sun (this reminded me of the process of collecting maple syrup in Vermont, where the trees need cold nights and warm days). The stalks rest like this for a period of two to three weeks until the pectin is gone, and the golden bast fiber is loose and dry.

The process depends on that peculiar time between late spring and true summer, when the nights are still cool and the lilacs haven’t yet peaked, when the frogs are singing in the reeds, but the air is growing a little warmer each night, until that first evening you find yourself looking up at the stars without a sweater. That is about the time we imagined would be right for a wedding, and that is when the flax would be ready.

The now retted and dried stalks are passed through a series of machines, whether mechanical or hand-operated, which break away everything but the natural fiber. The first step of this process is called “scrutching,” which is essentially just beating the stalks over and over again with a handy piece of metal or wood. The small pieces of organic pulp that fall away from the stem are collected and used to make paper, rope, or twine. Next, the stalks are put through a little machine called a heckling comb (that looks much like a hairbrush turned upwards) and brushed until the woody stalk has been entirely cleaned away to reveal a fine, luminous, hair-like substance that can eventually be spun into thread. Watching the gradual transformation from a green grass to a glowing linen thread is the stuff of fairytales.

Linen is one of the world's most ancient textiles, domesticated from the long-ago wild species *Linum bienne*, or "pale flax." Flax for the purpose of weaving is grown in Belgium, France, Holland, Lithuania, and China, though at various periods in history it was grown all over the world. Ireland was once the leading producer of linen thread from flax, though not as much now. In some small towns you can still find old linen mills, a collection of small buildings that once held looms and spinning wheels. The stone structures built along winding streams look like the woodland cottages out of an Arthur Rackham illustration. In ancient Egypt linen was considered a textile of great value, worn by revered priests, and used as a precious burial shroud. Flax seed traveled to Egyptian fields by way of Mesopotamia and the wealth of the Fertile Crescent. Still further back in history you can look for the roots of the flax flower. Fragments of woven, and possibly dyed, linen cloth were found preserved in caves in the country of Georgia from almost 36,000 years ago.

The first articles of clothing used by humans were most likely animal furs, worn purely for warmth and acquired only as needed in preparation for the colder months. For a prehistoric person, maybe a woman, to elect to sit down for hours of invaluable daylight and weave something to wear from the gathered stems of flowers would have taken patience, curiosity, artistry, and desire. Most importantly it would have required the undisturbed time to try and try again, to make a mess of it and start over. Her discovery, in another part of the world under a slightly younger sun, would not have been so different than mine when I was sitting in the middle of my messy attic apartment, running the smooth stems through her fingers, and recognizing in a moment that this was not just a pretty flower, this was a material that could hold things together, that would last.

There would be a short window of weeks in June of 2021 when the spread of the virus seemed to subside. It was a cautious and hesitant easing of breath, but it fell just at that precious in-between season of cool nights and warm days and blossoming pink and purple flowers—just in time for us to hold a small wedding by the ocean.

Among the daisies, roses, lavender, and greens, the golden flax buds were carefully arranged, wrapped in long linen ribbons, and given out to our small party of guests. I wore the flowers and ribbons in my hair. Aaron wore a linen dress shirt and

a linen jacket with the boutonniere of yellow flax buds I had made for him pinned to his lapel. The tiny yellow flower buds bent easily in the breeze, never breaking.

I could not have realized it then, but it brings me a peaceful, easy feeling now to look back and believe that, at a time that we will remember for looming doubt and uncertainty, our ceremony was, by dumb happenstance, threaded and bound across time to something ancient and tried; that with this little flower we carried with us came an omen of abundance and purpose, a blessing of patience, of most-usefulness, of nothing gone to waste.