

Emilia Rodriguez

Nursery

Mae thought it was a shame the flowers in her nursery could not see themselves. Tiny, cupped leaves, glowing like peridots, they twisted and fluttered and whipped, and sometimes turned to her in the presence of water. The trailing perennials spilled fearlessly over ledges and heights of shelves. Ground covers spread, like fast flying nets, over borders of plastic planters. She opened every morning at nine o'clock. By then the nursery would be full of expectant gardeners tugging at petals of striped, duotone, and climbing varieties of roses. She wished there were mirrors enclosing the space from all angles, so that the fuchsias could spot themselves: pink bottled sunsets—the hope that we might be eternal beings because we see our future sunsets blooming before us—each more impossibly compact than the one before, infinitesimal droplets of sky. Without her, they might continue to exist, without them she could not.

Mae had won the nursery in her divorce settlement. It had been his mother's bakery and the floors were still a speckled, pink linoleum. She'd sold everything in it but the industrial stove and a teakettle. A greenhouse was erected adjoining the nursery. Overhead, a burgeoning canopy formed, filtering daylight through its ever-changing shape.

Mae taped a piece of paper to the window. Its words faced the street: Now Hiring. It was the same corner of glass where the sign was last displayed, and Dottie had walked in with a floppy hat and short resume. Mae hadn't thought that Dottie, who was nearing 60, would find true love and leave to marry a man she met on the internet. Dottie hadn't even invited Mae to the wedding. Mae didn't regret hiring Dottie. She had wanted someone close to her in age. Part of Mae's decision had been made to assuage her fears: if she were ever in the same position, she didn't want to be rejected over her age. But now she realized it hadn't made a difference what age Dottie had been. She had behaved like a teenager, quit over the phone, and never once thanked Mae.

Mae went home late most nights to a house that was in good shape. The willow tree in the backyard, which she'd planted as a newlywed, was ripping up the plumbing with its roots. But in the evenings the sun fell behind it and it radiated, ethereal. Its branches brushed the ground and rustled softly, and she couldn't bring herself to kill it, so she worried about the mortgage instead. Most of her earnings came from local landscapers. Independent gardeners accounted for the rest, and because she only hired one or two seasonal workers a year, she was able to manage and maintain the nursery on her own and still turn a profit.

The first group of applicants was sloppy. One had dirt under his fingernails, and although that wasn't necessarily bad, she considered poor hygiene unacceptable. He'd been a flirt with one of the customers who came in during the interview. He'd seated himself at the table where Mae kept complimentary cards and stationary, so that if someone purchased a houseplant as a gift, they could include a personal sentiment with the plant as well. The applicant had pulled a card from the cardholder and used it to scrape the grime out from under his fingernails. Just then, the bell had clanged against the glass door and Mae had looked up to find a young woman already running her fingers through the foxtail ferns. As Mae

had attended the customer, he'd leaned back in his chair, presumably to improve his vista. Mae, choosing to believe the woman and the applicant were familiar with each other, had overlooked it. After she'd rung up the customer, the applicant popped out of his chair, plucked the bloom from an orchid and handed it to her as he held open the door. When the customer had left, the applicant turned to Mae and said, "The customer is king, or in this case, queen." Then he'd shot her a self-satisfied smirk. Yet this was not the worst of the applicants. The worst of them had mentioned several times that he had many plants and enjoyed the hydroponic method of gardening. It annoyed her so much she'd asked him to leave immediately. She was aware that marijuana was commonplace, and in fact, she smoked sometimes. It was his lack of discretion she couldn't tolerate.

The day the boy arrived, she was rinsing leaves for tea. The kettle whistled and he walked straight into the back room and lifted it from the burner before turning it off. She dried her hand on her apron and shook his. He told her about his interest in horticulture, and how in ninth grade he'd been on a school field trip to the city's arboretum. Most of the boys had used it as a chance to ditch class to make out with their girlfriends, but that was the moment he decided life had meaning. His father was a born-again Christian, and the boy said that on the bus ride home from the arboretum, he suddenly understood what that meant—to feel reborn. He said it was like feeling eternity. She hired him.

On his first day he arrived with a paper bag. She unlocked the deadbolt and he slid in sideways before the door was fully opened. When she turned to look at him, he was holding the paper bag out to her. She took it and unfurled the top.

"Seeds?" she said.

“My grandmother grows tomatoes in her backyard in California. She grows them in giant planters and they get to be the size of grapefruits.”

She scooped a handful of the tiny yellow disks and let them fall back into the bag. Maybe he really is interested in plants, she thought.

“Thank you,” she said.

He had already walked to the sink and was looping his apron over his head. He crossed the canvas ties at his back and knotted them before flashing her a smile.

“Thank you for the job,” he said.

She carried the seeds to the potting table, put them into tiny pots, and covered them with handfuls of soil.

Throughout the day, she noticed what an improvement it was to have someone capable of bending, lifting, and kneeling—things that had been a challenge for Dottie, which had left Mae picking up the slack. The boy knelt without a straining sigh or the use of a kneeling pad. He moved things in an afternoon that would have taken Mae days. In the evenings they had tea after they closed the register. Sometimes they talked about plant physiology. He once mentioned that he might like to stay on past the summer, and although she wouldn’t need the help then, she was glad to hear it. “You know, there’s a place for you here,” she’d said. By the end of the first month, Mae thought that if she ever saw Dottie again, she might thank her for quitting.

One afternoon, as she was grafting a broken branch back onto a lemon tree, she felt a great fatigue and wondered if she had not exhausted her life. If she had not ruined it trying to love a dead marriage back to life, grafting the good moments, severed by the bad, back to their life source, until the effort poisoned

everything down to a rotted stump. She raked her fingers through her hair and tied it down with an elastic. The boy stood in the distance with his back to the sun, his features hidden in the contrast of burning sky. He was the image of her ex-husband when he was young. She was nineteen again, looking at him through the car's side mirror while he fueled up. It had been months since she'd thought about her ex-husband, and a decade since she'd let herself remember how beautiful he had once been. But there was this boy and his shadow, and in it, the memory of pain, exhumed. She worried that by now the entire town had seen the boy, recognized his uncanny resemblance to her ex-husband, and for the past month joked about how she'd hired him in an attempt to make herself feel younger. Maybe she deserved their pity—after all, who would do such a desperate thing? It occurred to her that the boy might have known all along, and this was a game he was playing—an opportunistic grab at her loneliness. He might go home, call up his friends, and they'd laugh about how she was a wannabe cradle robber. He had three weeks left of employment. It seemed to her too long.

Heat spread across Mae's face. She lowered her gaze, resolving to tell him tonight, after they'd closed the register. She would put a new sign in the window on Monday. Maybe she'd call the man with the dirty fingernails. She wrapped the broken branch around the trunk with grafting tape. And thinking it looked too weathered to be kept in the nursery, she made a mental note to take it home, where it would be out of sight.

A storm was forecasted for that evening. The sun surrendered to lavender clouds, thick as frosting. The sky began to mist. Mae and the boy moved a collection of plumeria trees she'd set outside for lack of space, to the greenhouse, where the wind wouldn't disturb them. She bent her knees and reminded herself not to lift with her back. The boy lifted the planters by their bases, two at a time. The plastic planters were old and crackled under the pressure of his hands.

"Try not to break the planters," she said.

"I won't," he said, "but as the tree slipped from his grasp, he gripped harder and the plastic splintered. The potting soil poured from the crack like sand emptying an hourglass.

"Dammit," she said, "Were you even listening?"

"I'm sorry," he said. He put the other tree on the ground by the pile of soil, and lifted the plumeria by its trunk. She stomped past him carrying her tree. The wind had picked up and it muffled their voices.

"What were you trying to prove, anyway? That you're stronger than I am?" Mae was shouting, and her voice carried through a missing panel in the greenhouse. The boy laughed.

"I am stronger than you. Isn't that why you wanted me?"

"I never wanted you," she said, then realizing what he'd meant, she self-corrected. "I needed you. I thought I needed you."

The boy was at the entrance to the greenhouse. He lay the plumeria on the ground and rushed back to retrieve the rest of the trees, carrying them into the greenhouse, one by one.

Mae pulled a new plastic planter from a shelf and filled it with new soil. She walked to where he'd lay the tree.

"I can repot it," he said. "I'm the one that messed it up."

"Thank you, but I can do it," she said. She had over poured the soil, but didn't bother to level it with the rim. She balled her hand into a fist and aimed directly into the center of the planter, where she punched a hole. She lifted the tree, plunged it into the hole, and packed the soil around it tightly. "Plants require very little love from us to grow, and yet they give us so much in return."

"Yeah, I think that's what makes them so fascinating. They're, like, more evolved than we are." Mae tossed her head back and laughed.

"I think you may be onto something there," she said. Mae followed the boy into the kitchen, where he was setting the cups on the table. She left her apron on, but washed her hands before tightening the faucet.

"Something's bothering you," he said.

She thought of the heavy pallets of potting soil that would be delivered next week. He stood behind her and loosened the tie on her apron.

"Sit down," he said, "I'll make the tea."

He put his hand on the small of her back and nudged her toward the table.

She thought about closing the register, but decided to take a minute. Behind her, he was rustling through the tea drawer.

"Did I mess something up?" he said.

She remembered how her evenings after work had once been earfuls of complaints.

"I've had a lot to think about," she started, but was interrupted by the popping sound of a canister being opened. She recognized the sound, and before she turned to look at him, she knew what he had found. The boy smiled into the canister.

"Is this what I think it is?"

She considered acting like it wasn't her marijuana, but realized how transparently false that would be. He suppressed a chuckle.

"Try not to act so surprised," she said.

"But I am. I'm very surprised," he said. "Don't get me wrong, you just seem like such a straight edge."

“I was your age the first time I tried it,” she said. He carried the canister to the table and they exchanged nervous smiles.

“You understand you’re off the clock? You could leave and pretend you didn’t find this.”

“Or I could stay,” he added.

She pulled the rolling papers out from the drawer.

“I think I’ll put some music on, if that’s okay with you,” he said. He pulled his phone from his pocket and made his way over to the computer. “I think I have some Pink Floyd,” he said.

She laughed and dragged her tongue over the free edge of the paper. “Is that really what you want to listen to, or is it what you think I want to listen to?”

He shook his head and played a song. A lazy voice trailed over a raspy guitar. It didn’t sound modern, but she’d never heard it before. She didn’t take an interest in it, but knew a younger woman would.

“Who did we decide on?”

“Just a friend of mine,” he said, “I think he’s pretty good.”

She didn’t care for guitar music.

“I like it,” she said, striking a match.

“Did you grow the weed here?”

“Heavens no,” she said, and then slowly exhaled, “I grew this at home.”

He reached over and lifted the cigarette cautiously from between Mae’s fingers. Her hands tingled. She looked around the room trying to see it through the eyes of a customer.

“I’m going to paint the walls,” she said. “The pink is strange.”

He concentrated on a spiral of smoke he’d blown.

“I love the pink walls,” he said, “it’s like I’m inside someone’s intestines.”

She took the cigarette and inhaled. Inside her chest, her lungs bloomed, cupped like tulips.

“I know this isn’t what was bothering you. Did I do something wrong?” he said. She sensed his concern was earnest.

“No,” she said, wanting to rescind her resolution to fire him, but in a distracted moment, he could let their indiscretion slip in conversation, and she’d be ridiculed for smoking grass, or worse, labeled as a grower.

“It’s nothing” she said.

They sat and smoked and talked. She wondered about his mother. Mae envisioned her sitting on a couch, maybe watching late night television, or already in bed, wrapped in her husband’s arms, the weight of his affection pinning her to the mattress. She wanted to ask him about her. What she might think he was doing out late on a weekday. She didn’t expect that most eighteen year olds jumped at the opportunity to talk about their mothers, but she’d never heard him mention her. In all their talking, there was still so much she didn’t know about him. His mother had never called, and maybe she wasn’t the type of mother who would call or stay up worrying if he was sober.

His eyes followed the pink walls up to the ceiling.

“I feel something,” he said.

She licked two fingers and extinguished the tip, then poured hot water into the teacups.

“The leaves are in the top drawer,” she said.

He stood and walked slowly. His hands hovered above the open drawer.

“It’s like I’m under water.”

Since he'd come on the job, he hardly required any instruction. It was strange, but she liked seeing him like this: a little lost, needing her. She found the leaves for him and put them into the strainer. He watched. He leaned his head on her shoulder. The strainer steeped into the water, tinting it green. She rested her head on his. His chest rose with each breath. She switched the strainer to the other cup. They exhaled in unison. The water in the teacup caught the light like a small, green mirror and reflected the boy's lips. She pictured them turning to graze her neck. Kissing her skin with his hands at her waist. His eyes would close, he'd pull at her blouse, his open mouth would slide over her breast. She'd wrap her arms around him as he suckled softly. But the vision took hold of itself, slipped away from her, and her breast began to excrete a sugary sap. It trickled from the corners of his mouth, and gradually he sucked harder and more forcefully, trying to drain her of life.

He jerked his head from her shoulder, and she feared that he'd sensed the vision, penetrated her psyche. She worried that he'd run to his car, and drive off, and she wouldn't be allowed to explain it, not that she could.

"You never talk about your mother," she said, trying to conceal the tremor in her voice.

He sat studying the hot liquid, then lifted the cup to his lips and drank some.

"No one's called the cops to file a missing persons report," he said. "We're okay."

"We're okay," she repeated looking into his eyes as he had done to her before. Outside, the wind rattled a loose pane of glass on the greenhouse.

His smile stretched into a yawn.

"I texted my dad, and told him I was at a friend's."

The burner on the stove had been on. It flooded the room with a dense warmth. Mae stood to turn it off. When she turned back to him, his head was on the table. His eyes were shut. His cheeks puffed, intermittently, exhaling dreams.

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The wind sped through the streets and alleys of Mae's neighborhood, bringing with it the balmy cold of mixed currents, and pushing the car at its side. At red lights and turns, the gusts threatened the car's integrity, as it labored to stay intact. She fingered the radio's dials, but found nothing pleasant that could be played loud enough to drown out the wind's clamor. By the time she was in her driveway, raindrops clustered on her windshield, and the first sounds of thunder murmured in the distance

In the garage, she lifted the long pruning shears from the peg board. She dragged the ladder to the backyard where the willow tree whipped its wet branches against the fence. The sky thundered and flashed with menacing light. She climbed the ladder, hooked the open blades to a branch, and sliced it off. Again, and again, the branches gathered into coils on the ground, like the Christmas lights she'd ripped from the roof because it was April and because her ex-husband had put them up, but would not be coming back to take them down.

It rained harder and the branches flailed. They struck her arms and her back until she was bruised and had to climb down. She took cover from the rain under the screened porch. She removed her wet clothing so she would not slip on her way to the shower. In the morning, she would hire the first landscaper that came into the nursery. She would have them cut the tree down, drill holes in the trunk, and fill it with salt.

She rinsed the mud from her ankles in the shower and lathered her hair with a bar of soap. Every couple of seconds, she pushed the plastic curtain away to keep it from clinging to her thighs. The boy was probably dreaming now, of taut skin and volcanos and flying. She wrapped herself in a towel, wrung her hair into the sink, and went to bed.

When she awoke she noted that It was unusually cool for mid-summer. Fall was approaching, and spring bulbs would need to be planted. She dressed for work as her bedroom brightened. She took her time lacing her boots, and layered a cotton blouse, printed with daffodils, over her tank top. In the hallway, the mud she'd tracked in had softened back into dirt, and because she was running late, she made only a mental note to sweep.

When she arrived at the nursery, the boy's car was not in the driveway. It was possible he was also running late, or had gone out for coffee. Whatever consequences smoking grass with the boy had brought on didn't seem as important in the moment. What was important was that the light rays skidded over the surface of the windows and made them mirrors. Mae saw her backlit figure. She was made of glow and translucence. Her blouse was blooming with wind and color. Her smile, a soft vine curling in the breeze.