

Fruits of Neglect

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Planting the Seed

I didn't think immediately of you once the first tentative leaves crept up from a pile of broken up cement and stones in your Oma's garden. It wasn't even a garden, but the side of a swimming pool cracked open for repair, now filled with rainwater, home to a small community of alien-looking water bugs with powerful legs and tadpoles of different sizes. I often told your father that his parents' garden was a biology lesson waiting to be taught.

"It used to be a nice garden," your father said to me many times as we stood there, sometimes clearing up dried leaves, or playing with our cats Straw—a hyperactive orange tabby— and Frosty—a gentle white kitten with grey markings. Your father would point to stumps of palm trees, sweep his arms mutely across the surfaces of old garden chairs, and all at once you would see the garden in its glory days—akin to that of a poolside resort that would have been no stranger to pamphlets or ads you might find online.

But neglect had driven weeds and ferns to unfurl around the edges of pots; moss followed the imprints of feet and paws, and traced hazy outlines across the tiles. Strange little flowers and herbs with no names and strong flavors propped open their lazy little heads within abandoned flowerpots. Vines crawled along with their giant leaves, cellulose muscles bulging as they tightened their grip on the walls as if marking their territory. To the delight of the cats, the beginnings of cattails and grass grew where empty

spaces announced themselves. The kalabasa grew where we threw the seeds after a lunch of kalabasa soup, as if nature had decided: here, are the fruits of your neglect. Not the string of nameless wildflowers that broke apart like tiny dandelions, not the dragonflies and their metallic coats of blue and red. Not the flowers that died as your Opa brought pots, hoping for them instead to grow. Not the herbs that your Oma pruned meticulously, but had perished anyway, their heads dropping in limp, yellow clumps. None of those, but the seeds we threw away and discarded so that the cats could have a healthy snack; the seeds we kicked into the poolside rubble that grew and flourished, and bore sweet fleshy fruit.

How you would have giggled at your mother's dramatic musings. And I could have pointed out to you—or dragged, if he had walked by—Straw the cat. I would have held him up, wiggled his arms, and explained how he, too, was a fruit of neglect. How so, you might have asked, and I would have answered that his mother left him far too long. What counts as a fruit of neglect? Do accidents, and wild uninhibited decisions? Does a night in an Ermita hotel, with a man your great grandparents did not approve of, twenty seven years ago? But what does it matter, I like to think you would declare with a child's confidence, if there is the promise of delicious fruit?

First Bloom

It was when the first blossoms grew that thoughts of you began flitting through my head. I knew nothing of growing kalabasa; my only experience with them was of consumption: the creamy soups, the soft cubes of yellow flesh in savory vegetable stews, the fresh crunch of young blossoms in warm ensaladas.

You would have learned from school about how fruits are formed. Now, normally, that would be the task of bees: honeybees and bumblebees, carpenter bees and squash bees. That was what I knew of fruits; they were helped along by bees. But very rarely did bees visit your Oma's garden, so we watched the first kalabasa blossoms fall off their stems. As with most things in your mother's generation, dearest, learning about things was easily done by going online. You would have seen the irony of this, and I lament that same irony as well. You would have said, "But, mother, weren't you raised in the hills, surrounded by fruit trees and birdsong, and vegetables sprouting right and left?" To which I could have answered by

pointing at your lola, if she were in close vicinity, and saying “Blame your lola; she wanted me to learn about books and arithmetic, she wanted me to forget about the land,” for your lola thought the land was beneath books.

By the time the blossoms came again, I knew I had to look for the male and female flowers. Who knew? Who would think that there was such a thing? A male and a female of the same plant, separately, eight stems away from each other: the males, all eight of them in a row, diminutive and shy, all the same size, all in line, anxious and impatient. A few days later, the female arrived, unfurling the huge petals above her round base—fiery locks above her own bosom, plump and green! In the morning, the she-flower’s petals open at their widest, revealing a sticky claw-like formation within, to lure ants to their doom. The males opened too, their heads turned hopefully towards her. I would have told you to listen closely, and listen well, and to keep quiet in case your father was nearby, feeding the cats or clipping his toenails; I would have told you that men are silly, simple creatures whose desires are driven by sex. I imagine that you would have giggled, and I would have pointed to the male flowers craning at their stalks, over the leaves, just to get a glimpse of the female, eager to pollinate her. I would have explained to you the night your father and I met, how he had smiled a certain way to get me to stay longer, just a bit longer, and how I had draped one of my legs over the other, suddenly and out of nowhere a quiet seductress. I would have told you proudly that it worked on your stupid father; and he would have overheard us and pestered us with inquiries. But we would have giggled to ourselves, keeping our laughter to the overgrowth.

Hand-Pollination

I thought of you as I plucked a male, stem and all, and stripped him of his vestments, leaving only the powdery rod contained within; and as I slid him into the she-flower and prodded at her claw until every bit of her was coated in his powdery pollen. I looked to the side, suddenly self-conscious, chortling to myself, expecting a watching child, thinking how it would have been the best way for me to tell you, “This is how most life begins,” that this is all there is to reproduction: the simple insertion of a male into a female, until his seed and her seed combine to bear fruit. This was how simple it is. How I would casually discuss with you, over

a dining table, and shown you in simple, physical terms—with flowers, or with a vegetable that I might one day feed you. How, if you had asked me “how are babies made, mother?” this would have been my answer. I would not have at first thought of sex, which was what your lolo and lola thought about when I asked them the same question. I would have cut off a stem for you, and showed you how to peel away the petals, and to carefully spread the pollen.

“In a few days,” I would have told you, “this female will close up its petals, and go to sleep. You see this bulb she has? By next week it will grow to this big.” I would have held up my hand, formed a circle with my thumb and pointer finger, and your eyes would have widened.

It would have been an easy transition, to tell you about sex. How I first read about it in a book. How painfully I was made aware of it when I was far too young to be made aware of it, during a fifth grade confession; how it was more about power, and sometimes desire, than reproducing. I would have told you, the simple kalabasa knows no desire or power, and perhaps you would have asked, “Doesn’t it?”

It would not have! Otherwise, all eight males would have at first hollered and hollered until the she-flower awoke, and then torn themselves bodily from their stems to get at her until she lay shivering and wilted in the dirt. Perhaps some of them would have torn her open before she was ready; perhaps one of them might have harbored his desires quietly, composing love poems and planting songs in their roots. The she-flower may have closed herself off to all but one of them, or let herself fall off her stem if she desired no one, or she may have defiantly opened her claws to any blossom, ant, or bee—all reveling in her scent and sticky beauty—and found power in their helpless, hopeless desires.

I wonder if you would have asked me, “Could they do that?” It would have been one of your first almost-fables, “The Simple Kalabasa And How Babies Are Made.” I could easily imagine your father chiming in “The Sexual Kalabasa!” But in all truthfulness, the story is not so far from the reality of the sex we learn by ourselves, brought violently upon some of us, bearing accidental fruits that rot and fall off their stems left and right. Some turn into more clueless fruit; all were part of a cycle of hopeless, pitiful, and stupid flowers, all of us. Except, maybe, you. Your father and I made sure we would make no mistakes, and as we tended to the kalabasa we made

sure every part of it was accounted for: every leaf and every small blossom that sprouted we counted before pollination.

Harvest

Here's why people grow kalabasa: it's a tough little crop. It can bear the brunt of the most extreme heat, even rain, and once you cut it away from the plant, it can stay on your shelf for weeks and weeks, until you plan to eat it. I could have told you that, and how even the smaller blossoms can be eaten, or how simply redirecting the cats to the base of the plant makes for hassle-free fertilizing. But I never could have told you for sure why people decide to have children. Your own lolo and lola, as well as their own parents and grandparents, decided to have children as a kind of retirement plan. Your Oma and Opa decided to have your father simply because they became jealous of a newborn niece and thought she was so cute, so they wanted their own. Many people don't even plan it; children come in batches every day. So as your father and I planned our futures together, we spoke of having our own daughter, how we would have her when we were done with the world, done with seeking out and discovering its secrets.

But the world would never be done with us.

If I could tell you one secret, and it is because you know my mind as I imagine you to, there by the kalabasa patch, checking to see if they are ripe for harvest. Sometimes I think myself burdened with the sheer number of them, wanting to lop them all off at once just to be done with it, and be unbothered with all the troublesome tending...

Once, I made your father pollinate a forlorn looking she-flower, and we did not expect it to grow so quickly into a promising young kalabasa, only to find it one morning sloughed off from its stalk, dead and brown, eaten away by caterpillars. How I had murdered them with stones, pricking myself on their spines in my anger, but no mind—I did not stop until every last caterpillar had been smashed to a pulp. I buried that dead kalabasa like a child, speechless, as your father watched, amused.

It takes a little over a month for a kalabasa to grow into its full size; the type that had grown in the neglected garden grew only to the size of two fists, almost as if they were a single-serving kind. I would have pointed out to you the kalabasa in its many stages: at first, a deep, dark green, shiny

as if waxed to perfection in their youth. They are nearing ripeness if they slowly turn yellow, or if the shiny appearance begins to dull. Remove the kalabasa with a sharp knife, four inches away from the top of its head. Be careful of its tiny, spindly hairs.

Slowly, the kalabasa patch died where it began. It had spread from the edge of the garden, and ventured into the grassier parts of the yard and into the derelict pool. Your father's love faded with similar slowness, parts of it browning and withering away, dropping to the ground, crumbling into earth under the burning sun. I would have told you that not even all the care in the world can save everything you hold so dear. I never knew what happened to the last of the fruits that grew from neglect, that I had cared for in their transition before their painful endings; I left before I had the chance for harvest.

But I think of you still. If I can't imagine your face now, or the feel of your hands, I can imagine your mind, and your heart. I can imagine that you may be capable of feeling how I feel, that you will know I will think of you always, and that at least in these lines—and for at least a few months, amongst a small kalabasa patch that grew from a neglected garden—we had known each other.