

Oscar

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When Oscar awoke at last to the cold, it was an awakening unlike anything for there was no line between it and of sleeping. He was only ever conscious of the promise of sun, hidden behind a haze of what Oscar knew vaguely as clouds, those great haunches of plump grey white bruised with purple, or sometimes orange, or what he remembered of it; Oscar became aware that he could not see, and he could not hear; and Oscar did not mind. He stayed in his favorite chair by the window, dotted with the afterthought of last night's rain, awaiting the sun.

When the house came to life, as with the street, low whispers of dreams ending and eyelids unfolding, kitchens and trikes sputtering to life, slippered feet slid quietly over floors waxed to a blush, and as the maid bent over to pick up yesterday's newspaper—scattered across the living room floor as usual she gasped and quite loudly, exclaimed, "*Santamariajospor-santo!*" to see a plant in sir's favorite rattan armchair. It was a knobably, pathetic looking thing, with wiry, rheumatic roots and limbs that twisted and bent in odd directions, giving way to boughs that sighed under the succession of leaves shaped like hearts, spinning their way to the top where they gathered into a bald, wispy knob, waiting to sprout, stooped over slightly as if asleep.

The world lurched as the maid crammed him into a clay pot where the lucky bamboo shoots had recently died; and as he was set upon the windowsill Oscar tasted the morning, considered for a moment the

many strange rituals he had taken care to go through every morning, how amusing, how ridiculous it was, now that it was quite a joy to be so still.

When his wife found that he wasn't at the dinner table that night, she started to look for him. Oscar did not need to eat dinner anymore since he already had his fill of sun and air. Her voice rang loud and swift all over the house, echoing across the walls. She called for him in every room, and when she didn't find him, she rang the police. Once or twice it crossed her mind that Oscar might have gotten too upset and run off, but ah, then again, she knew the man had no spine and would come trotting back home, bald head hanging low like a sorry dog. And she was right, for Oscar had not the spine to run away, being too devoted to his wife and daughter the only way he knew how, faithfully working longer and longer hours for bigger and bigger paychecks, dealing with all his anxiety with sleep, sometimes wondering how peaceful it would be if he would be given time to be still, and wishing, fervently wishing as a thunderstorm passed over the house, that he could stay as he was then, in the most motionless of states, nourished only by rain.

The police came the next morning, as Oscar's wife had demanded. Oscar could have been amused, for his wife had never been so flustered, had he not been so occupied with the sun. He found that he had no control over his body, that he could not so much as move his leaves, but that he knew where each of them sprouted, knew how his roots settled comfortably among the soil. In every inch and nook of himself he found that he could breathe and feel somehow, the air and sunlight coming together within him and every bit of him, and he had never been so blissful and content. He found that he would be gladdened by the quick breeze and sickened by fumes from the street below, feeling a slow, inward urge to curl and seize the stillness, as the unwanted stuff passed through the inside of him. He was unaffected as his wife made quite a show of weeping, weaving stories of infidelity and constant arguments. Sometimes, she said, he had even raised a hand to her. He had hit her on some nights. "Oh but I put up with him," she sniffed to the audience of young men in blue, rapt and attentive as the idea of their responsibilities as protectors of the populace still fresh in their heads. "I put up with him; I can't raise my daughter on my wages alone." The younger of the policemen cast his eyes briefly at the wisp of a girl with vacant eyes, fiddling with a color magazine and turning

its pages on the living room floor. A sorrow stirred in him, and lingered as they left to return to the station, muttering about the case as they climbed into the car.

But had Oscar's wife been thrifty, her wages from selling skin care products and jewelry, would have been enough to raise her daughter alone. Oscar had brought this up the night before, still human, no less withered and stooped then he was as a plant. It had been his first slip; the first time he came to put what came to his mind as words to be spoken and heard, instead of the usual passive grunts when he would submit, exhaustedly, to his wife's very loud, very threatening wheedling. It was the first time he refused her, and she had responded, scathingly, "You call yourself a man? You're an old, limp vegetable!" But it was only when she mentioned their daughter that the sparks of rebellion died in Oscar, and he felt wilted once again, promising half his monthly paycheck, and the recent bonus his boss gave him. He had stroked his chin, mulling over the insult, watching his daughter with her vacant eyes staring at the television set, thankful that her condition prevented her from realizing that she had a weak, good-for-nothing father. If only he had enough time to stay at home, with this poor girl whom he loved, but sometimes he wondered if they were strangers both, far away from each other and never meeting. He wished to be an ornament then, constant and steadfast, and thought he heard the heavens giving their consent, applauding him, with the sudden arrival of rain.

The search for Oscar continued for days; at one point, the company where he had worked, financed a search for him, with his boss and the CEO coming over for a visit to lend the poor, distraught wife their sympathies. They had known nothing of his violent behavior, and he had come across, to them at least, as a meek, mild-mannered old man who did his job well, and that had been all they cared about. They thought it proper to extend an envelope containing a sum of money, passed around the office a day prior with a note about the daughter with the illness. They left with plump hearts, convinced of their own sincerity.

By then, Oscar had flourished somewhat, his leaves glossy with nutrients. Once in a while, small butterflies would rest with him before continuing on in search of prettier gardens, and at night, the moths heavy with fur hid from hungry bats beneath his leaves. One time, his daughter

climbed onto the windowsill with him and planted an earthworm in his pot of soil, and Oscar welcomed its friendly intrusion with plant-like mirth.

“Why is she so dirty, Yaya? Did you let her out into the garden?” Oscar’s wife shrieked. She was very rarely home these days, eliciting the sympathies of friends and neighbors, so adept at it that she gave up her previous job of selling soap in favor of selling tears. The maid, young and new and idle as she was in a house, without both her bosses, had taken to letting the small child loose in the garden while she went neighboring, exchanging chatter with the maids of other households. Oscar would sense a deep looming loneliness.

Ever so often his daughter would come into the house and feed herself handfuls of mashed banana, sitting on the windowsill with him, as if feebly aware of his transformation. She said nothing. She had always been a quiet child; unnervingly so, from birth, and had only learned to speak when forced to in the special school she went to before and after summers. When she took a nip at one of his leaves or tentatively dug a few fingers in the soil, Oscar would recollect, briefly, how her stillness disturbed and saddened him. He would also feel a kind of delicious warmth that his former internal organs and human capabilities had denied him. But now he understood her predilection and they would sit together in silence, weighed down with unknowing, but also with mutual affection.

All the money ran out within months—the donations in envelopes and the amounts on deposit slips. The comfort of money was a false security, and without Oscar, his wife knew she would be reduced to nothing in a matter of weeks. She became a fixture at the police precinct and local radio stations, pleading into the mic for a husband she secretly wished would not return, and a daughter she openly used to gather pity. Oscar would recognize her voice, bristling with the strange residual human emotion he knew was called guilt. Whatever it was that had remained of the human Oscar in his plantly incarnation struggled against his cellulose skin, and as it rained again that night, he was awash with regret. A great pungent pain surged through him like a current, resting on his leaves that were closest to the soil. These soon felt alien, like they were no longer a part of him, a series of dead extremities that, as dawn broke, sloughed off of him like a dead shell.

Oscar found no relief when the sun finally came out; the maid had come up to the plant on the windowsill to splash it with half a *tabo* of water as she did every morning, and discovered earthy bills pressed into the newly moistened soil. She backed off a couple of steps, saw that a handful of them had made it to the floor, and in her grand astonishment could only think of screaming, “*Ate! Ate! Ate!*” in varying pitches, scurrying in small circles.

“What in god’s green graces are you screaming about?” Oscar’s wife screamed back. But the maid was not to be silenced. Emboldened by the strangeness, she tugged and pulled and were it physically possible, would have thrashed her *Ate* about, babbling incoherently and pointing. Oscar’s wife soon pieced the signals together, and reacted with even more screams.

And that was how the nationwide search for Oscar was abruptly discontinued, and all investigations halted. The sorrowful wife declared that, unfortunately, she had to give up, and return home with a heavy heart. She was careful of all outward appearances, and had the maid swear on her life, to secrecy. The money tree was to be their salvation. However withered and ugly it was, it was so greedily guarded that they sought no expertise on its peculiar shedding of money—actual cash, genuine bills—caring naught about myths and legends and the implications of an actual money-bearing plant. This money tree was a gift, and that was all it was.

Oscar shared in this disbelief, but he derived no pleasure from this new ability. He found himself constantly and indiscriminately sprayed with pesticide, its irritating bitterness tainting his daily nourishment. His peaceful tenant the earthworm, who Oscar had grown very fond of, was murdered one day with pliers, cast aside with his lesser leaves, whose only fault were not being as vividly green as the others. The butterflies and moths stopped visiting him, their feet and tongues burned by the persistent chemicals; and now not even aphids or ants, whose company Oscar readily welcomed, dared come near. By now it seemed that the only person who shared in his distress was his little daughter, who let out a whimper as she took the pieces of dead earthworm and buried them in the garden.

Nevertheless, Oscar would continue to shed, as if on schedule, twice a month, and at times his wife would pause in her retail therapy to harbor thoughts of this strange schedule as being eerily similar to when her lost husband would hand over his paychecks. It was at these times that

she was at the very verge of realizing that her husband and the plant were connected in some way, but it was too fanciful a thought to dwell on, and she would quickly forget, too devotedly immersed in the tending of things she thought actually mattered, like a new paint job, so that the house could stand out among the hovels her neighbors called houses, or transforming the garden into a veranda where she could host friends.

Oscar, meanwhile, found himself dozing longer and longer, subsiding deeper and deeper into the indifference of plants. The movement of humans seemed quicker to him now; their voices a shrill and steady thrum reaching him in waves, intensified by the wind. Everything else seemed like a haze. The only things slow or still enough were objects that had remained what they had been longer than he had been a plant—the house, the furniture, the garden, the prickling of new grass, the grim intensity of the acacia in the neighbor's yard. The only things that mattered now, were the welcome heat of the sun, the acknowledgement of rain, and the consistency of the air. Once or twice though, he would come to, and almost regain that old platform of consciousness, of being, of human-ness, but it would be gone in an instant, swift as a passing thought. He grew more oblivious to the growing tensions at home, but in the rare times that he sensed them, he chose to overlook them. He would only catch on—almost readily—whenever his daughter touched him, stroked a leaf, or moved around the soil with her fingers. She could not visit him as often as she pleased, though, as the tending, caring for, and harvesting of the miraculous money tree belonged to Oscar's wife and the maid. Whenever the girl tried, she would be pushed away, led outside into the garden to occupy herself with other plants. On rare visits, in the dead of night, she would manage to speak to him, a word or two, and Oscar despaired at the loss of the gift of sentience, for he was not able to hear, only *feel* in low, significant vibrations in the air, what his daughter was trying to say.

Twice a month, Oscar's wife and the maid would take the plant into the kitchen, and seal all the doors and windows, and begin harvesting. Oscar would be roused from his plantly reverie, fully conscious about the gathering of money; it was the only time they were gentle with him. On these days his wife and the maid would talk about the bills, about renovations and new things to replace the old things that needed repairing; Oscar would recall conversations like this from a time that seemed to him so

very long ago, from which he was always excluded, because of his weakness with calculations and aversion to the luxury of new things. They were all just words to him now, a dull thrumming in the air as the two women went about their business. It would only be a matter of time before they set him back on his peaceful windowsill and he would drop out of their callow world once more. It was something that he could live with; after all, did they not only bother him twice a month? Did they not always return him to his place by the window, with the sun and the rain?

It was an arrangement that benefited everyone except the little girl. In the flurry of new excitements she was the house's lowest priority. Her mother would leave it up to the maid to care for her, and the maid, giddy with her new freedom, would assume that her *Ate* was in charge of the child, and would abandon her duties to cavort with the water boys and *ist-ambays* of the neighborhood. It could easily be imagined that one day she would run off with one of them, never to return, and later tell her grandchildren wild stories about plants.

The little girl would only ever be fed whenever the two older women would remember to eat, or cook, or bring home a meal, and that was not so very often, as they felt nourished by and content with merely buying new things. At times the little girl would venture a taste of the mulch that had accumulated in Oscar's clay pot while Oscar, aghast, tried to recall what he used to feed his daughter.

The day came when Oscar's wife discovered the little girl trying to eat Oscar's precious leaves, and she flew into such a panic that she pinched the girl's cheek until it drew blood. But the girl held dangerously on to the plant, throwing her thin little arms around the pot and thrusting her head against the stem as if to seek protection from beneath the leaves.

"You little *bruha*! You're going to break it!" shrieked the girl's mother. The commotion brought Oscar to his senses, the heaving and shaking and the confusion of what he knew to be voices, and a constriction around his being that he recognized as his daughter. It did not take long for him to understand, as much as a plant possibly could, and for a moment he thought he was to become human again with such a rage streaming through his boughs that he wanted to lash out, to protect the little girl, from his wife, the maid, the world, and he would feed her again, would care for her again. But there was nothing, and he was still a plant, motionless, thrashing in-

wardly to no avail until all the struggle around him ceased and all was silent again. Later he would sense the salt of his daughter's tears as they ran deep into the soil, the price of a wish fulfilled, the iron taste of it as it spreading swiftly through his roots, his stem, his leaves. He thought then that he should not forget, as he soaked up the bitter memory of this girl with the vacant eyes, and so with all his chlorophyllic strength he strained against his stillness, but there were no hands to reach out with no voice to speak with.

After a week of heavy rain, it was time for Oscar to shed again. He would shed at the break of dawn, and the women of the house would harvest at breakfast. If they did it too early and the money would crumble into soil.

Somehow it felt different this time. There was no sharp pain of his leaves drying up and falling. Instead there was a sweet tingling between his leaves and boughs and soon they grew heavy with a new weight.

Before light, his daughter who had managed to sneak out and visit him, found the strangest little fruit on the plant by the window, all in different stages of growth: some minute and edged with pleasantly green petals, some as large as grapes. She took one to put in her mouth, crushed it between her teeth, and the sweetness of it led her to reach for another, and another until all traces of the fruit Oscar bore were no more.

Soon he would remember nothing but the dawns in which he bore fruit; the rest of the time it would feel like a deep sleep stirred by faint dreams of faraway movements and voices. The deeper he slept, the less money he shed, the more fruit he bore. It did not take long for Oscar's wife to notice, blaming it on the expensive brand of pesticide or the lack of sunlight, and later on, the maid whom she accused of stealing, and the child, whom she accused of eating the bills, until there was no one and nothing left to blame. Eventually she was persuaded to return to selling beauty projects and to postpone the renovations to a later date.

Little did anyone notice, the fruit that grew in place of the money, for it grew in the dark, in the middle of the night, whenever the daughter would come. And every time, whenever she visited him, her speech grew steadier, her fingers quicker. She would now dare wait until the fruit ripened before picking, and if she caught a stirring in one of the rooms

she would hide them to eat later in the day. They loosened her joints, put strength in her bones, and over the course of a month her eyes began to betray signs of life, darting from one object to another. Her stares grew a little less vacant day by day.

At times, she would speak quietly to him about plants. Oscar could not understand a word, but the feel of her breath comforted him. Everything was a dream now, vacant, distant dreams that meant nothing to the great deep slumber of plants, a sleeping forever present, with no memories or thoughts of the future. But she would speak to him still, turn the soil until it was moist and pleasant and soft.

One morning, barely morning, as it was dark still, and a slight fog hung over the city, Oscar felt his daughter climb onto the windowsill, an uneven shudder, and a warm, faint breeze that was her breath as she spoke to him again, from so far away it might have been the wind in the leaves of another tree. But with the last that remained of what made him the Oscar who had fathered this girl who stayed awake and rapt, as she told him stories of men that turned into plants, feeling his soil turned again and again by the knowing warmth of small hands, he drifted farther and farther away settling forever into a blissful sleep not unlike death, but still very much within the reach of life, a different life, a different world ...