

DO YOU GARDEN?

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AS ASHLEY MASSAGED the loose skin free from the flesh of a boiled peach, the last one of one of the day's last batches, each batch a batch of a dozen, at least, and then braced the paring knife's blunt edge against the blistered pad of his thumb, numbed from being plunged into the mostly molten ice to fish out one peach after another, his thoughts would gather in the familiar hollow the familiar work hollowed out. These concerned his wife.

When knife bit into the peach pit, he rolled it full circle and thought of Sheila, his wife, and with a twist split open the peach. He scooped up the slippery halves of the peach and with a thought of his wife they lept from his hands to the jar like pair of koi. And with thoughts of her came thoughts of the fire and the rest revolved around these. Now and then these thoughts were eclipsed by thoughts of the nurse, Javier, as when he gathered the pits in an ice-cream bucket that the sun had bleached a dull green.

His flipflops made a puckering, sucking sound as he moved to stir the syrup and lower the flame a notch, and set the sprawling glass honeycomb of mason jars tinkling. The afternoon light on the pine-pannelled walls, beaded with varnish that never quite dried, and gave

an amber cast to the kitchen, into which the smell of peaches had steadily been luring wasps. On three separate occasions, Ashley had had to dump an entire jar of peaches into a dull yellow colander and hose them off in the sink, pressing his still-unblistered thumb hard up against the faucet so that the water would spray with sufficient force to dislodge the wasp from her dinner and push her twitching, brittle body through the slits in the pasta strainer. Each time it made him shudder. After the third occasion he had to pause to gather his nerves again and look out over the orchard, from the window over the sink. The afternoon was overcast, and the light had the sort of grayness to it that made everything out there gray. An engineless glider, so close to the cloud cover's colour that only movement gave it away, turned in broad and patient arcs. Something twitched up close at the edge of the frame. Something with brassy legs and antennae and a lithe black body that glistened and flexed a wisplike ovipositor. It coiled and uncoiled and coiled again with horribly intimate urgency. Ashley heard himself shout "stumpfucker!" and scrambled about for something. Everything around him a weapon. He grabbed an open bottle of Joy and smashed the bug with the butt of it, before it could climb through the hole in the screen. Yellow ropes of soap shot back in his direction. He smashed it again and again and when he separated the wasp from its abdomen and it still wouldn't stopped twitching he dropped the bottle and frantically yanked the empty tin can of pineapple juice that had been propping up the sash. The window slammed shut so hard and so fast that for an instant he thought it would crack.

The peaches in the colander were covered in soap. With them were three or four pieces from the modest collection of beach glass

he had arranged in a row on the window sill, the summer they'd first moved into the cabin.

"Ashley?" said Javier's baritone voice, and Ashley looked up to see him behind him. He'd silently entered the kitchen, wearing his indoor sneakers and egg-white scrubs. "Are you hurt?"

"No, no, sorry, no, it was just a stu – just a wasp, a big wasp. In the, uh –"

"Are you allergic?"

"No. Sorry. No, I'm okay."

"Here," he said, unzipping a burgandy fanny pack and rooting around inside it, "let me get you some lotion."

"No, sorry, I'm, I'm okay, I didn't get stung. I'm okay. I got it."

"I'd hate to see the other guy," said Javier, smiling.

"Oh, huh, yeah, yeah, I got him good," said Ashley. "How's Sheila?"

"She's fine. She's a very intelligent woman, very wise," Javier nodded dreamily and chuckled, "clearly, you know this."

"The, uh..." Ashley trailed off.

"No, of course, she's still on fire," said Javier, "there's been no change in the fire," which Ashley did not find surprising, of course, but it would have felt strange not to ask. He breathed in, and smiled again. "Ashley, it smells divine in here. We both look forward to your peaches, Ashley. We very much look forward to them." Javier turned to exit the kitchen, paused, with his ear cocked lifted and rested his foot, and then fished a wet-nap from his fannypack and wiped the sugar from the soles of his tennis shoes, before returning to the master bedroom.

It had been three full years since the fire began, which was, in itself, unusual. But no more unusual than two, to be fair, or even, for all that, a week. Whether or not it was normal for someone in that state to have a stomach only for peaches, there was no way, really, to know this. He once asked his nutritionist cousin about it, but she'd just said, "I really don't know what to tell you. It's just not something I've seen before." "In your practice, you mean?" Ashley asked, deferentially. "No, not really at all, no," said his cousin. And Yahoo wasn't any help either. It was unclear what to expect with these things, and the fire itself was unusual, for fire, in that it didn't seem to hurt her, for one, or even, really, to *burn* her – it didn't cause any tissue damage, at least according to Javier. Nor did it spread to anything that Sheila had come in touch with. When she'd first caught fire, at least after they'd come to grips with it, they had both been extremely cautious not to burn down the house. For an entire week Sheila lived in the bathtub, and Ashley would bring her meals but she'd leave them untouched, until they eventually hit on the peaches. On the flames the water had no effect whatsoever, besides noisily sputtering, which soon became sufficiently irritating that Sheila drained the tub out and sat on the dry enamel. When she noticed, quite by accident, that it didn't burn the curtain, they gingerly began to experiment. But the fire clung to Sheila, alone. Or to flesh, alone, perhaps. The possibility that it could spread to another human body was too dangerous to properly test.

The difficult thing was his asthma.

The fire had never produced any smoke, at least nothing that looked like smoke. But in time Ashley sensed that something was up with the air in Sheila's vicinity. He started to develop an allergy,

which he initially wrote off as hayfever, and probably nothing more, but it persisted well into winter and on a late afternoon in the middle of February he started to notice the threads. They hung in the air all around her, within a ten foot radius, and had a way of sliding slowly about that distinguished them somehow from dust motes. “They had a purposeful way of moving,” is how he might have once described these ephemeral glassy filaments, which congregated around her and in whose presence he could now scarcely breathe.

Unlike the fire, about whose existence and gravity no one was in doubt (and though theories about it varied, these don’t concern us here), the filaments troubled Ashley alone. Not only were they *quite* difficult to see, and under most slants of light invisible, but his allergy to them seemed quite particular, perhaps an effect of prolonged exposure. Every doctor he consulted seemed skeptical that there was anything in the air, there, at all, and he suspected the friends who had nodded and said, “yes, yes I see what you mean,” had been aiming only to humour him. Neither loratadine nor cetirizine hydrochloride provided any relief at all. Fexofenadine made the symptoms worse and diphenhydramine made him drowsy. Exposing himself to the filaments for even just a few seconds could spark a fit of coughing that would deprive him of sleep for the night. And when he spotted the tiny red specks on his sleeve, after a night of tossing and turning and coughing on the hide-a-bed in the living-room – where he’d been sleeping since Sheila had taken the bed after an uncomfortable week in the bathtub – he decided to hire a nurse.

They got along well with Javier, who was always conscientious and courteous. He would even make a point to bring gifts for the couple on the occasion of every solemnity, including many of which

Ashley, who had been raised Catholic, himself, had to confess he'd been ignorant. On the Assumption of Mary he presented to Ashley a bottle of Lepanto brandy, and to Sheila modest pearl earrings. On All Saints' Day, he gave Ashley *Resolí* and Sheila a tasteful pearl brooch. On the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, Ashley received a green liqueur in a bottle shaped like a sine wave labelled *Hierbas de Malloreca*, and Sheila received a pearl necklace. And so it went, without fail, and each gift came without ceremony. At first Ashley tried to demure, and beckoned Javier into the sun porch that day (on the first of the Assumptions in question) while *Rigoletto* played loud on the radio, and mumbled something about how Sheila, these days, didn't have much use for jewelry, and that the fire would probably damage them anyway (he knew that it wouldn't, it clung to her jealously, and never scorched anything she wore), and that they couldn't, in any case, accept these gifts, it's enough that they pay him so little, but Javier only shrugged and smiled and said it was no trouble at all. The pearls, the jewelry, these were hobbies of his, and as for the liquors he'd inherited them all when he'd inherited his father's house, and he, himself, didn't drink.

Once the last of the batch of peaches was sliced up and jarred, Ashley rinsed his hands and dried them on his khaki pants and slipped on a worn pair of oven mitts. He carefully poured the syrup into a tin watering can which he used to cover the fruit in each jar. Here and there a slice of star anise would bob to the surface along with fragments of cinnamon bark. After shooing the remaining wasps away, he placed the lids on the jars and screwed on the rings. The big pot took ten at a time and he wrapped each one in a thin cotton

rag, strips of a ratty bedsheet, so as to keep them from cracking when the water boiled and jostled them against one another.

He fished a Red Bird match from a terra cotta pot on the dusty top of the fridge and struck it against the side, and lit the large front burner on the stove. The ignition switch had been broken for years, despite his frequent vows to fix it. There was a time, in the first six months of the fire, when he'd blame the stove for what happened, or at least make an effort to do so, as a means of blaming himself. He'd occasionally hear himself saying things like, "I should never have let you use that stove, not in your condition," but his voice would lilt at "*condition?*" as if the apology were some sort of plea. It was not for lack of feeling that the words lacked all conviction, being less an empty vessel than a sieve. What *condition*, after all, could he have possibly meant? What dull-witted meaning did he expect would crawl out of the woods and get tangled in that apologetic net? If his intention was to draw out an avowal of guilt, or of the Hand of God at work in this world, then he wriggled on that hook alone. What bothered him most, as he heard himself speak, was the peculiar tone of his voice, which he judged irredeemably mewling. He did make efforts to correct it, and made a point to speak with his chest, like an actor. This, the critic he once was would've written, "had him delivering the lines histrionically," or in a crueller temper, "hamfistedly, failing to stoke the slightest conviction and leaving the audience cold."

His theatre critic days were in any case behind him, due to the withering away of the fourth estate, in fact, only in part. His facility with language had left him. The diaries he still kept and scribbled in daily he could no longer bear to read. His worries clattered out

of him in clunky blocks of cliché. He was no longer at home with words.

The hallway pulsed with flickering light and the indecipherable end of a bright conversation became for a moment unmuffled before giving way to goodbyes as the door to the bedroom opened and shut and Javier returned to the kitchen. “You know, Ash,” he said, while the canning pot boiled and the mason jars mutely clattered about, “she cares for you a great deal. She has such appreciation for you. Do you know that?” Ashley nodded his head like a bobblehead doll and smiled at the warmth in his voice. Javier removed his tennis shoes, placed them neatly by the door, and pulled on his rubber boots. He lifted a heavy green raincoat from a peg beside the door, and gripping the cuffs of his scrub sleeves so they wouldn’t ride up, he slowly put it on, without taking his eyes off Ashley. “I do hope you know that.” He turned towards the door.

Fiddling with a peach stone he’d just finished scrubbing, Ashley said, “oh, Javier, the, uh... they’re ready for you,” in a voice that felt flustered and stilted. “The peach stones, I mean,” he said, nodding at the plastic ice cream bucket on the corner of the table.

“Ah, I almost forgot!” Javier said, and moved to slide off his boots.

“It’s fine,” Ashley said, “I have to mop anyway,” at which Javier shrugged, approached the bucket and checked its seal, pressing it tight til it clicked on one side, and then gave it a shake and said, “thank you!”

“I’ve been... I’ve been meaning to ask,” said Ashley, “what do you, uh, I mean, do you garden?”

“Truly, Ash, thank you!” said Javier, holding the bucket with

a single hand as if it were a large cup of coffee, "I do appreciate this." Something outside the window caught Ashley's eye and he turned to see what it was. "And no, I don't garden," said Javier. "But thank you." Javier lifted his backpack from the peg where his raincoat was hanging, hefted it onto his shoulder, and then removed it again and unfastened the flap. "Ash, I almost forgot," he said, "I have something for you," and placed a tall bottle of *Gusano Rojo* on the clear patch of table where the pit bucket had stood.

"Thank you, you didn't have – no, thank you," said Ashley. Javier smiled broadly, and left.

Behind the muted clatter of jars it was quiet. Ashley cleared out the sink and ran the tap, and waited for the water to get warm, restlessly scanning the sky as he waited. It was a while before he could see it, in the late afternoon, with its colour already so close to the clouds'. But he saw it, tracing another generous arc over Sheila and Ashley's orchard. It vanished, for a time, behind the house, and circled the orchard again. Ashley was still holding the pit he was holding when Javier had entered the kitchen, and that he was holding when Javier left. He unclenched his hand and caressed it, moving the blistered pad blistered thumb in tiny, circular motions. He considered pouring a shot of mezcal. He wondered what gift Sheila'd been given, and how the colour of the flames would change just slightly in a blue areola around the pearls, as if their weight had somehow bruised them. This delicacy left him shaken. He leaned against the kitchen sink and felt a line of soapy water warm press underneath his navel.

He tugged on the knob of a drawer, jiggling it a bit to jostle loose the ladle that was jamming it shut. He rummaged about till he

found it: an oyster knife with a two-inch blade and a green, textured handle that made it easy to grip. He looked away from the chintinous mess in the screen and focussed his eyes on the pit. He cupped it in his hand and squinted. He set it back on the counter. The threads of pulp that clung to it moved like the air above a barbeque, or like algae underwater. Of course. He fished his reading glasses from the wicker basket, beside the pot on the fridge, and he wiped them off on his shirt before putting them on. He cupped the pit in his hand again and gripped it. He held it steady with his thumb and squinted. He trained his eyes on the seam. Yes, yes of course. He pressed the tip of the knife in the crease of it and cautiously – cautiously – twisted. The knife skidded loose. His pulse pounded at the base of his ear. His clothing felt twisted and knotted. He inspected his hand for cuts. He found none. He drew a breath and clenched the peach pit back in position. He pressed the knife again to the seam. A little bit firmer this time. And he waited to feel it find purchase. A tiny red drop began to bead. He pressed the knife harder and twisted.