

# DO YOU GARDEN?

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Ashley massaged the fragile skin from the flesh of a boiled peach. He braced the spine of the knife with his thumb, blistered but numbed by the ice bath, and rolled the blade around the pit. Thoughts of his wife pooled in the hollow the familiar work hollowed out.

The fire had just never gone out. He gave the knife a little twist and split the peach in two. It was hard to stand in the same room as her, now. He scooped up the gleaming slices of fruit and they slipped like goldfish into the jar. It was hard to really get used to these things and his thoughts moved in circles. They revolved around his wife and the fire, eclipsed now and then by Javier. Javier, the nurse, who looked after her now. Javier, for whom he collected the pits, in a sun-beaten two-litre ice-cream pail, as a small, yearly favour.



His flip-flops puckered as he walked to the stove and the jars that honeycombed the countertop tinkled. He lowered the flame. He stirred the syrup. The pine walls beaded with varnish and warmed the light in the kitchen into which the peaches and caramelized sugar had been steadily luring wasps. On three separate occasions he'd

had to dump an entire jar of peaches into a colander in the sink, turn on the tap, and – with his thumb against the faucet to concentrate the spray – hose their twitching, brittle bodies through the slits. Each time it made him shudder. He'd pause to collect his nerves and look out across the orchard from the window above the sink. Sheila's collection of beach glass lined the windowsill, translucent little livers of white, brown, and green. The afternoon light was an overcast grey that found the grey in everything. A glider turned in patient arcs, so close to the clouds in colour that only movement gave it away. Something twitched up close in the corner of the screen. Brassy, frantic legs and antennae, and a black as oil abdomen with a wispy ovipositor that urgently, intimately coiled and uncoiled. "*Stumpfucker!*" he wheezed before he felt his mouth move, everything out of sync now, scrambling about for a weapon. He wrapped his hands around a bottle of Joy and bludgeoned the thing with the butt of bottle before it could crawl into the house through the widening rip in the screen. Lemon ropes of dish soap shot in his direction. He smashed the thing again and again and when he had separated it from its abdomen and it still wouldn't stop twitching he dropped the bottle and with his face in a knot he yanked the can out from under the sash. The window slammed so hard and so fast for a second he thought it had cracked.

The peaches in the colander were covered in detergent, which now was all over everything. He could taste it! The scalp-prickling memory of his mother hearing him cuss, squeezing shut his nostrils as she washed his mouth with soap. The comotion had scattered the beach glass across the counter, sink and floor. He heard a voice behind him as he crouched to gather them up.

“Ash?”

He unclenched the fist of his face and stood. Javier was there in his sneakers and scrubs.

“Ash, are you hurt?”

“No, no, sorry, no, it was just a stu – just a wasp. It was just a really, really big wasp. In the, uh, fuck –” He felt his face getting hotter.

“Ash, you appear to be having a reaction. I need you to answer me, Ash,” he said, in painfully clear and measured tones. “Are you allergic to bees?”

“No. Sorry,” he said. “No, sorry, it’s... I’m... it’s fine, I’m okay. Wasp.”

“It’s okay, Ash. Here,” he said, unzipping a burgundy fanny pack and rooting around inside it, “we’ll put some calamine on it.”

“No, sorry, I’m, I’m okay, I didn’t get stung. I’m okay. I got it.”

At this Javier appeared to relax and his broad smile returned. He snapped a finger gun at Ashley and winked. “I’d hate to see the other guy!”

“Oh, huh, yeah, haha, yeah, yeah, haha, yeah, oh yeah,” said Ashley, “haha, yeah, he, uh, I mean she, uh, yeah, he won’t be bothering *us* anymore! Haha!” He crouched to pick up the lumps of glass. “So how’s she doing?” he asked. “Sheila, I mean.”

“Oh, she’s doing very well,” he said with a chuckle. “She’s a very intelligent woman, you know, very wise. But it’s clear. You know this.”

“The, uh...” Ashley trailed off.

“No, of course,” he said, “yes, she’s still on fire, of course,” which wasn’t, of course, surprising, but there was comfort in routine. He let

his eyes drift shut and his nostrils flare. "Mmm... it smells absolutely divine in here, Ash," he said, as Ashley rinsed off the beach glass and arranged it on the sill. "Sheila and I can't wait to taste this year's peaches, Ash. This means so very much to her, you know." Javier paused and cocked his ear as he raised and lowered his foot. He fished a wet-nap from the fanny pack and wiped off the soles of his sneakers before returning at last to the bedroom.

It had been three years now, since the fire began, which was, in itself, peculiar. Of course even one year would have been strange. Even a day in flames is odd. Unharmful, all the more so. As for the restrictive diet of peaches, whether it was under these circumstances normal was something he had no way of knowing. He did ask his nutritionist cousin about it. "I really don't know what to tell you, Ashley. It isn't something I've seen before, if I'm going to be honest," she'd said. "In your practice, you mean?" he asked, deferentially. "No, I mean, not at all," she said. It was unclear what to expect with these things.

The strange thing, it was widely agreed, was that the fire didn't burn her, that, according to Javier, it caused no tissue damage. Nor did it spread to things she touched. When she'd first come down with it and for quite some time, they were extremely careful not to burn down the house. For a week she lived in the bathtub. Ashley brought her meals but she'd leave them untouched, until finally they hit on the peaches. The bathwater, disappointingly, had no effect on the flames, besides making them noisily sputter. This became such an annoyance to Sheila, in time, that she would drain the tub and just sit there, on the dry enamel. When she noticed, quite by accident, that the curtain didn't burn, they gingerly began to experiment.

The fire, it seemed, clung to Sheila alone. Or possibly only to flesh. The chance of it spreading to another human body was simply too dangerous to test.

The difficult thing was his asthma.

The fire never produced any smoke, or anything resembling smoke. But something was somewhat off with the air. He started to develop an allergy – hayfever, he assumed – but it persisted well into winter and on a certain afternoon in February he started to notice the threads. They hung in the air all around her and had a way of sliding slowly about that distinguished them from dust motes. “They had a purposeful way of moving,” is how he might have chosen to describe them were he still at home in language.

Unlike the fire, whose existence and gravity no one any longer had occasion to doubt, these ephemeral, glassy filaments bothered him alone. Not only were they hard to see, and under most angles of light imperceptible, but his symptoms were idiopathic. Every doctor was a sceptic and friends would only humour him. Neither loratadine nor cetirizine hydrochloride provided any relief at all. Fexofenadine made the symptoms worse and diphenhydramine made him drowsy. An exposure of just a few seconds would have him coughing the rest of the night. When he spotted the tiny red specks on his sleeve after a night of tossing and coughing on the living-room hide-a-bed, he decided the matter was serious and decided to hire a nurse.

They both took a shine to Javier, who was always conscientious. He brought gifts for the couple on every solemnity, including many of which Ashley was ignorant. On the Assumption of Mary, for instance, he gave Ashley a bottle of *Lepanto* brandy, and Sheila modest pearl earrings. On All Saints’ Day, he gave Ashley *Resolí* and Sheila a

brooch, from whose hammered silver foliage bloomed seven baroque pearls. On the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, Ashley received a green liqueur in an undulating bottle labelled, *Hierbas de Mallorca*, and Sheila got a pearl necklace. And so it went, consistently and unceremoniously. Ashley tried to demur, at first, on the occasion of the first Assumption, and called Javier into the sun porch while *Rigoletto* played loud on the radio. He mumbled something about how Sheila, these days, had no use for jewellery, and how the fire would probably damage it (it wouldn't, he knew; the fire clung to her jealously and had never scorched a thing 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 jewellery, he said, was a hobby of his, and the pearls had come to him cheaply. The liquor was something he inherited, and he never drank a sip, himself.

Once the last of the batch of peaches was sliced up and jarred, Ashley washed his hands. He dried them off on his khaki pants and slipped on a pair of oven mitts. He carefully lifted the pot of syrup from the stove and poured it into a watering can, from which he poured the syrup into each jar, leaving a half-inch of headspace. Here and there some star anise would slowly bob to the surface. After shooing the remaining wasps away, he lidded the jars and screwed on the rings. The big canning pot took ten at a time and he wrapped each in a thin cotton rag, torn from a worn-out bedsheet, so as to keep them from cracking when the water boiled and jostled them against one another.

He reached into a flower pot on top of the fridge, fished out a Red Bird and struck it on the side, and with it lit the hissing burner

in the front right corner of the stove. The ignition switch had been broken for years, despite his vows to fix it. There was a time, in the first six months, 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 find 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 would crawl from the woods and get caught 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, 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 tried to correct it. He tried to speak with his chest, like an actor. This, the critic he once was would've written, had him "delivering the his lines histrionically," or in a crueller temper, "hamfistedly, failing to stoke the slightest conviction and leaving the audience cold."

His theatre critic days were behind him. This was due to the withering of the fourth estate, in truth, only in part. His way 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. Coarse cries of pain collaged from commercials. He was no longer at home with words.

There was a pulse of flickering light in the hall and an unmuffling of bright conversation, which swiftly gave way to goodbyes.

"You know, Ash," Javier said as he returned to the kitchen, "she



cares for you a great deal. She has such appreciation for you. Do you know that?" Ashley bobbed his head and smiled as the mason jars clattered and the canning pot boiled. Javier removed his tennis shoes and placed them neatly next to the door. He stepped into his tall rubber boots and hoisted a raincoat from a peg by the door. Gripping the cuffs of his sleeves so they wouldn't ride up, he slowly pulled it on, without taking his eyes off Ashley. "I do hope you know that." Fiddling with a peach pit he'd just finished scrubbing, Ashley fumbled for words. "Oh, Javier, the, uh... they're ready for you," he said, in a voice that felt flustered and stilted. "The peach stones, I mean." He nodded at the bucket on the edge of the table. The label read "Neapolitan", still, but the picture was bleached by the sun, leaving the strawberry white and the chocolate dull green. "Ah, I almost forgot!" Javier said and started to pull off his boots.

"It's fine," Ashley said, "I have to do the, uh," he made a gesture that looked like tugging a rope, "the mopping, still, it's, it's fine."

Javier shrugged, checked the seal on the bucket, and then pressed it tight til it clicked on one side. He shook it gently and said, "thank you, Ash!"

"I've... I've been... sorry, I've been meaning to ask," said Ashley, "what do you, uh... I mean, do you garden?"

"Truly, Ash, thank you!" Javier gripped the bucket with a single hand as if it were a cup of coffee. "I appreciate this."

Something in the orchard caught Ashley's eye.

Javier hoisted his backpack from the peg where his raincoat had been hanging and heaved it over his shoulder. He swung it to the front and unfastened the flap. "Ash, I almost forgot," he said, "I have something for you." He withdrew a bottle of *Gusano Rojo* and

stood it in a clearing on the table.

“Thank you, you didn’t have... no, I mean, 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 warm. His eyes impatiently scanned the sky. It was a while before he could see it, its colour already so close to the clouds’. But there it was, tracing another generous arc over Sheila’s father’s orchard. It vanished, for a while, behind the house, and circled the orchard again. Ashley was still holding the pit he was holding when Javier left. He unclenched his hand and caressed it, moving the blistered pad of his thumb in tiny, circular motions. He considered pouring a shot of mezcal. He wondered what pearls he gave Sheila this time, and how the colour of the flames would slightly change in a blue areola around them, as if they were bruised by their weight. Their delicacy left him shaken. He leaned against the sink and felt a crease of soapy water on his waist.

He tugged on the knob of a drawer, jiggling it a bit to jostle loose the ladle that seemed to be jamming it shut. He rummaged around till he found it: an oyster knife with a two-inch blade and a green, textured handle, which made it easy to grip. He looked away from the window screen and the chitinous mess in the corner. He strained to focus his eyes on the pit. He cupped it in his hand and squinted, then set it back on the counter. The threads of pulp that clung to it moved like air above a barbeque, or algae underwater. He fished his reading glasses from the wicker basket that he kept by the pot on top of the fridge. He polished them with the edge of his shirt before he put them on. He cupped the pit in his hand and gripped it. He

held it steady with his thumb and squinted. He trained his eyes on the seam.

Yes, yes of course. Of course. Yes, of course.

He pressed the tip of the knife to the crease and cautiously – cautiously – twisted. The knife slid loose. His pulse pounded at the base of his ear and his follicles itched on his scalp. His clothing, damp with sweat and syrup and soap, now felt knotted and twisted. The running hot water was fogging his glasses and so he wiped them off with his right hand while he inspected his left for cuts. There were none. He drew a breath and once again clenched the pit in his hand. He pressed the knife to the seam. A little bit firmer this time. An opalescent droplet beaded on the crease. He levered the knife a little, tilting it up and down, and waited to feel it find purchase. A shard chipped away. A sharp hiss of brine. A startled frill of greyish flesh withdrew into the pit. He wedged the blade deeper and twisted.