

## Deadly Grapes

It was late but the sun continued to burn their arms brown. Inéz and Carlos were on their knees picking and packing grapes. Their tattered straw hats offered minimum protection from the oppressive sun. Thinking they heard a duster, they instinctively pulled their handkerchiefs over their faces. Looking up, they saw nothing, this time.

Inéz pulled her handkerchief off. Still stooped over, she called to Carlos, not too loudly for the foreman. "Raúl told me that Chávez is coming to the camp tonight." There was hope and excitement in her voice.

Guillermo, nearby, overheard her. "He's going to talk about the Vons boycott."

Last month the market chain had again broken their agreement not to advertise grapes. Word was that the union was still trying to negotiate. For a brief period, there was murmuring among the vines. Carlos was filled with anticipation now as he pulled the dusty green jewels off the plant.

Finally, the foreman honked the company station wagon's horn to signal the workers to stop for the day and get their paychecks for the week. They slowly straightened up and shook the dust and stiffness off.

From the hood, the foreman hollered, "Valdivia. Balomi. Sakamoto..." His round gold-plated belt buckle reflected the sun, searing "Mort" into their eyes. It was the usual. "60 hours, \$199" was marked at the top of the pay stub and, at the bottom, "Deductions: ride \$25, food \$50, rent \$25."

Under his breath, Carlos let out, "Rip-offs."

Nobody said anything. The foreman had told them repeatedly

that there are many other workers that can take their places. And this was true. Guillermo was working for two weeks for no pay now. They told him it was a trial period. Today they tell him they're not going to hire him.

Carlos and Inéz crammed into the station wagon with the eleven other workers that share the ride. The foreman got in last.

Turning to the other workers, Mort said, "You know what day it is. Good old Friday."

The thirteen workers knew this routine. They pooled amongst themselves enough money and handed it over to Mort. He required that they treat him to an expensive bottle of tequila, for all his hospitality as he put it.

The station wagon pulled to a stop in front of half a dozen or so shacks. Everyone got out. Mort sped off. The dirt the tires kicked up was still settling. Carlos saw the dust curtain billow around their eight year old daughter. The girl was standing near the open fire. The pan of rice and beans was burning black. Dalia just stared at her parents mutely. Carlos and Inéz knew. They ran the two yards to their one room shack. Their eyes adjusted frustratingly slow to the darkness. On the cardboard mattress, propped up on packing crates, Gabriela was still. The moonlight forced its streak through the cardboard roofing, leaving a lighter mark across the teenager's face. Inéz sat by Gabriela's head. She removed the handkerchief used to hold back her daughter's hair. Stroking its length, she chanted, "Gaby, Gaby, Gaby." Carlos walked over to the two and picked up their limbless child.

He held her to him.

There were no tears.

They waited for Chávez in the dark.

## The Garden

Lily is checking the round, shallow, woven basket of items which she has gathered from the forested area nearby. The almonds, ginkgo nuts, and the long, pale, yellow roots of lop sok tei are dried and ready for the brew. She places the sundries and the chicken she has killed earlier into the large, round-necked, unglazed crock on the wood-burning stove.

The pot cooks quickly, and Lily takes a porcelain bowl over to feed Cosmos in bed. It has been hard for him to do much since his circulation has worsened. Cosmos sips the broth and chews on the bitter-sweet buttery-flavored ginkgo nuts but refuses the chicken Lily has shredded for him. She reminds him that the chicken is needed for rebirth.

As she again brings the spoon to his mouth, Cosmos says, "Let's do it today, Lily."

"Are you sure?"

Cosmos needn't answer. She sees it in his eyes.

The sun begins to move into position. The rays straddle the old cottage. Cosmos, in bed by the window, looks past the fairy primroses and monkey flowers in the window box to his wife in the garden. Lily is stooped low among the scarlet snapdragons and the yellow chrysanthemums. It takes Cosmos a few minutes to fix his eyes on her in the extensive vegetation. The blooms dance on stage, back-dropped by weeping willow tendrils, spotlighted by the approaching bright noon sun. Lily is one of them with her head wrapped in a soft, gauzy, floral scarf. Cosmos used to work along side her. His derby hat still hangs on the nail in the adobe wall by the opening where there is no door.

With her clippings, Lily wades through the maze of plants indoors to Cosmos. In a porcelain basin by the bed, with the heel of her palm, she crushed the bell-shaped blooms of the snapdragon, the feather-like petals of the chrysanthemum and the pak kei, the pitch-black earth she's dug up. Under her squeezing fingers, the

mixture becomes a black-red balm illuminated with yellow flecks catching the minimal rays from the window.

She joins Cosmos in bed. Naked, his white skin fades in contrast to her tawny flesh. With a scoop of her hand, she takes a dollop of the paste and massages it into Cosmos' right hand. The balm glistens on his skin. She first works her firm fingers into Cosmos' palm, then rubbing palm to palm, fingers laced. Her fingers echo the lines in his.

Lily looks up to the source of the increasing light in the room. The blue of the sky permeates the brown of the straw roof. When she looks back at their hands, their two forearms stretch back from only one hand. The room is getting even brighter. The thatched roof is no longer there. The plants indoors thrive as their leaves seem to flutter with the sunlight beams.

Lily leans forward until she is totally on top of Cosmos. He lets out a breath from her weight. Her body begins to settle into Cosmos' as their figures entwine like vines, cast green from the reflection of the plants. She rubs his temples. In an instant she is rubbing *her* temples.

The sun now directly above explodes the room in white light, leaving no shadows, flattening features. As fast as the white light filled the room, it is gone.

One figure lies on the bed.

Her torso becomes erect as she sits up, like the plants reaching for its life. She plants her feet firmly on the dirt ground by the bed. When she leaves the bed, it is not her impressions in the sheets but Cosmos'.

By the entry, she places Cosmos' derby on her scarfed-head before joining the others. Outside, she looks back, but the walls of the cottage have begun to fade. Lily watches as the walls completely disappear, and the indoor plants becomes part of those outdoors. She turns to walk off. In the distance one can barely make out the derby as it sways among the field of sunflowers.