

Flowers From My Garden

The first blessing bestowed by my stroke was that I got to see my three beautiful daughters. Had I known that was all it took to gather them for me once again, I would've lied long ago. I would've made my neighbor, Doña Meche, call Maggie and say she found me on my living room floor. She would tell them I hadn't shown up to our sunset seats by the fence, where we met daily and shared the latest chisme of our pueblo. I know now they would've believed it. They must have sensed my sprouting death, because they were home before I could water my garden the following morning.

I had longed to have my daughters together for years. I couldn't remember the last time my garden felt complete. Gratitude overwhelmed me as I appreciated the three beautiful flowers at the foot of my bed. Their sweet smells mixed in the stiff air of my small house of block. It must've been decades since we all shared the same scent. I longed for those days, when we lived together in our warm, yellow home. My house didn't feel as warm when it was left to myself. That morning when I woke to my daughters, I noticed the sun rays rest on my skin through the iron bars behind the window.

Margarita must've caught the surprise in my face before I did because she excused herself from the room to fix breakfast, as if to not overwhelm me.

"What do you want?"

"I..." I didn't know how hard it would be to spit my first words. I learned to speak again. "Anything's fine."

She smiled at me and I smiled back. I knew she would know just what to make. I couldn't remember if Maggie had asked that the weekend before, when she had visited last. I wondered if she knew that would be my last meal. I also wondered if that put pressure on her. Before

I could hope it didn't, she had already left my sunny pink room.

"Can I talk to her alone for a minute?" Hortensia asked her younger sister.

"Are you serious?"

"Just give us a minute. Go help Maggie with breakfast or something, 'bout time you make yourselves useful."

Dalia simply rolled her eyes and left. She never entertained the bickering of her sister. She had realized long ago there was no fight to win with a woman who always made sure the last sound in the air was her voice. Hortensia sat beside me and I wondered if she realized Dalia still hadn't had the chance to share a single word with me at all.

"How are you?"

"I'm... very happy to see you girls."

"I'm happy to see you too. It's strange though, none of us are little girls anymore."

"I know. You're all great and grown now. You've watered the dry seeds I've given you and out of flowers made grand trees full of life. I'm so proud of you."

"You have no idea how much everything you've done for us means to me," she stopped herself from sharing more and I wished she hadn't. I glanced at the gloss in her eyes and understood. I wished I didn't have to understand, and instead my daughter felt comfortable enough to cry in front of me.

"I know, mija." There was silence until I spoke again. "Did you fly in from el otro lado?"

"No, I actually didn't have to. I was in a city nearby promoting my new book."

"You weren't going to tell me?"

"It was for business. I didn't say anything in case I was too busy to come visit."

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Oh, about that..." she became nervous. "You've been getting the money I've been sending right?"

I couldn't tell if she was reminding me or asking me. So I simply sighed.

"Pinche Margarita, is she keeping it for herself?"

"I'm not the only one that needs help, you know?"

"She has been keeping it, hasn't she? I can't believe her. It's her fault she's—"

"No." I coughed.

"I'm sorry Ma," she said and stared. I could see her struggling to come up with anything to talk to me about.

"You know I've been thinking about moving back here."

"Really?" my eyes blossomed into bright sunflowers of excitement.

"Yeah. I was thinking of maybe spending a few months here, to write my next book. It could be like a work getaway. A visit home even. Of course I'd have to find a place to stay..."

The petals of my sunflower eyes dried up and the seeds in my pupils fell to the dirt as I realized what Hortensia was leading to.

"I could stay with you, right?" She said as if I would be alive by the time any plan of such would come to fruition. It must've been her way of asking me for the house, or the land, or whatever value it was Hortensia found in the place I called home. The same place she had worked so hard to get far away from. I stared out the window disappointed. Before I answered, her phone rang and she began to walk closer to the door.

"I've got to get this."

She picked up the call and left. Alone, I smiled out the window and admired my backyard. It was a work of art stretched through lifetimes. I had lived on the same plot of land my whole life. Over the years, I saw it become smaller and smaller as the soil was sold. My mother and I had lived where she and her mother had once lived. My mother spoke often of the times when the whole block belonged to our family, when the lands and the grass belonged to everybody. She dreamed of the riches nature had once afforded us. Of a time when the fields were more fertile, and the animals more lively. I never dreamt of these times. I recognized the beauty in the life that blessed my garden. I savored the juice from the fruits of my trees. From my window, I fantasized about walking barefoot on the wild grass again. I took a moment to appreciate two small cempasúchil flowers that had begun to blossom in the

back of my garden. I thought of the last Día de los Muertos, when I cut the flowers from the plant myself and took them to my mother's grave. I wondered if my daughters would cut those same flowers for me that November. I hoped they would.

Even though she never had a quinceñera, Dalia always walked around with her hair curled and propped up like she was ready to slip in her first heels and receive her last doll. When they were growing, we would often joke that Hortensia's hair had been done simpler at her quinceñera than Dalia's was done on a common day. When she walked back in the room her bark brown curls bounced like they did when she was fifteen. She still looked as beautiful and as young. It was I that had become wilted and frail.

"Are you sure you don't want to eat in the kitchen?" she asked as she balanced her way in with a fresh glass of tamarind water, a large plate of red chilaquiles, and a sliced orange.

"I'm sure," I said, with no energy left to get up.

She placed the food on a pillow on my lap. I hadn't eaten anything spicy for years. Maggie always yelled at me when she caught even a serrano in my fridge, but today she must've remembered how I loved spicy food in my teens and twenties before my health was a concern. I imagined she had gone to buy the ingredients, or possibly even sent Dalia to the store down the street. When they were younger, it had always been Maggie's duty as the youngest to go get the morning tortillas. I wondered if this time had been different. I reached for the pills on my bedside as routine, but I placed them back down without taking any. Of the breakfast, I had no more than a few bites and a couple sips, that I rejoiced in, as if that day were my last. I gave the plate back to my daughter who stared back at me speechless.

"Where's Maggie?"

"She's making more breakfast for her girls. She said she'll be here when she's done."

"Tell her I said thank you. It was delicious."

"I will," she grinned as I reached towards the plate and popped a last slice of orange in my mouth. The sweet

familiar juice and pulp burst on my tongue. "But the orange is from me. I remembered when my sisters and I would compete bringing you fruit from the backyard. We'd always try to guess what you were in the mood for."

"Somehow, you were always the one that knew exactly what I wanted," I reminisced.

"I just... know how to read you. I noticed your craving often aligned with how you were feeling on that day."

I didn't know if Dalia was right or whether she had been following a useless made-up strategy all those years. However, I didn't question her, for I knew of the child's observant nature.

"Thank you for the orange, mija."

"What did Hortensia want? Did she ask you to leave her the house?"

I answered only through expression. I knew Dalia wanted the house too. She had made sure to remind me enough times before, that she didn't think she needed to now. Her and my nuera had been struggling to find a stable safe place to live, and my house had become one more thing Dalia felt entitled to. Truth was, I didn't know who would keep my home when I passed and I didn't wish to decide. I didn't wish to compare and choose among my flowers.

"Doesn't she make enough money already? She barely ever sees us. Now she suddenly wants to be part of the family?"

"Dalia, please."

"Well, did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Leave her the house."

"I'm not dead yet. I'm still deciding what to put on the will."

"You don't have a will? What do you mean you don't have a will?"

"Diosito gave me another day for a reason. I'll fix one in the evening."

"It's okay, Ma," she hugged me with her empty hand and kissed my cheek. She started to walk towards the door, "Just worry about getting better for now."

"Dalia," I said and she stopped at the entrance.

"When do I eat oranges?"

"Mande?" she asked, confused.

"When I eat oranges, how do I feel?"

"You feel happy."

"And how do you know I'm happy now?"

"I don't," she answered and she gave one last smile before leaving.

"Dalia said you needed me, she didn't even let me finish breakfast."

"I wanted to see you."

"Is everything alright?"

"I don't want to die here," I begged Margarita.

"What? You're not going to die," she lied, holding back her tears.

"Can you take me outside?" If I was to have my last breath, it would be of fresh air. "Please."

Margarita gently grabbed me by the hand and walked me to the garden. I could hear her girls fighting inside the house, too young and clueless to understand loss. Maggie looked back, but instead tightened her grip on my hand. I nodded towards the house, making sure she knew I would be okay.

"I love you, Ma."

"Me too, mija."

"Call me when you want to go back inside."

She left me by the fence where Doña Meche smiled at me from her usual seat and enjoyed the last rays of sun.

"I was hoping you would come."

Instead of walking to the seat on my side of the fence, I walked into my garden and planted myself on the ground. I sunk into the soft soil. I laid relaxed, intoxicated with the scent of my favorite flowers. The bees flew from my flowers to my skin. They buried me in pollen and fed me the sunlight they carried with their thin wings. The smooth spring breeze kept me fresh. All I did was lay among my flowers, as I withered away back into the earth and embraced my second blessing.