

The Gardener

At the same time Jehovah created Adam, he created a woman, Lilith...taken from the earth. She was given to Adam as his wife. But there was a dispute between them about a matter that when it came before the judges had to be discussed behind closed doors. She spoke the unspeakable name of Jehovah and vanished.

–Moses de Leon, The Book of Splendour

When my wife died we buried her out in the family plot, across from her garden. She loved that garden more than anything else in the world. It was the reason we'd agreed to move into that tiny house in the first place. Neither of us had been sure about it at first; it was out in the middle of rural Massachusetts and would add an hour, easy, to the commute. Her family had owned the place since the U.S. was barely a country and the house had only had indoor plumbing for the past fifty years. It was a relic, with only tradition keeping it standing. But then we got out back, and she saw that huge backyard.

The house was backed by nearly two acres of hills and old trees. A little creek cut across the middle of the plot of land, separating the yard from the family's cemetery plot. The ground in the front acre was hard and rocky, with barely two square feet of level ground anywhere. I could see right off it would be a nightmare to mow, but then she turned back to me with her whole face shining, and I could see gardens in her eyes even before she said, "Adam, just imagine what this place will look like in the spring." I couldn't say no.

For six months after we moved into the tiny house she did nothing but work on making that acre into a garden. That was the thing about Rachael: once she started to believe in anything, the idea of failure would never occur to her. You could look at her and see the kid she must have been, bandaging up animals she found in the road. It didn't matter to her how hard the ground was or how much poison ivy she found; she bought calamine lotion and thicker gloves and kept trying to persuade that acre that it was more than a wilderness. I'd ask her from time to time,

“Don’t you think it’s a waste of time trying to clean the place up?” She’d look at me and her eyes would take on a mischievous spark, and she’d say “Lost causes don’t bother me. I married you, didn’t I?”

She finished it in late June of the next year. She’d cleared out all the poison oak and ivy, pruned the trees and thinned out the weaker saplings, put in a pebble pathway, and filled the place up with irises, daffodils, peonies, roses, and at least a dozen kinds of flowers I’d never heard of before. All the rest of that summer, and for two years afterward, she spent every spare second in the garden, most of the time taking me with her. The big tree in the center turned out to be a black cherry tree, and every summer we’d feed each other dark sweet bites like kisses. I never understood much about plants—she used to joke that as long as I could tell between a tree and a flower, that was good enough for her. We had one game where I’d blindfold her, spin her, take her all over to different parts of the garden and make her tell me where we were by the smell of the flowers alone. She was never wrong, at least as far as I could tell.

That was then, though. By the time we’d lived there four years I’d moved up from basic computer tech work to designing pretty substantial programs and was working longer hours. I got home late that night. It was a little after 8:00, but near the end of July, so it hadn’t gotten too dark yet. She was lying at the bottom of the black cherry tree. I didn’t even register that anything was wrong at first. Maybe that’s how we try to protect ourselves. That first minute as I walked down to her I had the idiotic idea that she’d tired herself out, fallen asleep in a heap like that. I remember walking so carefully on the pebble path so I wouldn’t wake her. Then I reached her and put a hand on her shoulder and she didn’t stir, and that’s when I knew I was scared.

It was wasps. She never used to be allergic, she'd been stung before and nothing ever happened, but the doctors told me later these things can develop over time. I still can't think about how she looked when I turned her over.

After we buried Rachael I stayed at my brother's place for a few weeks. I was in pretty bad shape. I felt like if I would have said no to the promotion, maybe I could have been home earlier, maybe I could have done something. I had bereavement leave and a few years' worth of unused sick days, which was lucky because even after nearly a month I wouldn't have been able to get into the office if my life depended on it. Seth was starting to get a little tired of having me around, though. Not that he'd say it like that, but he was hinting here and there, and since I was getting myself out of bed and dressed in the morning again, I agreed it was time for me to get back to my own house.

I felt claustrophobic hanging around the house when I got back, and I started, slowly, to spend more time in the garden. I wasn't sure at first how I'd handle being there, but it hurt less than I'd expected. I started trying to do whatever little things I could think of to keep it alive. Nothing much, pulling out dandelions or working the Miracle-Gro mostly, and when the leaves started falling into the flowerbeds in September I got a rake and cleaned them out. I usually avoided hanging around the cherry tree if I could, but a small paper packet near its roots caught my eye. I picked it up and felt small flat shapes inside it—seeds. The label was bleached white as though it had been lying there for some time. It was a miracle the squirrels hadn't gotten to it. The thought hit me that Rachael might have had it on her when she got stung, and I set down my rake and tore the package open.

The seeds were weird-looking, even to me. They were pinkish-orange, brighter than any of the seeds I'd ever seen Rachael cup in her hand. They felt strange, too: soft and a little tacky, like gummy candy. I figured they must have spoiled in the rain, but I was in a weird mood, and so I took one out and pressed it with my thumb into the ground under the tree, right where I'd seen the packet. Then I got my rake and finished up. Inside, I realized I still had the seed packet in my pocket. I set it in the basket on the counter where we used to keep all the miscellaneous odds and ends we found around the house, and put it out of my mind.

The next spring I was doing a lot better. I'd been back at my job for six months and was in charge of designing the new interface system for both my company and our sister branch. It was the kind of project that could make things go easy for me for a long time if it went well. I spent time in the garden almost every day—I even bought a couple books on plants so I'd have some idea of what I was doing. During the first week of April I was clearing out some weeds when I saw a strange-looking plant near the base of the cherry tree. I gripped it low to the roots to pull it out, but something about the texture made me stop. It was soft and surprisingly warm, and when I touched it I had a sudden image of Rachael working in the flowerbeds, stronger than I'd had in months. I looked at the plant again, noting its placement. Could it have grown from the seed I'd planted the previous fall? Whether it had or not, I couldn't kill it now. I watered it instead.

The plant grew quickly, once I started paying attention to it. In two weeks it reached my shoulder. Its coloring and texture still seemed strange. It shaded to a few subtle variations of smooth pinkish-tan, and it felt soft, like new leaves. It was supple though, and didn't tear when I

rubbed it the way a leaf would. I couldn't find anything like it in my books, but I kept watering it, and spritzed some Miracle-Gro at its roots.

"Not that you need it," I told it. It made me feel good to talk to it. I wasn't getting out too often, except to go to work and see a few casual friends from time to time, and it felt good to just get things off my chest. I talked to it about Rachael a lot. I told it how she used to listen, how she saw things in me that I never could see in myself, how badly I missed her sometimes. I even told it how guilty I felt that just nine months after I'd lost her I was already feeling, well, lonely.

The plant didn't grow any taller, but the stem started thickening and becoming more defined. It happened much more slowly than the first shooting growth, but after a while it became clear to me what I was growing. Or rather, *who* I was growing. What I had taken for buds off the main stem stretched and swelled, and I began to recognize the beginnings of slender arms and small, rounded breasts and hips. The face was hidden behind crossed arms, but soft hair began to brush the delicate shoulders. It was exactly Rachael's shade. By late May I couldn't put both hands around the main stem—waist—any more. I could see the ribs rising and falling shallowly, although the feet were still hidden under a layer of mulch and fertilizer.

On the last night of May I sat a few yards off, watching her stand naked and perfect under the cherry tree. The night was mostly clear, with only a few thin clouds passing over the stars. In one of those darker moments, when a cloud blocked half the moon, I saw a flicker of movement. When the light shone more strongly again I could make her out more clearly. She'd brought her arms down, and for the first time I could see her face. She looked like Rachael, except her eyes were darker. Except her eyebrows arched more sharply, and her mouth was a little wider and her lips were fuller. Except her chin and cheekbones were sharper, more angled, like a cat's. She

stretched once, long, arms over her head, arching her back until her small breasts and slim ribs pointed toward the moon, and then she looked at me.

“Who are you?” she asked.

It didn’t surprise me, really, that she could speak. After all, hadn’t I talked to her for weeks as she’d grown?

“I’m Adam. I’m the gardener.”

She nodded. “And who am I?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “I thought you might be Rachael.”

“But I am not.” Half statement, half question.

“No. You’re someone else.” A thought occurred to me, a fragment from half a dozen conversations murmured in bed in the early hours of the morning. “Lelia,” I said. “Rachael—if we’d had children—it means ‘night beauty.’ It was her favorite name.”

“Lelia,” she said, tilting her head to consider. I could see her perfect white teeth and pink tongue as she said the name. She smiled. “It is good. I will be Lelia.”

I got up. “Can you walk? You do have feet under there, right?”

She nodded. “I believe so.”

“All right, let’s get you out then. You can come inside and I’ll make you a sandwich or something. I think you need more than fertilizer at this point.”

She flexed her legs. I could see the soil moving a little, but her feet were in pretty deep, and she lost her balance. I put a hand on her waist to steady her and for a second I couldn’t breathe. God, she even smelled like Rachael. Warm and salty-sweet, like fresh bread or caramel popcorn. Lelia’s scent was maybe a little wilder or darker, but it was close enough to make my head spin. She had one hand on my arm, leaning in toward me, her hair swinging against my

shoulder as she freed one foot, then the other. She was unsteady at first, and I kept a hand on her as we made our way back to the house. Once inside, I wasn't sure what to feed her. I hadn't considered it beforehand, and my pantry wasn't exactly loaded with the natural, healthy foods I figured she'd want. In the end I fixed her a plate of Triscuits and cheddar cheese cubes, and a glass of no-pulp OJ. She seemed happy enough with it and went to sleep on the couch afterward, curled up under an ancient afghan that had been there since before we moved into the house.

Early the next morning she was outside again. I finished getting ready for work and found her cupping the last of the lilacs to her face. Now that we were in the daylight, I noticed another problem that I'd forgotten about.

"Listen," I started, feeling awkward. "I'm sorry I didn't give you a robe or something, but I didn't feel right giving you my wife's things. I'll pick up some clothes after work today. I guess I can figure out your size."

Lelia turned to face me, a puzzled expression on her face. She held out her arms, palms up, like she was testing for rain. "It's warm out," she said. "I'm fine."

"Right," I said. "I'll pick you up something anyway, if that's okay. Oh, and is there anything you can think of that you'd want to eat?"

She shrugged. "You're the gardener," she said, and I thought I saw a hint of irony in the smile playing around her full mouth.

I bought her a couple of light dresses, a robe and some toiletries. I checked the supermarket, but aside from grabbing some Lean Cuisines that seemed easy enough to make, I decided not to change my eating habits. I wasn't much of a cook, but I could do pasta, stir fry or boil vegetables, and work the grill all right. For the rest, there was frozen pizza and Chinese takeout. I figured she'd be okay, even if it wasn't gourmet cuisine.

Lelia didn't complain about the food I made, but no matter how many times I tried to explain to her, I couldn't convince her to wear any of the clothes I'd bought her for more than a few hours.

"It's warm enough to go without," she'd say.

"It's more than that," I'd counter. "It's modesty. Don't you want to cover yourself?"

She'd get this arch look in her dark eyes, cross her slender arms and cock her head, ready to take in my every move. "You know what my body looks like already, yes?"

"Yes, of course."

"And it displeases you to see it? You find me ugly?" No defensiveness. She presented the question with a neutral, almost academic curiosity.

"Well—no. No, of course you're not ugly," I admitted. She seemed to be waiting, and I finished my thought aloud. "You're beautiful."

"Well then," she'd say, and for her that ended the matter.

I gave up after a while. The house was too small for entertaining and too far out of the way for my friends and the people I worked with to want to just stop by, anyway. I'd come home from work, cut up some fruit and meet Lelia in the garden. It was a game for her to guess which flower would bloom next, and sometimes I'd find her with a pile of flowers in her lap. Lelia may not have liked the cotton dresses I'd bought, but she loved to thread hollyhock, red daisies or morning glory into chains draping over her slender shoulders, or following the curve from her waist to her hips. She took the fruit from the walnut trees by the creek and used the brown juice to stain patterns on her skin, like henna, of flowers and birds and small, twining snakes.

What Lelia seemed to like most of all, though, was me. She'd step just a few inches closer than she had to when I brought her dishes of fruit, and I could feel her eyes on me as I

raked the pebbles of the path back into place beside her. Whenever she thought I was watching her she'd reach for the highest flowers, showing off the sinuous curve of her back or the tension in her legs as she rose on tiptoe. Sometimes I'd catch myself noticing and try to find something to do somewhere else, but there were other times when it was so good to watch her, see her move. I'd come out of a daydream, not remembering anything of what I'd been thinking about, but acutely conscious of the smell of her skin or the feel of her as she brushed past me.

In July the fruit was black and ripe on the cherry tree. I'd told Lelia about everything that had happened under that tree, and for a while she watched it from a respectful distance. After a week or so of watching the birds gorge themselves, though, the attraction must have been too strong, because she caught my arm while I was kneeling to clear the pits and fallen fruit from around the roots of the tree.

“Is it safe to eat?” she asked. “Are there still wasps in the cherries?”

I was almost tempted to ask her to keep leaving it alone, but it didn't seem right to let buckets worth of cherries rot, either. “There were never wasps in the cherries. There was just a nest nearby, and I made sure to clear that out last year. Cherries are fruit, like you eat every day. They're safe.”

Lelia picked one cautiously, turning the dark fruit around in her fingers, but keeping her eyes on me. She held it to her lips, then slowly, gently closed her mouth around it and sucked it off the stem. I raised my eyebrows in surprised admiration. Maybe it was just a symptom of too little time spent around women lately, but no smug, Manhattan-drinking girl I'd ever seen at a bar had ever made eating a cherry look like that. Lelia spat the pit delicately into her palm and watched me sidelong through her lashes as she reached for another cherry.

“I’m going to go check on the dahlias,” I announced, clapping my hands to my knees as I got to my feet.

Lelia’s eyes danced, as if at her own private joke. She smiled at me, licking cherry juice off her lips, and for the rest of the day I kept to the opposite side of the garden.

Five days later, the weather jumped eight degrees almost overnight. It was the first day that year to pass 90, let alone hit 93, and as it was Saturday, there was nothing much to do but pour a drink and spend the day trying to stay cool. I took my shirt off; I was sick of damp cloth sticking to my back. I called Lelia over and rubbed some sunscreen on her shoulders. She seemed to tan more than burn, but I figured it was better not to take chances. Then I reached over my own shoulders.

“Let me,” she said. Her fingers were warm and smooth, kneading and stroking. I stepped away.

“That’s good, I think it’s rubbed in.” I yawned. The heat was really getting to me. “I’m going to take a rest for a few minutes. Wake me if you need anything.”

The grass under the cherry tree was green and soft. The shade felt great on my face, and the fruit was so ripe now that even lying down I could smell the cherries above me. I meant to close my eyes for a minute or two, but the next thing I knew was I was floating, rocking in the branches of some huge tree. There were dozens of birds flying to and from me, my bird family, and every time one came it would feed me a cherry, soft against my lips. The sunlight was warm and heavy, pressing me into my nest, and I rocked there, leaves fluttering around me, taking cherries from a flock of birds with Rachael’s face.

And then the sunshine weight shifted, and I half-woke to feel a real pressure against me. Lelia bent her mouth to mine again, and she tasted like cherries. Her chest was warm against mine, and then she lifted, and I felt quick fingers working at the zipper on my jeans.

“No!” I gasped, but it was too late for protests. I was lost in every tiny bead of sweat on her skin, in the smell of her hair warm in the sun, in the taste of her breath. The months of loneliness seemed to press in from all around me, and the only escape was Lelia. I could hear the blood rushing through my body, and when she touched me, hard as I tried, I couldn’t think of anything else in the world that mattered.

Eventually she folded back over me again, her hair falling over my face. I kept my eyes closed. If I lived to be ninety years old, I thought, I’d still remember each place where Lelia’s skin was now touching mine.

She leaned to whisper into my ear. “Just think,” she breathed, “if your Rachael were still here you would never have been with me.”

Instantly, the peace and warmth drained out of me. “How can you say that?” I snapped, pushing back to get out from underneath her. She looked up at me with those dark eyes and that sly smile, and all I could think about was Rachael.

“Oh, God,” I groaned. The memories that I had lost in Lelia’s warmth flooded back with a vengeance: Rachael and I sitting on the grass, feeding each other cherries, Rachael standing, smiling proudly at her garden, Rachael lying motionless in my arms, God, barely a year ago.

Lelia, breasts still flushed red, clasped her hands around my shoulders.

I grabbed her wrists and pushed her. “Get off me!” I yelled. “How dare you talk about Rachael? Why couldn’t you just leave me alone?”

Lelia was caught off-guard, sprawled back now in the grass, but she lifted her chin defiantly. “If you wanted to be left alone you wouldn’t have spent so long watching me. You wanted this. I could see it in your face. And,” she added, “I will talk about Rachael if I choose to. You have no right to stop me from speaking. I am the one who’s alive now, and she is dead, and I have as much worth as she ever did.”

I wanted to hit her. If I’d been a different kind of man, I would have hurt her for her defiance and for insulting Rachael’s memory, but even in that moment my own guilt twisted more sharply within me than my anger at Lelia. I sucked a breath between my teeth and dropped my hand.

“The emergency cash jar is on top of the refrigerator,” I said, making my voice as even as I could. “Take it, and get your dresses, and get out of here. I never want to see you in this garden or in that house again.”

Lelia held my gaze for a few seconds, then rose gracefully to her feet. Her head was high. “I will leave you,” she said. “But do not think you are punishing me or dooming me by sending me away from you. I know more than you think. I have greater power than you know about. I leave this place at your suggestion, but of my own will.” She turned away from me then, back toward the house. She carried herself like a dancer, and there was pride and strength in the way she walked. I didn’t know what she meant by having power I didn’t know about, but as I watched her leave I realized I believed what she had told me.

These past two years, Lelia has kept her word; I haven’t seen her since that day and I don’t think I ever will again. I wonder sometimes what would have happened if I had handled myself differently that day. Maybe she still would have left. Maybe not. Somehow I’m not

worried about her though. Lelia understood herself and me too well for me to think she couldn't survive without my help. I spend my attention on other things. When my company took a wild upswing last year, I surprised everyone by taking my share of the profits and retiring early. Between the money I made last year and the pension plan afforded to a senior executive, I'll live comfortably enough in this house for decades.

And as for what I'll do with all this time on my hands...the seeds in that white packet may still be good. I planted one last week near a bed of roses, and I water it every day. When she sprouts, if she sprouts, I'll call her Evie. I won't make mistakes this time; Evie will be perfect. I've raised a barricade of sharp-thorned roses around the cherry tree, so she'll never have to know about Lelia or Rachael. It'll just be the two of us, safe here in the garden.



a woman started growing
where we planted the seeds

just like in the ad,

e home and j comeau



I remembered to water her
every day,



for a while.

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