

When the Flowers Scream

By Rocky Nguyen

My Abuela Garcia said she knew when plants made happy noises. She mused about it all the time when I was growing up. I always asked her what it sounded like. She could never describe it to me exactly, but would yell at me when I turned up the volume dial on my hearing aids to try to listen to the snapdragons in her garden. I stopped asking her questions once she eventually played *Fantasia* for me. If I had to guess though, she couldn't *hear* it, she *saw* it. She could always tell when a plant made the slightest change, whether a leaf grew taller or into a darker shade of green or if a stem changed its direction of growth, in any light or pose.

My Abuela seemed to intuitively have the knowledge of a botanist. She was a descendant of the Yaqui Tribe who had a mischievously green thumb. Whenever she watched me during the summer while Mama was at work, she'd take me to the neighborhood Walmart and set me loose in the outdoor garden department. It was a weekly trip for her, Crumb the dog, and my near-daily visits whenever grade school was out. We'd pull into the parking lot after my post-lunch nap and the heat from the 2:00 pm El Paso sun and the buzz of the car's backseat typically lulled me back to sleep. The frosty blast from the fans at the sliding doors usually woke me right back up as Abuela ushered me to the gated outdoor section.

She told me, "If you like a flower, pinch off a half-finger of stem and hide it in your pocket." By the time she was done with her shopping, I'd usually have only made 2-4 selections. We'd get home and the faster I'd help her put away the groceries, the sooner she would help me graft the flower into a glass of water. She let me line her kitchen window, and any window in the house, with jars and bottles of flowers until their roots came in. If they didn't, then I could pick more from Walmart and try again next week. But if the roots came in, I could add them to one of

the pots in the backyard. In her time between Mass, trips to Walmart, and caring for the every need of her adult children, my Abuela spent most of her retirement in her backyard. She had filled her backyard with vibrant ornaments and colorful clay flowerpots, and cleared half of her yard to designate for growing veggies and flowers. It was magnificent.

On a cloudy morning the summer I turned 7, my Mama drove me to Abuela's place. The sun had risen but hadn't fought past the clouds for long enough to warm the dew off the grass. The neighborhood looked blue when the sun was its backlight. My Mama pulled into her short driveway and reached past me, opening the passenger door for me.

"Are you gonna say hi?" I grabbed my backpack and unbuckled my seatbelt.

Mama shook her head, "I'll be back at 6:30, mija. When you see my car, I'll flash the headlights twice and you can come out."

I looked at Abuela's window and saw her looking through it back at us through the curtains. I waved and smiled, but she retracted like a turtle. I could see her walk to the front door.

Mama turned down my left hearing aid to mute it and tapped her finger on it.

"Hey!" I shielded my ear. I couldn't *hear* it, but I could *feel* the click of her fingernail against the plastic of my earpiece. I could feel my cheeks get hot.

"*Just you,*" she withdrew her hand. I shook my head.

I hated when she did that. *I was already listening.* "I don't want to walk in the dark."

My mom scowled at me, "6:30 won't be dark."

"You normally pick me up when it's dark."

Abuela's front door swung open. "Good morning!" she announced to the lawn.

Mama huffed and unbuckled her seatbelt, “Uquela...” she grumbled as she got out of the car. I circled around the car to grab her hand before meeting Abuela at the doorstep.

“What? You weren’t gonna say good morning? Hello? To your Mama?” Abuela balled her fist and knocked it on my Mama’s forehead.

“Ahh!” She winced and yanked my arm forward at her, “Go inside, Monica!”

“Uquela...” my Abuela scolded as she ushered me inside, “It’s fine if you’re in a hurry-”

“Mama, I have to go to work,” my Mama began to back away.

“Who said you have to come in? All you have to do is mind your manners when you’re-”

My Mama had already made it from the doorstep to the driveway when she called back, “Thanks, Mama!”

I was already sitting on the couch as I watched Abuela stand at the doorway. She watched my Mama slam the car door and drive off. Abuela sunk back into the house from the front porch as my mom pulled out the driveway. She had been gone for a few moments, yet Abuela had continued to stare blankly at the front lawn. The sun’s pale rays had finally begun to pour through the colorful windows of the house. I sat quietly in the living room, my legs still too short to hang off the edge of the couch cushion.

My Abuela inhaled slowly with conviction and the frustration melted off her face. “I’m sorry mija,” she gestured for me to get off the couch and took my hand. “I had a surprise for you,” she ushered me through the kitchen to the door to the backyard. There was a towel covering the bottom half of the back door to keep me from seeing through. “Close your eyes!”

I covered my eyes with my hands and heard the door swing open, the heat of the sun hitting my skin as Abuela ushered me forward. She lifted my hands and revealed a new plot in the innermost part of the garden. My flowers from last summer were sitting there in the middle

circle plot, a cluster of bright yellow ones blooming in the center. It looked marvelous. “Dios mio...”

Abuela knocked me in the head. “You learned that from your mother?”

“Ay...” I nodded, rubbing my head.

“Your damianitas came out beautifully,” she pulled me into a hug.

I hugged her back, burying my face into her belly, “Thank you, Abuela.”

“You were taking up too many flowerpots.”

I giggled into the waistband of her apron. She squeezed me tight, but let out a heavy breath. “Mija, you’re not leaving the house unless your Mama comes in.”

I gulped and looked up at my Abuela, who stared off at my yellow flowers, “Yes ma’am.”

“Do you want to go to Walmart?” she looked at me and smiled.

Instead of leaving me to the outdoor department like usual, Abuela had her own shopping to do too. I helped her push the flat clunky cart and lug a big plastic bag of fertilizer on it; it was probably heavier than I was. As we walked through the aisles, she would point to any flowers that she liked and flare her right nostril; that was the sign for me to swipe a stem off of it. She signaled for me to sneak a bud off of a succulent.

“Monica,” she pushed the cart.

“Hm?” I shoved a leaf in my pocket.

“Who are you and your Mama living with?” she pulled a smaller set of gardening gloves into the shopping cart.

“Armando,” I shrugged.

“Hmm,” Abuela shook her head, “when did that happen?”

“When Mama left Ignacio’s.”

“Uquela...” she sighed, “is *that* why she won’t come in? You should be at your Mama’s place, not a boyfriend’s place! Better yet, you *both* stay at my place!”

“I think that Mama likes Armando though. He’s nice.”

“Oh, sure. What did she say about the last one?”

I nodded, “He was mean.”

“Ignacio?”

“Yeah, he was scary. I didn’t like him. Armando’s nice though. I have my own room.”

Abuela swallowed her next words and continued to the checkout aisle. She let me struggle to put the fertilizer in the car on my own, but after a few minutes, she did it herself and surprised me again with my own pair of gardening gloves.

It was dark outside, the yellow ceiling light in the living room bled out onto the porch through the windows. I’d had a good day. My skin was salty from dirt and sweat after a day of weeding and spreading fertilizer. I knew I didn’t have to walk in the dark, so I wasn’t afraid. Abuela let me sit on the couch and wait for my Mama to pick me up at 6:30 pm, just as she said. After an hour, she let me watch cartoons and after another one, she let me eat a popsicle. By the time my Mama showed up in the driveway, I was licking the red syrup off my knuckles and turning down the volume on my hearing aids. Abuela stood in the doorway, blocking any light from bleeding out onto my Mama. They stood in the doorway talking for a little while. I didn’t feel like listening, instead, I kept my eyes focused on the TV. The commercials were taking forever. A news segment was starting when Mama walked into the house and snapped her fingers

in my face, grabbing me by the hand and pulling me off the couch, out of the house, and into her car.

She stomped the entire way. I could tell she was yelling by the way her lips were curled and how the car vibrated when she slammed the door. It was a long car ride home, but I was glad it was silent. I had no idea that it was raining until I opened the car door and a pool of water flopped into my lap. I turned the volume back up on my hearing aids as I ran inside. I shut the door behind my Mama, who was talking to Armando in the kitchen by the time I was pulling off my sandals. Next to a dinner table with three plates of chilaquiles on it, he was telling her about the lightning storms and called to me, reminding me to lock the front door. My Mama, now calm, invited me to the table while Armando took off his apron and washed his hands.

I remember that dinner was delicious and feeling happy for Mama and Armando. I took a warm bubble bath while they watched TV before the power went out. I looked at the lightning clouds with Mama on the front porch before Armando had us go to bed, the air smelled like freshly wet dirt and my wet hair dripped on my dry pajamas. I shut the door behind my Mama on the way in. I left the window cracked open just a hair for me to listen to the sky's grumble and passing rain.

I remember waking up in the middle of the night soaked in a pool of sweat since the power outage took out the air conditioner, my hearing aids half-on and probably needing charged batteries. I heard footsteps in the living room and saw my Mama's bathroom light on throw the light that bled beneath the crack of my door. I heard louder rainfall pulse at the center of my house, near the front door.

I remember ripping my pink and orange bedsheets off me, and in doing so, noticed how rainwater sprayed all over my pillow and my half-on hearing aids. I sat up and crawled over to shut my window all the way. I looked out at the sky for a moment while I heard Mama's yelling, I figured she was mad at Armando for leaving the seat up.

I remember that my hearing aid was only half-on when I poked my head out the window. I saw a flash of light, the static in my ears, and its warmth at the tip of my nose. More lightning cracked across my window when my door swung open and Ignacio rushed at me from the other side.

I remember screaming so loudly from the sight that my throat scratched up and I started coughing and I couldn't stop coughing and then I started choking on the dry skin in my throat.

I remember Mama tackling Ignacio to the ground and Armando pulling him out of my room while Mama screamed and swung at him.

I remember that I couldn't breathe and it felt like I kept choking and I couldn't stop choking. Mama picked me up out of bed and took me to the car. Armando had Ignacio pinned to the ground as we left, waiting for the cops to arrive.

I remember that Mama ripped my hearing aids out when Ignacio started screaming and laughing, "I didn't touch her throat! She's alive!"

I remember she drove me to the hospital where they diagnosed me with a panic attack.

For a few weeks after the first break-in, I kept feeling like I was choking again. It felt like my ears were plugged and full of pressure and my nose was pinched, and when it happened, I couldn't stop shaking and crying. I had to see a social worker lady who told me I had to see a therapist lady who told me that I was having panic attacks whenever the pinchy pressure feeling

came back and it felt like couldn't breathe. I felt paralyzed. Mama usually hates crying, but she wouldn't yell at me when it would start happening. She'd leave the room if we were in the house. But when it would happen at the store or church, she didn't seem to know what to do. If there were people watching, she'd pick me up and put me in the car. I always felt really guilty when they happened, but I couldn't control when the attacks would come.

Fortunately, since it was the summertime, she didn't have to deal with me very often: only two full days of the seven if she wanted to. When Mama finally told Abuela everything, the conversation was surprisingly quiet. Mama spoke plainly and Abuela nodded while they drank tea in the kitchen after Mass. I sat outside facing the garden, leaning against the backdoor sipping horchata and yanking my cup away from Crumb, Abuela's dog, who was trying to steal a sip of liquid gold. Mama told Abuela about my new appointments and what the state wanted her to do. It was hard not to listen. I couldn't tell if it was time for me to turn my volume down and go nap behind Abuela's cacti wall, but Mama and Abuela didn't tell me to go away. All I recalled was that, while I was leaning on the back door when Crumb finally gave up on my horchata and laid down next to me, I could hear the faintest sobs of my mother. Her sobs were the wet, mucousy, and breathy kind. I scratched Crumb's nape, repeated allowed "peh-peh-peh-peh-peño" and rocked back and forth, feeling the texture of the "p" consonant pop off my lips and into the air. The texture of the word on my lips and the fur on my fingers made it possible for me to listen to Mama's crying.

Following afternoon tea, Mama hardly took me away from Abuela's house and Abuela drove me to all of my appointments for the rest of the summer. At first, Abuela was pretty dismissive of therapy, but she hated when I cried too. She wouldn't yell at me though and when

the choking feeling would come, she learned from the therapist lady to pick me up and put me in a dark room until it passed.

The therapist lady talked to Abuela and me a lot, together and alone. There was one day when the therapist lady was talking to me alone and she tried to make me talk about Ignacio. I told her I didn't like talking about him, but she wanted to anyways. It started getting hard to breathe again, and I didn't like how many notes the therapist lady was writing while I was choking. I was trying to leave to get my Abuela when she stood up and dimmed the lights. "Sit down honey," she knelt down next to me and offered her hand for me to hold. She gestured at my hearing aids, "May I?" I squeezed her hand. She muted my hearing aids and said something. I looked at her blankly. She spoke again but stopped herself mid-sentence. She blushed and paused for a moment before pointing to her lips. I lipread as she repeated a question: "How do you feel?" I didn't answer her. I didn't want to. In the silence, I could breathe again.

After the panic passed, the therapist lady sent Abuela and me on our way. She talked to Abuela about things like "sensory deprivation" and told me that maybe I could use my deafness as a tool. I think that the therapist lady was pretty excited. The panic attack that happened during the session only lasted 45 minutes when I couldn't hear as compared to the 2-3 hours that they'd usually last if I could.

I hated waiting for the feelings to pass. Mama said that they made me act like a toddler. Abuela would get furious if she overheard her talk about it. The feelings would show up at the worst times and as the weeks passed, the less my Mama would take me to go shopping or church, or to the movies. I think she felt embarrassed. I never blamed her. I tried really hard to be calm and brave when I was around her, but I think doing so made the feelings come even faster. I could never stop crying on command like she wanted, but I really really tried to. She started

leaving me at Abuela's house on the weekends when her fights with Armando began. I didn't mind living with Abuela though, the spare room's window overlooked the garden and we'd still go to Walmart whenever she'd suggest it.

After a particularly nasty fight with Armando, Mama showed up on Abuela's doorstep with all of my things after work. They took turns grabbing my clothes and stuffed animals from her car to Abuela's spare room and finished in time to watch the sunset. As I was cleaning out the spare room dresser to move my things in, Abuela grabbed a 40 oz from the garage refrigerator and sat with Mama on the porch. She sobbed her eyes out. My stomach started to hurt. Mama never had a peaceful beginning or end to a relationship before. I turned out my lights and shut off my windows to put the rest of my clothes away. I think that making a room pretty is supposed to be a happy occasion, but it didn't feel like one. I walked into the kitchen to grab my marigold graft jars from the window when I overheard Abuela shouting:

“You better not! No daughter of mine is gonna live like this any longer!”

“We’re *not* dating,” Mama hushed her, “He’s just a roommate from work.”

“Is that what you told Ignacio?”

“Dios mio...” Mama scoffed and swigged what was left of her 40.

“When are you gonna stop fooling around with these boys-”

Mama let out a long exaggerated groan.

“-and move in with me?” Abuela quickened her words.

Mama’s continuous groaning evolved into a loudening yell.

“*You’re* putting us all in danger! YOU!” Abuela yelled right back, “You hate me *and* your child that much?”

I caught a glimpse of them on my way back to my new room. Abuela paced back and

forth and Mama finished the rest of her beer. I heard the shatter of glass against concrete and Mama's drunken shouting. The choking feeling came back. The water from the graft jars spilled on my hands as I shut the door behind me. The wet glasses were slipping through my fingers. I tried to set them down on the carpet before they could fall, but I spilled one of the graft jars on the way down. The water splashed across the ground and sunk into carpet fibers, turning them into a darker shade of brown.

I just wanted to die. I ripped out my hearing aids, curled up next to the tipped-over flower graft, and closed my eyes. There was nothing in my ears, there was darkness in my eyelids, but I couldn't get the noise out of my head. I didn't know where it was coming from. My hearing aids were on the ground, but I still could hear clicking and ringing high-pitched piercing in my head, like a tiny scream that wouldn't go away. I thought that I spilled the other jar next to me but when I opened my eyes, I realized that I was just crying.

I reached up to wipe my tears and itched a wet spot near my left ear when I realized that covering my ear lobe made the noise go away, *without my hearing aids*. I froze at first, my heart started pounding and I wanted to vomit. The world was still silent and dark except for the tiny scream in my ear. After a little bit of crying and pinching my stomach to make the queasiness go away, I finally turned my head in the direction of the tiny scream. I opened my eyes to the tipped-over graft jar with a semi-crushed marigold in it. "What?" I whispered allowed, though I couldn't even hear myself without my aids. The tiny scream got louder when I held the semi-crushed marigold closer. It got quieter when I stood across the room. I kept walking back and forth to observe the noise until I realized I stopped crying. The ringing noise got quieter when I added water back into it from the other graft jar, it nearly stopped altogether once I picked the crushed parts off, but there were still some clicking sounds from both jars.

I wondered if the clicking was the sound Abuela always talked about when a plant was happy. Pushing past my stuffed animals, I stood on my bed to unlatch the window that overlooked Abuela's garden. The moment I swung open the glass, I was overwhelmed with a symphony of clicking and varying frequencies. It felt like the notes and rhythms rushed at my face. I fell back onto the mattress and scrambled out of my new room into the hallway. "ABUELA!!" I shouted, feeling the vibration of my throat but not hearing my voice or her answer. I realized my hearing aids were back in my room. I opened the front door to see Abuela alone on the front porch with a broom and dustpan. She was sweeping up Mama's beer glass and laughing to herself. Abuela shook her head at me before I lipread: "She'll be back mija. Don't you worry." I nodded and sat on the lawn. I could hear the clicking and humming of all of the grass and trees and flowers in our neighborhood. It was so beautiful that I started crying again, but this time I didn't try to stop.