

Carrion Flower

by Laura Ellen Scott

The first criminal act of Jacabo's life was crossing the Sonoran desert to sneak over the border. That was also his last act as a Mexican. After that he was reborn as an illegal, and his new identity made it easy to accept minor criminality as a lifestyle. But it wasn't until he hit West Virginia that he started selling drugs. The hillbillies kept asking him for drugs, kept demanding them until he figured out a way to score. Cousin Ramon thought it was funny as hell. Ramon was legal for six years. He worked his ass off in a brake lining factory in Winchester.

Now the dope-dealer-to-rednecks took shelter in the trees while a stupid hillbilly kid struggled to get his shit together. Kid didn't have the sense to get out of the sun. Jacabo hated the woods, hated the spider filled trees, and he imagined bearded mountain men in the shadows and behind every oak, but he wasn't stupid enough to get sunstroke.

Black insects thrived in the thick heat and soft clover where Nestor Stanyk hunkered down, raw knees pulled up to his chest. He was all long bones drawn in close as if he meant to squeeze himself out of existence. He wept quietly, and the tears scoured his acne ravaged face.

Crazy, ruined boy. Only 13, Nestor seemed eager to suffer the brutal heat. Surrounded by pink and white clovers that quivered with bees, he was ready to confess.

Jacabo remained patient; despite his sweaty misery, he was ready to listen. Ramon had always told his cousin that this was a good place, that any place with trees and shade and cheap beer was better than Nogales. All Nogales had was cheap beer. At the time Jacabo agreed, but there was so much he hadn't known yet. And so much that Ramon would never know.

How'd you find me man?

Niece in juvie knows your lady.

No way. Barbee wouldn't talk.

Barbee's got religion now, or something.

Jacabo gave the boy a can of beer with oxycontin and rat poison in it. He instructed the boy to drink and talk. Jacabo did this, fully aware that making ghosts was a costly enterprise.

* * *

I was only ten, Barbee was a year older. We cut school and there were these two Mexican guys down by the tracks. Down there, but you can't see for the leaves. In winter you can see the tracks and river and everything. I think the Mexicans mighta been drinking or whatever. But Barbee starts acting up and we get the idea to start chunking rocks at the guys, just to freak em out. We didn't expect to throw so good, but we hit em a couple times and the guys get pretty hot, start hollering at us in Spanish. And then they start coming up the hillside, but these are kinda fat guys and they can't see us anyways cause we're hiding behind trees and stuff. I ask Barbee what she thinks the guys are saying, and she goes all goth on me: 'They think we're evil forest ghosts. They're gonna kill us!'

But that's all witchy bullshit. Barbee don't know Spanish. But it was funny. We get a little braver and step out to toss some more rocks. This time the guy sees us, and he yells in English: 'You little cocksuckers! I'm coming up there! I'm gonna bust you up!'

So he starts up again, and we think this old fat Mexican trying to run up the hill is about the funniest thing we ever seen. He even tries to throw stuff back up at us. We watched him a little, then we run off.

An hour later we come back. And we brought with us Barbee's Dad's .22. Barbee said it was no more dangerous than a BB gun, and I knew she was lying, but at the time it was like hell, Barbee said it was okay so I don't have to give it another thought. I'm off the hook.

Anyways these guys were still there when we got back. I shot twice into the ground around where they sat. Then Barbee shot. The same guy that was yelling before started screaming this time. He knew all the English swear words. Called Barbee a mother-fucker.

And Barbee shot him in the eyeball.

He's the guy who died.

* * *

When the smell of rotting death rolled out of the woods, Nestor's parents suffered hard. He'd been missing for three days, and the worst they imagined was that he'd run away. But when the stink grew high, their fears did too.

Sheriff Miles, a good bluetick hound named Shelley, and a part-time deputy began the area search at dawn. By mid-morning all three emerged from the woods with good news: the smell led back to a couple of mangled deer carcasses, inexpertly dressed by poachers. Miles would borrow a couple of losers from the "farm" to haul the mess away ASAP. Foxes could clean it up in a couple of days, but while the boy remained missing, Miles would not pass up the opportunity to appear active and decisive.

The town of Casablanca, West Virginia had never been the site of a Native American settlement, nor had any famous colonial figure ever passed through long enough to leave a speck of history. Its mountains were too stubby for skiing, and the giant rusting hulks of defunct tomato processing factories loomed over Casablanca like depressed ancestors. Tourists whizzed by on the overpass, barely aware that the town existed.

But even in the most desperate places money can be made. You just have to learn how to realign your sense of pride and industry.

One door closes, another opens. Some doors aren't even doors so much as they are crayon sketches of doors drawn by inmates on a cement wall. The for-profit prison injected new life into Casablanca's economy, and the inmate population provided a cheap (sometimes free) resource for day labor.

The prisoners—a 28 year old pot farmer and a 57 year old former magistrate who liked to waggle it in public parks—looked pale inside their bright orange coveralls. Paper masks covered their mouths and noses. The Deputy drove them out to the wooded hillside and sent them down the slope. Rocks, pricker bushes, and pawpaw saplings claimed the spaces between the big trees, making for rough descent.

Deputy Bells waited topline, cradling a shotgun he knew he'd never have to use.

The men in orange mucked out the deer carcasses, and temperatures rose into the low 90s. The forest steamed. They made three trips down into the woods, each time returning with garbage bags full of deer bones and matted gore. As the last load was pitched into the back of the maintenance pickup, the pot farmer asked an interesting question of Deputy Bells:

So how come the woods still stink? Even worse now.

Usually an expert at inexpressiveness, Bells seemed shaky. His face dripped; the climbing stink tended to potentiate with the afternoon swelter. So it wasn't just his imagination. Even the prisoners, who shouldn't be able to smell anything at this point, could tell.

Bells radioed Miles with the bad news. This time the Sheriff would have to corral his team as well as municipal officers from the Stotler and Gourdvile posts just to assemble enough men to mount a formal, responsible search of the area.

The Deputy stared into the woods and sighed. He thought of all that yellow tape.

At the Duarte scene he'd been the one who wrapped the yellow tape around the trunks of hickories, white oaks, and sycamores. As if locusts and raccoons would respect the boundaries he'd staked out.

More tape.

Damn.

Even as late as last December, he spotted straps of faded yellow plastic stretched around a couple of trees. Yellow shreds whipped in the cold wind, forgotten like a dead woman's recipes.

Deputy Bells' worst moment in law enforcement had occurred while he secured those ribbons at the Duarte scene, with all the confusion and people arguing, people crying. Crying in Spanish. He'd never seen a man shot in the eye before, and the scene was so disturbing that he tried to sink himself into the task of tying those yellow ribbons around . . . Without realizing, he'd started humming the song.

Staple gun in hand, he punched the yellow tape into the bark, all the while humming like a moron. Oooh, tie a yel-low—he hadn't

realized what he was doing until his eyes met those of a caramel skinned man whose face glowed red with fury.

One of those macabre, indefensible moments. You never recovered from that kind of thing.

Bells shook himself out of the past. The pot farmer balanced on the back of the truck to shovel the deer carcasses deeper into the bed. He paused and recognized what was behind the deputy's eyes.

Looks like you may have to do a little work now, don' it?

* * *

Barbee dropped the gun in the woods when we run, and the police found it and traced it back to her Dad. I just went home and passed out on my bed waiting for the cops to come and get me, but they never did. Barbee run off, I don't know where, but a couple days later they found her hiding inside the merry-go-round on the 3rd graders' playground. It was an old one, shaped like a top, not flat like the new ones. There are these bars underneath like bike spokes, and Barbee was balanced on one of them all crunched up in the dark. I guess those 3rd graders couldn't get the thing spinning right, and that's how Barbee was caught by the Teacher's Aide.

For some reason she never told nobody about me. Took the blame all on her own.

So that all happened a long time ago, two years. And maybe I didn't actually shoot a guy. But I think I could have. So it's no different to my mind.

I feel bad every day. And sick. I thought I'd get used to it.

A week ago we took the IQ test in health class. For fun the bitch says, since school will be out in another week. We got the results back yesterday.

And guess what? I'm a genius. I scored 155. I should just fucking off myself man.

Cause here I am, a kid who either coulda or couldn'ta killed a guy. I mean if the opportunity had been just a little different who knows? I don't. What if it was my turn with the gun, and the guy came charging up? It mighta been exactly the same except I probably can't shoot straight. So I just don't know.

And up till this goddamn test I kinda thought well maybe I'm just some dumb fucker, some stupid farm boy with no sense and no feelings. Maybe I don't know what I'da done since I don't know much of anything anyway. Half the assholes in my family are like that. I can't hardly stand em they're so ignorant. My uncles spend all their time bullshitting about what's wrong with the world, drinking beer, and yelling at the niggers in the McDonald's commercials. But there I am, a worse asshole cause I'm doing my homework, reading whole books for school.

And now I'm a genius. There're no excuses. Because I know better. I know the difference between right and wrong better than anybody else. But I still don't know if I'd kill or not. For fun I mean. That's a scary thing to not know about yourself. I could be a . . . serial killer or whatever. Just don't know it yet.

I used to write song lyrics but I don't anymore. A guy on a nature show said, 'the carrion flower is a thorn-less smilax,' and I never wrote another line. Didn't think I had to after that.

* * *

The stench was so much worse now. Like a hog farm or a paper mill.

Everyone knew what that meant.

Even Nestor's father knew. Luddy Stanyk was a man made entirely of instinct and little common sense. He drove his ancient F150 to the spot on Route 8020 where the Sheriff's men had gathered, and before they could spot him he backtracked and found the grown over entrance to the old farm road. Twenty years ago most of these hills had been part of a cattle farm, all rocks and weeds, but not so many trees. Not too many folks remembered that. But Luddy did. Most people look at a forest and think that it takes a hundred years to grow it up. But it doesn't. Sometimes it seems to happen overnight.

He horsed the truck through bramble, plowing down saplings and most anything else in his way until he was forced to come to a stop at a large white oak that had fallen across the roadbed. The scent of death was even stronger here, and he left the truck to proceed on

foot. He took his rifle from the passenger seat and peered down into the woods.

An experienced hunter, Luddy spotted paths worn through the briars that others would miss. Some made by deer, some by men chasing deer. Boys and Mexicans used those paths too.

The hot smell of his spoiled child made his eyes water.

Something deep and low in the trees, a spot of bright blue color.

It was there, then it disappeared. Then it was there again. On this windless day the branches swayed as if the goddamned sun rocked them with pure heat.

Bright blue. Maybe a Mylar balloon scrap. They stay flapping in the trees forever.

Luddy blundered towards the piece of color, crashing through the undergrowth. His boots kept him from tumbling as he encountered hidden rocks and holes under the leaf litter. As he stepped deeper into trees, he stepped deeper into stench. Death was a reeking wet mist that stung his eyes, his throat, any exposed place.

Up on the ridge the voices of the official search team trickled down to mingle with the rising hum of buzzing, vibrating bees and flies. Luddy descended further, and the sounds of men and bugs became indistinguishable from one another.

An endless stripe of ferns contrasted against limp mayflowers that were past their peak. Their presence indicated a leveling out of the terrain. He knew he was close.

By the time he found his boy, Luddy had become intoxicated by necrotic air.

A dark bloated thing half-hung, half-sat against a tree trunk. Nestor's blue tank top was pulled up around his neck, snagged to a low branch only four or five feet up from the ground. Legs bowed like a marionette's, his feet turned inwards so that he seemed to rest lightly on his ankles.

Luddy Stanyk stumbled sideways into briars he didn't feel. He gazed down at this peaceful carcass that used to be his flesh and blood.

Bugs feasted on the child, made the skin look alive.

Nestor's swollen black hands hung like anchors between his thighs.

The branch that suspended him was almost broken from the tree. It was as thick as a man's calf, but long and crooked, a lightning bolt of witches' joints—gray, leafless, firespark dry. Where it fractured from the main trunk, the scar showed a dull, black-specked heart surrounded by ribbons of brighter, living wood.

Luddy could see the disease inside.

Disease inside.

Reason and contradiction were two cabbage moths that fluttered in front of Luddy's burning eyes. He batted them away and gazed upon Nestor's flesh: his face was an eggplant, but his chest seemed to fade into mottled shades of olive and red that blended like rhubarb. He looked just like he did when he was a newborn. Except more green than yellow this time.

Bugs inspected Luddy's sweat glossed face. The thing about junebugs is that when you swat them away, you can hear them smack into the ground or against the trees.

And the crazy thought that came into Luddy's mind, drunk as he was on death and discovery, was this: The forest is a magical place.

It was the most angelic thought he had ever had.

* * *

At first, Jacabo Duarte was happy to leave West Virginia behind. He changed his name to Ramon so he could hide inside a memory of the cousin for whom he had just committed the ultimate act of respect and love. Jacabo understood what his future held, but the instinct to run was too powerful to resist. He traded 67 pills for a coughing, rusted Cavalier that he drove north and east to Pennsylvania where the sun rarely shined.

In Breezewood the car started to decline, and by Somerset it was terminal. Plenty of tall trees and shade in Somerset, but for no good reason. It seemed that the sun was always shrouded by gray, threatening skies. And while the beer was cheap enough, it was a pain in the ass to buy. In Pennsylvania the beer is only sold by the

case from special shops. Maybe his cousin was right about West Virginia.

He drove back south for no better reason than his grief. In Hedgesville the car up and died, and he abandoned it by the side of a two lane highway that didn't seem to lead to anyplace in particular. Hands in his pockets he walked, not giving a shit about direction. In a half day of walking and hitching rides he was back on the outskirts of Casablanca. He'd always wondered why criminals tended to wander back to the scenes of their crimes, and now he knew why. He'd become Ramon in Casablanca, a new man. He'd been reborn in an act of killing, but reborn nonetheless. And this was home now. He couldn't imagine being anywhere else.

The new Ramon strolled along the highway's edge where speeding trucks nearly rocked him into the pines. When the Sheriff's cruiser approached he averted his face, pretending to study the ditch.

The cruiser never slowed, just whooshed into the horizon to disappear. Ramon relaxed and eased the tension from the balls of his feet as he tried to adopt the careless gait of a tramp going nowhere.

Crazy boy, he drank the beer. Talked like he was never gonna get a chance to talk again. If the kid tasted bitterness in the Budweiser he never said a thing about it. Crazy, messed up boy. It was hard for Ramon to recollect his anger. He feared he might carry that child for the rest of his life, however long that might be.

The highway crested in the distance. The cruiser reappeared there, and for a hung second it seemed that the brown and gold vehicle was clenched between a cloud and the roadbed. The deputy had turned around, heading back towards Ramon.

Could mean nothing, could mean everything. The hillbillies were pink as soap, and it was only natural that honeyed Ramon aroused caution. Or more likely, someone in the Sheriff's office just figured out that dos y dos iguales cuatro, and there was a bulletin out for him at last. While the cruiser picked up speed, Ramon felt time slow down. He could stay or he could run. He peered into the pines and saw a thousand possible paths to take. Unlike the snarling, bramble-

choked woods where his cousin loved to drink his beer, clean pine forests seemed to welcome fugitives.

But that welcome offered darkness. A ghost he'd made and the ghosts he knew were surely waiting.

The Deputy pulled over to the side of the road. He bellowed something unintelligible through his bullhorn. Then the Deputy exited his vehicle, weapon drawn. Ramon stared hard into the woods until his eyes made lies out of shadows. His own ancestors weren't so worrisome, but the ghosts of others terrified him. Some ghosts didn't follow rules.

Sure enough, he soon perceived a pale arm beckoning to him. The more he stared the darker that arm became.

The Deputy shouted, crouched, looking entirely ridiculous. Ramon felt sad but relaxed, as if this were an uncomfortable yet familiar experience, like a medical examination. The arm in the forest began to flutter seductively, teasing.

Ramon sighed; he knew he would die.

The hillbilly boy was playing a trick, pretending to be his cousin. After all that had happened, after all that he had done, Ramon felt sorry for the kid who thought he was a genius. The Deputy was screaming now, like an over-excited child. Before today he may have only drawn his weapon on sheep-killing dogs and rabid raccoons.

Ramon leapt into the woods, knowing it was too damned late. When the bullet caught his back it helped him fly higher and farther than he'd ever gone before. He soared into the branches and his mind died mid-flight—for all he knew he never touched the ground.

Someone else would string the yellow tape this time. Someone else would be unflappable in the midst of grieving relations. The Deputy stared at the empty space where a man had been, waiting as if it might fill up again. When his senses returned he rushed into the pines to locate his quarry. An impossible thirty feet into the trees Jacabo Duarte lay face down in dry needles.

Bells tried to calculate the physics, but as the math exceeded his grasp he accepted the power of shadows, magic, and a smidgen of Jesus. Outside funerals, the only dead people he'd ever seen had

been just like Jacabo Duarte: surrounded by trees. He began to practice a story that had nothing to do with law enforcement and everything to do with stuff that lasts. Each detail he imagined became immediately real in his bare mind.

Roots creep to hell and branches stretch to heaven, his mother liked to say. He never knew what the hell she was talking about; he'd assumed it was natural for some country wisdoms to become abstract over time. But now her meaning was made clear by the vision of the body so far away. Duarte appeared to snooze, comfortably nestled into the decomposing forest floor. A tiny, friendly curl of smoke rose from the dark ruin of his back. Bells hadn't realized that his own mouth hung open until a cloud of no-see-ums sent one scouting party down his throat and another into his eyes. Coughing, swatting, stumbling backward into the highway—and possibly into the path of a screaming semi—the Deputy understood that his mother was right.

