

Stranger and the green gloves

by Rachna K.

On a Sunday evening, when the early summer sky glittered like steel struck with light, a man came through their front gate and kissed his mom. It was a few months after his father's death. She was on her knees working in the front yard, pulling weeds from the lawn. It was a hot day. Flies were persistent and buzzing. A clean rivulet of sweat ran down her neck. She had been quite oblivious and had not noticed her teenage son. He stood near the half-curtained window with his fingers laced together over his grey t-shirt, staring at the apostrophes of little black birds. And for the same reason as she felt the need to look at her shadow from time to time, she turned around and saw the man. She moved the damp hair away from her bronzed face and stood where she was. The man took her in his arms with a strange intimacy and kissed her pale lips, sliding her gloves to the side. They talked in a hushed tone. Then he left, leaving a slight tremor in the wind and a wet cloud in her eyes. The boy looked away as if it never happened.

In days to come, she washed the gloves and kept them in a safe, cool corner. Her bare hands moved inside the mounds of dirt, synchronized to the pulse of earth as if something was sprouting within her. She worked all day and showered in the evening — her wet hair crimped in place with bobby pins and a small rose on the side. The flowers in her garden bloomed and collapsed as sacred verses in the lap of gravity; the streams of sun played Morse code in their kitchen and as days turned into a haze, she lost track of time. The boy caught her sitting next to the washing machine long after the cycle had ended. Sometimes, she stood next to the boiling milk until it stuck to the pan and turned brown. She kept the curtains drawn, the rose-bush trimmed so she could oversee the entrance.

Her ears picked up every sound — when a footstep hit the patio or when a spoon dropped or a bird took flight. She rarely slept and when she did, she kept her knees close to her chest to get through the night.

The boy thought of saying something but never found the words beyond: “Mom, are you OK?” “Yes, sweetie,” she said. And he held her hand, his eyes reading her face — bare and concentrated. After an uneventful summer and fall, the prismatic landscape changed to a banal grey. She spent more time by the fireplace, stuck on the same page of a romance novel, watching the snow cover her barren flower bed, the gilded grass and her hopes with an icy blanket.

When spring arrived, a heady smell of grass persisted for days. On the day, exactly a year since the stranger had appeared, she sat amidst new bags of mulch and top soil. Then as if she recalled something, she recovered the green gloves from the corner and stuffed them in a half-filled trash bag. The boy, standing not too far away, snatched the shiny, black bag and ran to the dumpster at the end of the street and emptied it over a heap of debris and circling flies. Then he climbed inside and mixed it until the gloves were out of sight. Knee-deep in filth, he looked at the sky. The sharp lines of light crisscrossed under the liquid blue canvas. Not a single cloud. Holding one of the edges of the dumpster as though it were a close friend, he wept. His voice eventually faded until he could only hear its echo in his heart. When he arrived at home, he stood at the gate for a moment, his mom, with her back towards him, kneading the lumps of soil with her hands, sang lightly as if to a bird.

