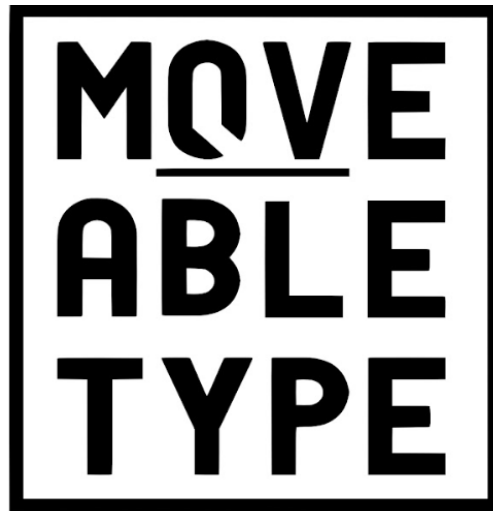




Story: 'this is what august tastes like'

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this is what august tastes like

MISHA S. MCDANIEL

when we were children, our grandmother would tell us to pray to the pear tree. it stood towering over the little blue house our nana and papa bought when they were young, before their knuckles cracked into echoes and before their ears struggled to hug the sounds around them. nana used to wash the dresses and skirts of white women across town, while papa drove their husbands to work and other places. they lived in and out of apartments back then, and finally, after too many peeled back nails and work nights that didn't end until dawn, they piled all the crumpled bills and quarters and nickels they had shoved into their work clothes pockets and gave them to the bank. they wanted a home, they used to say, a home like their bosses had, one with a yard and a tree. a home where our mother could grow and call it hers.

by the time we were born, our grandparents were half-way retired, and those days, nana would take us to the backyard while our parents worked downtown in offices past five. the untrimmed grass would tickle my shins and toes as i stood still in the yard, my brother running as fast as his short legs could take him, panting, inundated with joy. he always ran headfirst into everything he did, headfirst and screaming, sweaty. he came out the womb that way, my mother used to say. i didn't.

eventually, our grandmother would tug us along for our evening prayer, after the thrill of being outside and in the sun wore off, straight to the back of the yard that ended with a thin wired fence. the pear tree stood massive there, its trunk the width of two of my father's torsos, its bark blacker than the galaxy above. the branches stretched over the roof of the house like an umbrella, its leaves a rich green the color of stained glass. its pears, however, were small and hidden until august when they'd finally bloom in bright pinks and soft yellows, the fruit dense and soft and sweet. plucking season. my favorite time of year.

our grandmother was the daughter of a bewitching woman. that's what our father told us when i asked why she kept drawers full of thread and hair and flower petals and loose cinnamon captured in clear glass bottles that fit in the middle of my palm. she had books older than the pear tree, she told us, older than her too, stuffed into wooden creaking bookshelves that made walls all over the little blue house. our grandmother used to move as if floating, her long skirts shielding her ankles and feet from view. she had a smile that stretched on forever, like a rainbow, like a promise, her unpainted lips exposing the blinding white of her teeth. she was old then, lines etched into her face around her eyes and cheeks and neck, but her dark coily hair never grayed.

"she uses a spell to keep it dark like that," our mother used to joke, and our grandmother would hit her on the hip with that infinite smile on her lips and say,

"don't tell the world my secrets." our grandmother was a simple woman guided by simple rules of life. never leave the bacon grease open near the stove. when you feel a storm coming, rub a little lemon behind your ear to keep the lightning away. stretch in the morning and before sleep at night to keep your bones from echoing. never grab milk from the front of the shelf, always from the back. and pray to all fruit bearing trees—especially the ones that feed you.

do unto the earth as you would have done unto you.

~

He's 37. His brother is 42. Their grandmother has been buried for over a decade now. Their parents have moved up and away to somewhere warmer and less expensive. To a place with no offices. The little blue house their grandparents bought is theirs now. And today, his brother is cutting down the pear tree.

He's told his brother over and over that their grandmother would be disappointed, but the older brother only scoffs at him, ignores him, says the pear tree is dangerous—it might fall and crush the little blue house. He and his brother have always been on opposite sides of everything, his brother pummeling his way through life, sweaty, screaming. And as the youngest, he has always let him; he has always not quite known how to make his brother stop and stand still in the grass.

The two men are the color of auburn sunsets, their dark coily hair now spotted with strands of silver. (And no, they never did learn their grandmother's spell.) As they walk to the back of the house, his brother's thick fingers grip the ax tightly.

"Don't you remember how we used to pray to the pear tree before we ate its fruit?" the younger one asks, as he follows his brother to the backyard.

The older brother barely glances back. "I never prayed," he tells him with a laugh.

The younger brother, his arms crossed over his chest, stands a couple of paces in front of the backdoor, the overgrown grass tickling his shins and toes. Meanwhile, the older brother struts to the pear tree, to its thick dark trunk nearly bursting through the thin wired fence. The world's silent for a moment, the wind in the air heavy and sweet with summer. The pears have another month left before they bloom. He had begged his brother to wait until after plucking season, but "August brings storms," his brother said dismissively. He didn't ask if his brother remembered what their grandmother used to say about keeping the lightning away. He knows he doesn't.

Finally, the older brother pulls his arms back, elbows bending sharply like lightning. He steadies his feet. He takes a deep breath, his chest lifting like wings.

He swings.

The younger brother doesn't watch as his older brother hacks at the pear tree their grandmother used to tell them to pray to. Instead he goes inside to their grandmother's office, the one with the clear little bottles of things. (And yes, the room still smells of orange and cinnamon.) He sits in his grandmother's chair, closes his eyes, and prays to the pear tree for forgiveness. Then he finds a lemon and rubs its juice behind his ear. To keep the lightning away.

When it's done, his brother comes in panting, his face and neck and shoulders and collarbones glistening with sweat. The younger brother stares at him quietly. The older brother winks and heads to bed. He doesn't stretch.

That night there is no storm, but the wind does holler until dawn. The younger brother dreams of their grandmother and her rainbow smile. She makes him a promise.

When he wakes up, the sun has crawled halfway up the pale blue sky. There are no birds chirping. He hops out of bed, stretches, bends his tall body across himself, touches his toes. He shuffles around the creaking little blue house, slowly, to his older brother's room. He knocks on the door once, twice.

Silence.

Finally, he pushes the door. At first, the door pushes back against him as if something's in the way. So the younger brother braces his foot behind himself, summons the strength of a man, and finally the door groans open. Immediately, he trips over dozens of pears, the color of cotton candy and freshly cut grass.

He tumbles straight to the floor, into a sea of them.

The younger brother blinks for a moment. All he can see from his place in the pear sea is the edge of his brother's bed, even more pears falling from it, a waterfall. The sugar in the air is heavy. He stands up. He looks.

Where his brother's eyes used to be are pale yellow flowers. The kind of yellow that's almost white. Little pools of galaxy-black soil leak from his brother's ears. His nostrils are filled with vines as green as stained glass, curling at the ends. His brother's mouth is open, as if in prayer, and long dark thin branches are spewing out of it, twisting and twirling around one another all the way to the ceiling. Like a spider's limbs. Like lightning. His brother's ribs have cracked open to make room for the trunk of the pear tree that has now rooted itself in his body.

His sunset skin is striped with chlorophyll, his limbs more leaves and vines than skin and muscle. He can see where the tree has replaced his brother's bones with its own bony roots, his brother's blood staining the sheets brown beneath him, but he can barely see the blood through all the branches and leaves and pears. There are so many pears surrounding his brother's body, on top of his brother's body, on the floor, underneath the bed. Piles of pears. A storm of pears. He looks like a sculpture. It's the first time, he realizes, that he's seen his brother so still.

The ax his brother used to cut down the pear tree lies next to the bed, discarded, buried underneath another sea of pears. In a grave of sorts.

Do unto the earth as you would have done unto you.

The younger brother, now an only child, plucks a pear from one of the branches emerging from his brother's hip. He can't help it. The sugar in the air taunts him. He takes a bite. And no, he doesn't taste blood, but fruit dense and soft and sweet. He tastes august.

* * * *

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