



## Texas Night-Blooming

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This morning in the desert Maria watches the sun rise from her kitchen window, brutal and thrusting and nothing but golds. She is drinking tea; honey collects in the bottom of the cup, coating her throat on the last swallow. It is winter, but it is not snowing, although she is thinking of snow. Some people are surprised it ever snows in the desert. Maria isn't. She finds it somehow fitting. In the winter, as soon as the sun ducks below the horizon, the temperature drops so rapidly she can see the mercury slide down the thermometer. It moves that fast. The snow doesn't stick. But if she turns off all the lights in the house, she can see the flakes swinging back and forth with the wind, so few and far between, like feathers riding a gust.

Maria thinks of snow on this particular morning because she is remembering the last time she saw Lucus. She remembers it clearly although it was almost ten years ago: she was waiting in Chinatown in New York for the bus that would take her to the airport, standing on the sidewalk with tiny broken bottles of liquor in the gutter beside her, a light early winter snow falling. There was a truck nearby filled with crates upon crates of live chickens. Men in work gloves loaded them onto a conveyor belt that slid them through a door with a sign above it in Chinese. Watching the animals process to their death, she couldn't tell, when the wind blew, if what was hitting her face was snow or feathers or both.

She'd been working as a poet, living in the city so as to soak in the dirt of people's psyches rubbing up against each other everywhere, when she received a postcard in the mail saying Lucus had a layover, just for a few hours, could she make it to the airport? At that point, only two months had passed since she left him; reconciliation was still possible, necessary maybe. When she arrived at the airport—by bus in the snow, chicken feathers lodged in her upswept hair—she was met by a horizon of sliding glass doors and blue screens with runs of

incomprehensible letter-number combinations. She discovered Lucus's first flight was late. There wasn't time for him to leave the enclosed area and then get back through security again before his second flight left. They saw each other on opposite sides of the bulletproof glass. He looked beautiful—hair wild, eyes as blank as oyster shells. He looked the same.

The pain shooting up and down her sides had been immediate, not the nausea of anticipation or the lurch of sudden loss but debilitating physical pain; it made her muscles spasm; it was like being caught and held in a field of electrical current. She turned from him, doubling over, stumbling out of the terminal into blistering searchlight beams of noon sun. The pain had happened between them before and, when it happened that time, in the airport, again, Maria decided to leave the city that had kept her smeared in the sap of other people's grief. She moved to the desert where there was space. Like being alone in a double bed.

And today, almost a decade later, Lucus is traveling to the desert to see her. She called him on the telephone out of the blue a week ago and he said yes. He said he would come.

Her house is small, with glossy concrete floors that spill through the place, walls cluttered, surfaces filled with all sorts of things: Moroccan coins, laboratory beakers, body parts made out of plaster, a topographical map. There is a giant wall of books interspersed with silly things like seashells and hatboxes, and there is a ladder that slides along it so Maria can reach the volumes on the top shelves and so she can even climb up on it, where she sometimes perches on the lip of wood and reads, especially when the wind is strong outside, whipping the windowpane.

She sells cacti. She has a wooden sign right off the two-lane highway that says *A Cactus Doesn't Need Love To Live*. Few people drive that road and even fewer stop to look at her cactus garden. Most of her business is via the Internet, young specimens of Texas Night-blooming sent to collectors in the North, postcards and coins sold at auction. She buys things and sells them for more than she paid. It is the American Way, she thinks.

Her desert is a reg desert, hard and rocky steppes, surges of red clay. It is on the edge of what they call Mesa country, which at one point,

millions of years before, had been under water. Much of what was left, after the erosion, was hard limestone, and because of this it was one of the more difficult places for plants to survive. Only cactus adapted to the most severe conditions grew easily here, which is what made her plants sought after by certain collectors; for it was precisely those adaptations, those grotesque spines and shapes that made them unique, stranger and more beautiful.

In the desert, her day splits itself into little compartments of time. She watches the sunrise over tea. She composes letters on an electric typewriter, letters to people she used to know but doesn't really know anymore, like her uncle who is a silversmith in the Hill Country. She looks out at the garden, a singular offshoot of cactus like a tongue, most spectacular when in bloom, as rare as snow here, with the yellows and oranges of mambo skirts. She plays punk rock albums on her record player and lies flat on the squat birch kitchen table, her arms covered in beads up to the elbows, hanging off the end, as she looks up at the sky through the ceiling. She drives to the post office. She reads in her leather chair until dusk and then dinnertime.

Her grandmother had also gone to great lengths to make the world very small—African violets under heat lamps, jigsaw puzzles, soap operas followed for decades. Her grandmother would often recruit Maria to help take down the Christmas tree on Christmas morning the absolute *minute* the presents had been exchanged, directing her as to the most efficient way to collect the cloth and wood ornaments into their boxes. And then, periodically, throughout the rest of the day her grandmother would sigh with relief and say *God, how nice it is to have that out of the way*, as if it were wiping the slate clean, as if these seasonal arrangements, blips in the routine, had been weighing heavily on her.

In her house in the desert, Maria is ruled by the same god of minutiae her grandmother had been. She thinks it is the desert that makes her this way. It is spare. It is life distilled into grains of sand. Maria wonders if Lucus will understand this when he arrives. If he will understand that she has changed.

Maria met Lucus in a café off Plaza Nunoa in Santiago. It was afternoon, and they were sitting at adjacent sidewalk tables—she with a tiny skillet of fried eggs, using a roll to soak up the yolks, he with a mug of

beer, wearing white bracelets made of bone. From their dark hair and dark eyes, they each assumed the other was Chilean. At one point, a woman wearing tight jeans and peacock feathers in her hair passed by them on the sidewalk before entering the more expensive café on the corner. The woman was one of the minor stars in a new primetime *telenovela*. And Chileans took their *telenovelas* seriously.

"She's obviously only with Rafael for his money," Lucus said to nobody in particular. "Any fool could see she'll always love Juan Diego,"

"But Juan Diego is a fisherman, whose only true love is the sea," Maria replied. She, noticing his empty mug, ordered each of them a Fan Shoppe, a Plaza Nunoa specialty of tap beer mixed with Orange Fanta soda.

They were both in South America on grants, attempting unsuccessfully to avoid other Americans. He liked her because she wasn't coy and treated him like a friend; Lucus was not macho and the Latin women made him feel pressured to be protective, to court them mercilessly. Maria liked him because he had more spirit than the rest of the mild-mannered intellectual ex-pats, whose voices were always measured and discussions logically advanced. When the local family Lucus was staying with forbade her to spend the night in his room, he yelled along with them, letting fly his Spanish like never before, which made her more comfortable than if there'd been awkward stammering and apologizing and talk of cultural mores. That night, they rented a hotel room in a bad part of town.

Maria thinks about this while driving the thirty minutes to town as she does every day after lunch, except for Sundays when the post office is closed. She thinks about how one should always be suspect of lovers met abroad. Like those relationships formed in times of war or extreme trauma they are difficult to transfer into the life that comes afterward. It's not the place or country itself that makes it different. What is it, she wonders? Is it that you are living free from any physical reminders of your past or future and therefore exist magically in the present? Maria is still not sure as she fiddles with the radio trying to find the one station that comes in on this road; it plays old country songs, Merle Haggard and Ray Price.

She parks her pickup next to the courthouse and walks past Frank

on the bench in front of his antique store where he sells saucers and candelabras and end tables to tourists and retirees. He is drinking a Coke from a glass bottle; sometimes he offers her one and she drinks it even though she's not sure where one gets glass-bottled Cokes these days.

"Maria, darling," Frank says. "When you gonna come around and decide to marry me?"

"Impossible, Frankie. I'm already married to the sea," she replies. She likes this reply and thinks she may use it again tomorrow.

"Sure picked the wrong place to live," he chuckles as she butts open the door to the post office with her hip.

There is a letter from a customer in Maine, and there is a book, hardback and slim, tucked into her post office box. The book is long and narrow as if made specifically to fit into post office boxes. She recognizes it of course, she wrote it, but not the return address on the packaging, some place in Louisiana. A ribbon is tucked inside, and when she flips to the marked page, she sees a verse underlined in felt-tip pen:

The man walked up to the table of poets and asked, *isn't third degree*  
the worst kind of burn, worse than first degree?

*No, no isn't it the other way around?* she asked, pleaded.

But they all agreed with him. Third degree burns are the worst.

*What about murder?* she asked. *Why is it different with murder?*

*Because murder isn't as bad,* they said, *as being burned.*

There is no note and Maria wonders who might have sent it. The book only sold a few hundred copies when it came out, and the poems are as stilted and vague and cold as she remembers them being. Maybe it was her neighbor growing up in Lake Charles, the creepy man who collected newspaper articles about everyone he knew, like when she won third place in the Science Fair and he hung her picture on his refrigerator. Or maybe it was her mother, from whom she is estranged, intimating from the underlining that Maria will burn in hell for being such a delinquent daughter. Hell was a word her mother liked to throw around. The book is slight and reminds her of parties thrown by other, more successful poets and how she couldn't help but stop short in front of their bookshelves, so many remarkably thin volumes, like looking in the skinny mirror at the fair, as if a stronger hand than

hers had smashed all the books together for lack of space.

If Lucus wasn't coming to visit, he might have been her first guess, except he doesn't live in Louisiana. Lucus collects books, literary hardbacks and some first editions. During the summer he and Maria lived together in a black sand beach village—not an especially nice beach, but one lined with shacks and broken-down rickshaws—she remembers him walking around in the morning naked and picking up different books from the piles. Over and over, he would call out the title of a novel and ask if he should sell it, and over and over she would say no, until he came to *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and then she said, definitely. When he read, he wore rectangular black-rimmed glasses that made him look old and dowdy, but she liked them; they made him look serious even if it wasn't serious about her.

As Maria leaves the post office she overhears two men, strangers, probably visiting artists at the colony, talking next to the slot marked Stamped.

"She totally has issues," one of them tells the other. "She's bad in bed and sometimes in the middle she'll cry."

"Maybe she's been sexually abused or something," says the other one, the one with glitter on his neck, as if a movie star or stripper had been nuzzling there. "Have you asked?"

"I told her not to tell me stuff like that," he says, sawing through the brown strings of a package with the serrated edge of his car key. "The last thing I need is to end up getting emotionally trapped."

Maria leaves the post office, climbs into her pickup, the edge of the doors rusting copper-colored, and thinks: *that's the last thing anybody needs.*

Soon after Lucus and Maria met, he mentioned one night over beers that he couldn't imagine himself ever traveling in Latin America with a woman. She responded by saying she couldn't imagine herself sleeping with a man who felt that way. A few months later, with Maria on the pill, they were backpacking together in the Patagonia, the snow having melted just enough to make the trails passable. On their toughest day she was walking behind him, face set against the wind as she tried to ignore wet jeans rubbing her skin raw and the squish of her boots at each step. That morning they'd lost the trail and attempted to cross a river, sure they could see the dirt track on the other side; now they

were soaked, with hours more to go before camp. He turned back to her and asked how she was doing.

"Cool," she said, forcing a smile. "Doing good."

"You're not," he said, spinning back around to start down the trail again. "It's okay to feel like shit. But I hate fake cheerfulness."

She had thought to herself: *how dare you*. How dare you propose to know what I'm feeling? But she didn't say it aloud because he was already trudging forward, and the wind would only have flung the words behind her. As she began walking, staring at the back of his flannel shirt, the phrase *put together* popped into her head. How one says of someone, *she is always so put together*. Maria had never before considered this, how the phrase implied each person was a collection of pieces, and only a lucky, praiseworthy few were able to fit them together into some unified front. Everyone else, including Maria, was just walking around exposed, parts of themselves jaggedly sticking out of their pockets for anyone to see.

This signaled the beginning of the pain that would dog her relentlessly, mounting slowly so as to be almost imperceptible until one day it reached the threshold of Flee or Perish. At least that's how she saw it. Flee. But walking there behind him on the trail, surrounded by towering cuernos and toothpaste lakes, she did not yet know any of this. He had always been the one to sense things first.

"I smell storm," he said, a few days later when they'd made it out of the glacier mountains and into the pampas, setting up their tent amidst a whirling sea of tan, knee-high grass. He brought out his Polaroid camera and took a snapshot of her squatting eating string cheese. Then he dug a hole using a stick and buried the photograph.

"In case we don't make it," he said, grinning boyishly. His dark curls had collected into almost-perfect ringlets. Maria thought he looked most beautiful when he saw the chance to best her in anything.

All night they listened to the wind whip in furious circles around them; westerlies screamed loudest. They lined the inside of the tent with stones, but it wasn't enough. They had to sit up all night, their backs stooped against the tent sides, to keep the thing from blowing over.

"If a tornado picks us up, at least we won't see it coming," she said.

"I think that makes it worse," he replied. "But it's just like you

to say that. It's just like you not to want to look at anything that's happening to you." He gave her the half smile that made his dimple lengthen into a slit, but she turned away.

They spent the nighttime hours in a sleepy daze. She taught him the first three stanzas of the poem "Howl," and he taught her the words to "Tangled Up in Blue." They each decided on what the silliest thing was the other had brought.

"That damn camera," she said.

"A page from Sunday's paper," he said

"But it has the forecast for the entire week," she said.

"It didn't say anything about this storm."

On the way home from the post office, she stops by the nursery, owned by a retired landscape artist named Sol, to pick up some things. Maria and Sol should be friends, but for some reason they are not. Maria has been getting her supplies from Sol for years: fertilizer and gloves and packaging materials to send cactus to far away parts. Occasionally they chat about plants and growing plants and the plants they've recently lost, but the two women have never really clicked. In fact, it's been years since Maria has clicked with anyone. Sol is an orchid woman, delicate and precise, with brown skin as brittle as recycled paper.

Inside the shop is that smell Maria loves, the smell of garden stores everywhere; maybe it is the nitrate from the fertilizers lined up in bags. The place is littered with plants in charcoal-colored buckets, five-and-ten-gallon, with the common name and price scribbled on the outside in white chalk. There are rusted metal lattices and gray sculptures scattered around, the kind so in fashion these days as garden embellishments. There are little pools of pebbles on sale: pea gravel, lava rock, Arizona river rock. Sol's cat lounges on a pile of burlap, but Sol is not here. A teenager with waist-length black hair sits on the stool behind the desk reading a crumpled paperback.

"She's not in today," says the girl before Maria can ask. "I'm her niece. I'm here on my winter break helping out. Tia Sol has a cold. Yes, she'll be back in a week or so. No, she doesn't need anything. And, no, I don't know anything about plants but, if you know what you want, I can take your money and give you a receipt. Have a nice day."

"I see," says Maria as the girl goes back to her book. "Is your name Orchid by any chance?"

"Holly. Mama and Tia Sol don't exactly get along. Mama's into perennials."

"Thought you didn't know anything about plants?"

The girl just raised her eyebrows in that way that says: give me a break. Maria bought a new pair of shears, hers were getting tight, and three long sheets of special plant packaging foam; then she left.

Some of Maria's more popular cacti packed easily into square containers. The Devil's Pin Cushion, still called Niggerhead Cactus by the old timers, is this way; round with broad ribs and heavy spines that interlace and curve like chicken claws to protect the soft, water-permeated tissue inside from the thirsty animal residents of the desert, its bloom is red and sprouts from the top. But other species have more irregular shapes, and Maria must build packages for them out of the strips of foam so the spines don't break off during transport. The foam she bought today at Sol's is for a shipment of Velas de Coyote with its long symmetrical arms branching out to hold the cactus's post-bloom fruit, which turns a waxy yellow by the end of summer.

Before starting the car, Maria opens the letter from Maine: a complaint about the plants. The man wrote that he'd had them over a year and not one of the cacti had bloomed. When Maria sends her cacti to places like New England for use in some rich client's attempt at exotic landscaping, she knows many of them will never bloom or bear fruit again. One adaptation that allows cacti to survive in the harsh climate of the desert is that they've limited transpiration to a minimum so as to conserve water, but this also means their life processes and growth are similarly limited. Some people feel as if they can fix this, make them live faster, grow bigger, if they can only make the surrounding climate more palatable. But plants, much like people, do not so easily adjust. They are what they are, and more water and cooler air only suffocates them; they are not equipped to sweat it out quickly enough, so they choke. More cacti in cultivation have been killed by too much kindness than anything else.

On the way home from the nursery, Maria passes El Paisano, the hotel where the movie *Giant* with Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor was filmed. She has been trying to get them to buy plants from her for years, but they prefer greener, more tropical varieties. It's a hotel thing, they tell her.

Once, when she and Lucas had been walking down a wide boule-

vard after seeing a play in Buenos Aires, walking behind the others all laughing and leaning back and forth like pitchers spilling water, he'd pulled her into the lobby of an expensive-looking hotel made entirely out of glass. When she looked up at the glass ceiling, she thought she could see people in the second floor rooms reading the newspaper, braiding their hair before bed.

He said he wanted to be alone with her, away from the group, their friends. And so they sat down in elegant white chairs pretending to wait for someone. Through the glass, she watched the others continue to walk, huddling together into one nebulous shape as they crossed the street. She realized she wanted to be out there with *them*: out there, where she would be protected by their teeming bodies draped in mohair coats and long, long scarves. Not left behind, sitting here on upholstery the color of snow next to Lucus, with whom she suddenly felt as transparent as the walls of glass; did he even know what she was thinking? Of course. And as he looked at her, that was when she began to feel the uncomfortable sting along her arms and legs as if a caterpillar were forcing its way through her veins.

The problem wasn't that she thought he could see *through* her, no, that phrase felt all wrong. Rather, he reflected back to her things she didn't even know she was projecting. On the surface there was nothing wrong with this; these were not deep, dark secrets after all. It wasn't any particular instance that bothered her but the concept itself, the general impression of bodies leaking and emoting, unable to keep everything inside from oozing out uncontrollably. But not just this, everything. Later, when Maria lived in Chinatown, she began looking for these secretions of interiority; she found them everywhere, in all furtive glances and attempted conversations, brushing up against her and clinging to her sleeves. And even writing couldn't purge them completely.

When she gets back to the house, Maria takes a handful of blackberries out of the refrigerator and pours cold water over them from the tap. She wants to cook something for him, a tart. The color bleeds into her palms and stains them purple. They are overripe, she thinks. I have let them go too long. Maria is waiting for him to arrive. Any time now, she thinks. It could be any time.

She sits down in a blue wooden chair she bought across the border

and lets the blackberries spill from her hand onto the table. Most of the chairs are in places that make it easy to put her feet up on something, a window ledge or an outcropping; she is small and her legs don't reach the floor. It took years for her to make the house perfect. It is perfect.

When she sleeps at night it is very dark, pitch black, not even a mention of moonlight, dark until she wakes up and pulls open the curtains, a thick and heavy velvet. There hang elaborate mobiles, constructed from twigs and dried leaves and slivers of colored glass that dangle close to her head when she sleeps, and a hammock hung on the porch from where she watches the weather.

She considers putting on one of her punk rock albums, but decides against it. She wants to hear his footsteps crunching the gravel when he approaches. She wonders if his arrival might make her life interesting again. That was probably why it took her so long to leave him in the first place; he made life interesting. Will he find it too solitary here? Will he be able to look out her window and see the beauty of sameness? How it is not really sameness at all but like the black sand beach where they spent that last summer.

She remembers one scorching afternoon, the window of their shack open, looking out over the beach. An old man was sitting a dozen yards away on a thatched rug, sipping yerba mate through a silver straw. Real silver. A constant buzzing sound soaked through the mosquito net draped like a sheet-ghost over their small bed. Lucas's crucifix, cool and jagged, on a chain around his neck, thumped and slid against the inside of her thigh as his head moved back and forth.

The pain building up in her was at its worst at night, when the two of them thrashed hotly in the brown sheets, sweating and unable to breathe, suffocating the closer their bodies came to each other until they eventually draped off opposite sides of the bed, torsos concave, the salt from the ocean still coating their hair and skin in a dappled powder. She would reach frantically for his crucifix, trying to tether herself to him somehow.

Their last moments together were on a subway car dropping her at the train station, funeral tears streaking their faces as businessmen in suits and package-wielding tourists jostled and cursed them, oblivious. When she got off at Parque La Llorona, he stayed on, his mouth open, as if he'd been knifed.

Maria turns off all the lights in the house. She wants to see the bob and swish of his headlights coming up the drive. She reaches into a hatbox for some matches. On them is the name of a bar in Valparaiso from where she'd once hailed a cabbie who was so fucked up he let her drive. People tended to trust her immediately, as if the look on her face was so blank it had to signify some sort of innocence.

Maria strikes a match and lights three thin, tall candles by the door. As the wick of the third one catches, the match flame works its way down to her skin. Shit, she says, flinging the match into the sink. She sucks the tip of her finger. *Murder isn't as bad as being burned*, she thinks to herself, laughing.

She walks outside—her cactus garden illuminated by the near-full moon—even though she worries she won't be able to hear his car arrive back here. Shivering from the cold, she goes in search of an aloe vera. Its sword-like leaves curve upward, a dancer with arms overhead. She breaks the tip of one leaf and peels back the layer of flesh, spreading gel-like juice onto the tip of her finger.

Maria is accustomed to being in her garden at night; it is the only time many of the plants ever bloom. Cactus avoids blooming for as long as possible because that is when it's most vulnerable, but sooner or later, in order to reproduce, it does so if only for a few hours. Cactus flowers are renowned for their size and beauty, a necessity to attract insects quickly from across long arid distances. And the fruit they bear can be unimaginably sweet.

The hue of her garden soil always reminds Maria of the little girl she and Lucus once saw in a park in the neighborhood where Jorge Luis Borges grew up, old men playing bocce ball nearby. The girl had dark curls bunched around her face, and she reached down, picking up handfuls of sand and letting them slide slowly through the cracks of her fingers. Over and over she had done this, unaware of the playground bustle, children running and screaming. The girl was apart, was in some peaceful place of repetition and solitude. Maria and Lucus sat on the bench that day and watched her for what seemed like hours.

"She looks like what I imagine you would have looked like as a child," he'd said. "Like a very small monk." Maria, however, found the little girl's behavior frightening, mysteriously cold. That was before she understood the beauty in places like the desert.

As she walks back to the house, the tip of aloe vera in her hand, she notices how utterly dark everything is, clouds blanketing the moon; the light from the candles glow faintly through the tiny stained glass window, but that is all. As she rounds the corner of the house, she hears a noise, a crunch, and then a click. She reaches for the door. It's locked.

"Let me in," she says. "I know it's you."

Later the next day, after they make love on the floor and after he tells her she looks stranger and more elegant than before, chiseled and sharp, maybe she will change her mind. Later, in the days to follow, choking on the expectation of his brown eyes, maybe she will tell him to leave, and maybe he will toss his things into a backpack and call her horrible names, say that he never wants to see her face again.

But right now, at this moment outside in the dark, she feels her body changing, opening itself to what she has beckoned from across arid space and time. She slides down the door onto the ground. From the other side, she can hear what she thinks is his breath, rhythmic and deep. She catches something out of the corner of her eye. Something white. A feather, maybe.

Or could it be snowing? It is the desert, and the chances are slim. From where she lies, she knows it is time to try.