

*White flowers on the windowsill*

White flowers on the windowsill. The window cracked open, and the breeze sneaking inside. The lace curtains flutter idly. There is a line of dust on the windowpane, broken only by a little black spider that wanders along the edge.

Below, a table with a red checked tablecloth, and a bowl of fruit – oranges, lemons, limes, no bananas because Rafaela is mildly allergic. Plates with jam and crumbs, cutlery propped carelessly against the chipped ceramic rim. Coffee half-drunk, still steaming. The chair is pushed back. Its legs pull at the threadbare blue rug, which inches back to its usual spot on the wood floor.

Sunlight spills into the kitchen. It's the soft yellow of early morning, where dust pirouettes mid-air, and everything is drenched in colour. It was part of the charm, for Rafa. She always wanted the sun to rise on the garden. She likes the way the flowers slowly light up, like the fireworks her brother and father used to send up into the air on New Year's Eve. Purple clovers and red hibiscus, goatweed and knapweed threaded together by the hedge, and carnations of pink and white, exploding in slow technicolour across green grass. Remo picks the crumpled stems on his way back from work, and drops them in an old glass for the windowsill. She berates him if he picks them in their prime. *What will the bees do? Where will they go?* He has since learned how to pick out the dying flowers. Then, he puts them in water and gives them a new life.

The living room is in the same four walls as the kitchen and dining table. It is a humble house, all they could afford, but it is home. Remo paints all the walls yellow, and Rafa adds orange and pink flowers by hand. At some point, Rafa flicks her brush and splatters Remo in paint. It freckles his skin. He grabs her waist and arms, disarming her, and spins them both round: orange and pink rains. He cranes her arm back until the brush kisses her cheek with

orange lipstick. Paint flecks their hair. They spin and laugh and yield. They press their yellow handprints to the wall, and write their names into the stone. Remo still finds spots of pink in the carpet. There is a brown loveseat, and a painting of the bell tower, opposite an open fire that keeps them warm on winter nights. Their wedding photo sits on the mantle. Rafa dusts it each morning before breakfast, and Remo kisses it each night before bed.

When evening falls, it touches the back of the house first. The moon takes the sky, and they see it from the bedroom. From their bed, they count the stars. In the space between their pillows, Rafa and Remo spill their dreams. Their bodies close together, knees touching, fingers brushing, the future suspended in breathy potentiality between their lips.

Rafa wants to be a teacher. Literature, she says, everyone should read Lorca.

“Remind me which one he is.”

“To find a kiss of yours / what would I give / A kiss that strayed from your lips / dead to love / My lips taste / the dirt of shadows,” she recites. She pauses. “When must you return?”

Remo allows himself to touch her, he strokes her head. “Let us not think of that. For now, we have the future in our hands. Tell me about the house.”

“I want the sun to rise on the garden,” she says. “I want a lovely garden, with wildflowers and bees.”

“I’ll pick you flowers, for the windowsill.”

“Not the beautiful ones!” she protests, pulling closer. “You have to let them grow. Pick the ones that look a little broken. Give them new life.”

Remo frowns. “But why not the beautiful ones?”

“What will the bees do? Where will they go?”

“You are too much heart,” says Remo. He traces her lips with his eyes, and commits the details of her face to memory.

“I’d like a lemon tree, to make cakes,” she continues.

“You could take them into school. You’d be everyone’s favourite.”

Rafa smiles in the dark.

“I have pictured everything all too clearly,” admits Remo. His voice is almost a whisper. “I see our house in my dreams so often, it is like it is real. I can see the yellow walls –”

“With flowers that I’ve painted,” adds Rafa. She draws one in the air for effect.

“– with hand-painted flowers, and the painting that hangs in Signor Spagnuolo’s front window –”

“The one of the bell tower? I love that painting. I used to stand for hours while Mamma did her shopping, wishing I could live in that town –”

“You do live in that town, dear,” says Remo softly.

She smiles. This time, it is a sad smile, one that lifts her cheeks but doesn’t quite touch her eyes. “You know what I mean, though. That is a town where nothing bad ever happens. There are no shadows.”

“But it is also a town where you cannot smell the fresh bread from Ricci’s, or see the children play in the fountain every summer when it gets too hot, and hear their laughter.”

“We used to go in there naked,” laughs Rafa. “Do you remember? And everyone would sit at the bar and drink while we swam all afternoon.”

“I used to think of our children swimming in that fountain,” he says. He strokes her hair because he knows it will make her sad.

“Don’t talk of children.”

He nods, and says instead, “This town is lived in, but that’s not so bad.”

“I know,” replies Rafaela. “We lived here. And everyone before us, Signor Spagnuolo, and the Ricci’s, and Ada, and Lorenzo, our mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers. Our handprints are on every wall.”

“There, that’s not so bad.”

He brings her hand to his lips and kisses it, murmuring against her knuckles, “No kiss strays, Rafa. They are all meant for you.”

“When do you leave?” she asks again. He rips his lips from her fingers.

“I don’t think I’ll ever leave,” says Remo. “Not really. I think a part of me will always be in this town, in that fountain, in bed with you.”

“Before, maybe. Before it all, I would have believed that. I should have liked it.”

“And now?”

The illusion shatters. The four walls of their house collapse. All that is left is the moon, and the future, crumbling in the thin air between them.

“I leave tomorrow.”

Remo hears his voice break but tries to swallow it down, looking away from her. She cups his face and brings him back, presses a kiss to his forehead, and guides him to her chest. He clings to her until the morning he prays won’t come.

“Think of the future,” she whispers against his hair, “and don’t be scared.”

The morning comes anyway.

But the future will never come.

It might have done once, before. In a different version of the town, with no shadows, and a different version of Rafa and Remo.

The moon takes the sky hostage each night, and stars pinprick the vastness. Rafa will not smell like lemons, nor taste like lemon cake. Remo will not swallow her dreams on the safe mattress of their marriage bed, and he cannot offer up his own for consumption.

The garden is overgrown with nettles, and the bees will not come because all the flowers have died, beaten out by weeds. There is no colour, only burnt brown. And no wind.

No tablecloth on the kitchen table, no teapot just boiled, no afterthought of a breakfast shared.

The ceramic is piled in the cupboards in dust. There is a bowl with a dead spider, withered and upturned, its legs and body stiff. No fruit. The chairs have not been sat on. The floors are bare and cold. No loveseat. The walls have not been painted, the mantle is empty, the fire dead.

And Remo will never pick white flowers for the windowsill.