

A Sorrow Blossom

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The sun dips lazily through the white sky like a candy cane stripe. It moves across a wispy desert landscape sprinkled with sculpted rocks and prickly shrubs. Mice and lizards flick and meander across the land, looking for scraps on the ancient kitchen floor.

Alone, a saguaro cactus stands like a man awaiting a train.

Pygmy Owl tells her friends that Cactus is pugnacious.

Night Lizard complains that Cactus snores.

Antelope Jackrabbit thinks its weird that Cactus is still into The Backstreet Boys.

Cactus lets these murmurs pass around him like the wind. He watches the desert stars go by night after night, tracking the different constellations. His elegant needles quiver with the rotation of the planet. They clink against each other, a small applause of “tick-tick-tick”. He’s 10 feet tall, small for his kind, and his rippled skin mimics the green of a dusty vintage vase. He remembers a time when there was a house nearby, when his flowers still bloomed. A girl of five, Naomi, would bring her little radio outside in the scorching heat and sit beneath Cactus. She’d ask what Cactus wanted to listen to first before overriding whatever he had decided on. Naomi would admire his flowers and move with his shadow as the hour changed.

The world had kept shuffling along and Naomi grew up and moved away with her family. Soon after, her house was demolished. Cactus, alone, lives a stationary existence amongst the locomotive fauna. Even the tumbleweeds get around more than he does.

Now the candy cane stripe of sunset falls into a vat of melted blueberries and chocolate. A skilled hand flicks powdered sugar over the concoction and Cactus nostalgically observes.

The evening before Naomi left, she stood by Cactus and stroked one of his spikes, contemplating her future. Cactus could hear her thoughts as they fled and mingled in her head. He held them within his waterlogged interior and let them bubble. Sweet Naomi, take me with you, he pleaded. For the first time, she heard him. She got a high stool from her house, picked one of his flowers and pressed it between the pages of her favourite book. Naomi spent the whole night sitting under Cactus. They listened to a final song on her radio as the sun rose. It was like an orange creamsicle emerging from the depths of a freezer.

These days, men who drive trucks and women with low-cut shirts make love under Cactus. They bury their used condoms around him. Cactus closes off every part of himself and focuses on the flower, where it’s cozy

and safe, snug in Naomi’s favourite book. In these moments, the train finally takes Cactus to his destination.

Thirteen years later. Summer. Vancouver. Naomi massages the blisters and burns that speckle her fingers as she reads *The Secret Garden*. She sits on a cinder block in the shade of her workplace and muses, being a cook is a lot less glamorous than I thought it would be. At eighteen, she’s surprised she got the line cook job. It was taxing work: seemingly endless shifts with no breaks in front of sweltering burners and ovens. All her co-workers were men in their thirties who made crude jokes, smoked pot and called her “little one”. They had been complaining that it was hotter outside today than it was inside. Hot, but not as hot as Arizona was, Naomi thinks. She turns the page and a crinkled flower flutters to the ground. Naomi picks the saguaro cactus blossom up and twirls it between her fingers, remembering.

“You’re still here?” Dimitri plops down on the cinderblock beside her. He’s handsome, if you could look past the crappy haircut and his often sardonic personality that made him about as appealing as mud.”Your shift ended fifteen minutes ago, FYI.”

“Thanks, I wasn’t aware,” she replies dryly.

“What’s that?” he asks, pointing at the flower.

“A daisydil.”

“What?”

She leans over and whispers into Dimitri’s ear, “Just between you and me, I’m not actually a line cook. I’m a very serious, very professional flower breeder. I created this one-of-a-kind hybrid and I’m gonna sell it on eBay to the highest bidder.”

He pffts at this, shaking his head, “You’re so weird.”

“It’s actually a saguaro cactus flower,” Naomi says, handing it to him.

“A sorrow cactus?” he asks. “Man, that’s depressing.”

“No, it’s pronounced ‘suh-war-row’.”

“Whatever, it looks pretty sad to me,” Dimitri says, handing the wilted flower back.

Naomi rolls her eyes, but realizes that he’s looking at her adoringly. He’d been doing that too frequently. It made her heart shuffle backwards into her spinal cord. She wasn’t used to adoration or infatuation, not any of those sticky terms. Naomi often likened herself to the cactus that grew near her old house: solitary and proud. Recently, she’d started to doubt that comparison. She was lonely, really. For thirteen years, her life had been

like waiting at a station for a train to take her a stop or two forward to something new.

These days, she felt like she would have to throw herself in front of the train in order to go anywhere. Dimitri pulls out his phone, “Pick a song. Wait, don’t. I know what you like to listen to.” He holds up his phone as the opening strains of *As Long As You Love Me* pour out.

Naomi smiles, “Please turn this Backstreet Boy garbage off before I vomit.”

“Never.”

They face each other and have a silent conversation. Naomi hadn’t felt anything powerful since she was young, but maybe that’s because all feelings are more intense in memory. Either way, she thinks it’s time to end her emotional hiatus.

Tucking the saguaro flower back between her book’s pages, Naomi leans into Dimitri, throwing herself in front of the train.