

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF HOUSEPLANTS

by Art Taylor

During one of their trysts, one of those long lunch breaks they took from the ad agency where they worked, Roger invited Felicia to bring her husband over for a Friday-night cookout.

“Tell hubby it’s casual,” he explained to her after he’d caught his breath once more. “Tell him we’ll just—” and here he grazed his fingers a little more insistently along her damp skin—“just get together and heat up some meat in the backyard.”

Felicia arched a single eyebrow and then turned her head toward the far side of his bedroom—looking at what, Roger wasn’t clear. Unlike the other women who’d sometimes shared his bed, often under similar circumstances, Felicia seemed a true mystery—aloof, challenging, and the more desirable for it. He followed her gaze. Her beige linen business suit was folded sensibly across a chair by his bedroom window. Beyond stood the backyard itself, the patio, the teak table and chairs. Roger could already see himself standing by the grill, making small talk with her husband. *Your wife’s breasts*, he would think as he smiled and chatted with the other man. *That mole on her pelvis*. *That scar at the hollow of her ankle*.

“Whatever you may think,” Felicia said finally, “Blanton is not a fool.”

“Blanton,” Roger said and then again, “Blan-ton,” stretching out the syllables as if they were his to twist and toy with. “You know, I still just love his name.”

Blanton’s grip was unsteady as he moved the watering can from one pot to the next in the solarium behind his and Felicia’s house. His fingers trembled. His attention faltered and fled. The bougainvillea got too much water, the passionflower too little. He nearly drowned a blossoming powder-puff

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before he jerked the can back—just in time. He looked at his hand as if it wasn't his own. The age spots there had spread like a fungus. Further up, arm hairs had begun to gray. He thought of the gray hair sprouting from his ears. Were those really his ears? Could he believe them?

"We've been invited for dinner." That's what Felicia had told him barely a half-hour before. "One of my coworkers."

Blanton had been making drinks at the time, their evening cocktails. Mango mojitos tonight—splitting open a mango one of his botany students had given him earlier in the afternoon, one of a quartet she'd delivered as a thank-you present. The gift had left him brimming with contentment, and he had been muddling them merrily when Felicia broke the news. An offhand remark—or meant to be.

"Have I met her?" Blanton had asked, adding a splash of white crème de menthe to the cocktails.

"Him," she said. And the pinpricks became a knife.

"Just let me know when," he had told her, and then excused himself hastily, the plants suddenly claiming his attention, some spritzing that needed to be done. And at least he was good for that, right?

But for what else? he thought now. *Because most men in a situation like this, they'd . . .* But that thought struck him mercilessly too: what most men would do.

Still balancing the watering can dumbly against his side, Blanton glanced over at a lyre-flower Felicia had given him, just one of the many plants the two of them had exchanged—this one a present for his forty-sixth birthday. "A perennial," she'd said, learning from him, remembering. "Like our love."

He was so touched by the intention that he hadn't told her the other name for the flower: old-fashioned bleeding heart. Neither had he told her how some perennials only bloomed once before dying.

"Metaphors," he laughed now, bitterly, and thought of others—the withered stalk, limp to the root—and about what he couldn't do now that "most men" still could. His fault that she'd found one of those men, his fault twice, because wasn't her infidelity his own suggestion?

He'd tried drugs first, then therapy. Then the herbal remedies he'd so thoroughly researched—not just relying on supplements but trying to grow the plants himself: panax ginseng, turnera diffusa, ginkgo biloba, *ptychopetalum olacoides*. Increased libido, increased bloodflow in those nether regions—empty promises, more desperation. And then . . .

And then, standing in the solarium, he corrected himself—the bigger, truer picture. *Most men*, he remembered from his well-worn copy of Thoreau, *lead lives of quiet desperation . . .* "And go to the grave with the song still in them," he muttered aloud to the plants around him, as if they might hear.

"It's biological," Felicia's mother had told her years before, when she hit her teen years. "It's evolutionary. Now that you're becoming a woman, they'll all be sniffing around you. That's what they do, that's what they'll *keep* doing, all of them wanting a piece. And it's dog eat dog for them—evolutionary again. Survival of the fittest."

Felicia hadn't wanted to believe it, but she'd found out too quickly how right her mother was. So many of them, it seemed, eyes glossing hungrily over a low-cut blouse she wore, mouths nearly salivating over a glimpse of her thigh—and not just the boys at school but men too, men passing her on the street, men at

the country club where she worked weekends, teachers in high school, professors at college, her father's friends, even a distant uncle at a wedding she went to, drunk and leering. Not just dogs, but wolves more like it, sly and relentless, fangs bared, hormones howling. She'd had to learn quickly how to walk among them.

And then had come Blanton—guileless, earnest. He'd brought her an orchid for their first date. He'd typed up tips for taking care of it. He'd kissed her on the cheek at the end of the evening. And she'd said, even then, "You're not like other men, are you?" and he'd cocked his head and given her that lopsided smile. No, he wasn't. Not at all.

Felicia sipped the drink he'd made.

When life hands you mangoes, make mojitos. And when life hands you lemons . . .

But Felicia had tried to be supportive, she had. *It's fine, it happens. No big deal, another time. Perhaps if I . . . ? Or we could try . . .* And then *maybe the worrying only makes it worse?* Finally, when all his efforts had fallen short and all her efforts too, he'd come home to her one afternoon flush with embarrassment, starkly vulnerable, ripe for martyrdom.

"You're still a young woman," he'd said. He held a plant in his hands, a symbol of what she wasn't sure—the offer he was making? The words he couldn't bring himself to speak? Peperomia, she found out later, its spiky flowers jutting up like tiny fingers, like phalluses. "I just ask that you keep it discreet. And, please, nothing . . . lengthy with anyone."

"I'm not going to do that," she'd said flatly, and she'd said it once more the next time he brought it up: "Thank you, but no."

He never mentioned it again, but it was already too late. Appreciation turned to pity, and soon pity began to fester into frustration, then flare toward anger. Where did it come from, that desire to kick a person just for being generous to you, to kick a man not just when he's down but *because* he's down?

Ultimately, her mother had been right in more ways than one. "You'll want it too," she'd warned all those years before. "You'll *need* it. Simple biology. But just don't forget who you are in the middle of all that."

She had needed it. And then she'd taken it. But what about this next step? Dog eat dog again? Was that what this was all about?

If so, Felicia did indeed know who she was.

The bitch in the middle.

Roger had invited a fourth for dinner: Jessica, an old friend who knew about the affair—knew about all his adventures, in fact. Her curiosity always bested her disapproval, and her disapproval always gave Roger an extra little thrill. He liked witnesses to his exploits.

"This dinner," Jessica had said when she first arrived, "it's kind of a jackass thing to do, you know? And what's the point? I mean, are you *trying* to break up their marriage, is that it?"

"Things with me and Felicia are perfect just the way they are," he'd told her. "The sex is *always* better with someone else's woman."

Jessica had rolled her eyes. "And so the rooster struts."

"Make up your mind, Jess. Am I a jackass or cock of the walk?"

The latter, he knew, even though she didn't answer him, just smiled and rolled her eyes and shook her head.

The first time he'd met the husband of one of his lovers—purely by chance that time, at a cocktail party—he'd felt a surge of adrenaline and pride, a sudden strut to his step. The next time he and the woman tangled in bed had been passionate, relentless, charged.

He wanted that same intensity next time with Felicia, to break through that wall of immovability that he'd tried so many times to penetrate.

"You were *bad*," he imagined Felicia saying next time, and he would tell her, "Bad's what you want. It's what you need." The victor. The conqueror.

But to do that, he needed to go to battle first—needed to one-up the competition—and so the richly marbled steaks and the fine French wine and the freshly pressed shirt, gradually mounting more proof of his superiority. So too the plant that he'd moved from the bedroom to the study, where he would lead them all at evening's end for an after-dinner glass of port—the plant that Felicia had given him just after the first time they'd slept together, now displayed prominently on a small mahogany stand.

It was all perfect, he thought, and when they arrived, he felt geared-up, ready—energized even a little more when he caught his first glimpse of Felicia in the doorway, those long lashes shadowing the dark gleam of her eyes, the corners of her lips curled just on the edge of some sly, elusive grin, that knee-length sundress showcasing those tawny legs.

But when Blanton trundled across the threshold, Roger felt a surge of disappointment, and more than disappointment, revulsion. The other man was older than Roger had anticipated. His hairline was receding, his face was not just slackjawed but jowly. His polo shirt—once green, evidently—was faded beyond the point at which Roger would have cast it aside. His weighty paunch sagged across the waistband of rumpled khaki shorts, whose fabric squeezed flabby haunches.

Roger's revulsion deepened. What sense of victory could he achieve when there wasn't really a challenge in sight?

Along the curving driveway, then glimpsing the house—modern and angular—and then walking up the steps, Blanton had been struck by the feeling that he was somehow spying on his wife, spying in plain sight. Rethinking possibilities, weighing consequences, he became so lost in his thoughts that he seemed to be watching himself too—all of this, his own finger on the doorbell, the door opening in response—as if from some great distance, some other man making these small moves, unsure where it would end.

Roger Wilson, he heard the other man say, as if through a tube, tinnily echoed, and then his own voice, *Blanton Morrison*, and his own hand as if another's reaching out to shake the hand of Felicia's lover—a man who seemed to have stepped directly from the pages of some fashion catalog. Felicia handed over a bottle of wine they'd picked up on the way. Blanton offered a pair of mangoes and felt himself patting the breast pocket of his coat. Somewhere the words *mint* and *drinks* and *later*—his own—and then Roger's *thanks, thanks, thanks* and *hope the directions were okay* and Felicia's reply, *No trouble getting here*. Necessary pretenses. Ruses. He knew she'd been here before.

And then another woman coming down the hallway—thick red hair, a wide smile, wiping her hands on a dishtowel—and Blanton felt relief and sudden elation. Maybe he'd been wrong?

"My, what a beautiful sight," he exclaimed, too loudly—the volume suddenly

back on but turned up too high—and he felt embarrassed at his outburst. But when she giggled and opened her arms— “I adore a man who flatters first thing. That deserves a hug instead of a handshake!”—he welcomed the sense of being embraced and all that this woman seemed to mean: This evening wasn’t the beginning of some horrible series of events, but a dinner to mark some end.

“Felicia didn’t tell me you had such a lovely girlfriend,” he said, almost on the verge of giddiness. But then he noticed the sudden hush.

“Jessica’s not my girlfriend,” Roger said.

“I know him too well,” Jessica laughed, nervously, blushing. “I’m not his style.”

There was some brief interplay of glances between the three of them, Blanton saw. Nothing was safe. None of them.

“A local artist,” Roger was explaining, pointing to the headless torso of a woman on a side table: bronze, nearly all breasts and the back arched to emphasize it. “Molded from her own body.”

“I’ve never liked that piece,” said Jessica.

Felicia had never liked the sculpture either, always felt that Roger thought of all women the way the artist had presented herself: all breasts, no head. But she didn’t say that now. Blanton hadn’t responded either, and Felicia wondered at his quietness. A dull panic? A simple sulk?

The image prompted a memory—a college boyfriend, a sulker himself. He’d loved David Lynch movies, she remembered as Roger continued his tour of the house, Blanton commenting on the light, Jessica throwing Felicia little glances, trying to catch her attention. Felicia couldn’t remember the boy’s name now, only his goatee and his baggy shirts and the two of them watching *Lost Highway* in his dorm room, all the lights out and her attention wandering.

Another night, they’d gone for pizza (Paul? Peter? Philip? P certainly)—late night, a local hangout, a crush of people, frat boys at a table nearby, and the two of them in a booth of their own. The pizza arrived, and she and P. had each taken a slice, and as they ate, one of the frat boys had turned and started talking to her: “How are you doing? You’re looking good tonight. That pizza smells great.” And then he’d turned to P. and said, “You don’t mind if I have a piece, do you?” and he’d picked up a slice of their pizza and eaten it in front of them, a smile and a wink at Felicia between bites.

“Yeah,” P. had said, hesitantly, and “Um” and “We’re kind of talking here.”

Later, P. had fretted and moaned—all the things he should’ve said, the things he should’ve done. “I could’ve punched him. I could’ve stabbed his hand with my fork, I could’ve . . .” Revenge fantasies, underscored by hints that maybe Felicia herself should’ve acted differently too.

Felicia had slept with the frat boy months later, long after P. was gone from her life. She didn’t remember his name now either, and wasn’t sure he’d remembered hers even at the time. That hadn’t seemed the point, and now she couldn’t quite remember what the point had been.

Standing at the grill with Blanton, Roger found himself just going through the motions of what he’d planned.

When Blanton said he liked his steaks well done, Roger said he preferred “a little more pink in the middle, the way a real man should.”

When Blanton asked how things were at the office, Roger volunteered that

Felicia was “a real fireball. Get her going and she just won’t stop.”

“I’m surprised a man like you isn’t married,” Blanton said at one point, as Roger checked the steaks. “Jessica seems swell, doesn’t she?”

“Can’t say I’m the marrying type,” said Roger, not bothering to ridicule the man’s *swell*. “Not really an institution I put much faith in. But there’s usually someone at work who’s willing to take a little lunch break, if you know what I mean. The usual ins and outs of office romance.” He glanced openly toward the women on the other side of the patio—at Felicia, slender and shapely. “Truth is, I’m involved with a juicy little something myself right now,” he winked.

“That kind of romancing is a younger man’s game,” Blanton said. “I just don’t know what I’d do without my Felicia.”

His Felicia—and yet what had he done to keep her?

Jessica was telling a story across the patio, gesturing with her free hand, leaning toward Felicia, laughing a little. Felicia smiled, demurely, and took a sip of wine. Even from that distance, Roger could see the way her mouth left a smudge on the rim of the glass, the red outline of her lips. Despite the smoke from the grill, he could still remember—as if smelling it now—the vanilla and honeysuckle of her perfume, the scent that sometimes lingered on the pillows on the afternoons she stopped over.

Sometimes Roger had questioned why she talked so rarely about her home life. Unlike the other married women he’d had, she never went into tirades about a dull home life or demanding children, never recited ad nauseam bickering arguments about monies spent and monies earned or dull squabbles about whose turn it had been to take out the trash. Not once had Felicia embarked on some small drama insisting that they must stop this, they must, because she couldn’t do this to her husband, couldn’t do this anymore. At one point, he’d admired the way she handled the affair, but now, seeing Blanton, he felt that admiration turn to pity, a sour pity, and a cruelty too. He’d enjoyed the challenge she offered—all that he saw of himself in her, that strength, that will—and the power play between them. “Three lunches a week, no more,” she’d told him, wanting that control over the relationship, but then asking another time to be tied up, wanting to be dominated in ways she obviously wasn’t getting at home. Now he saw that it must be weakness that held her to Blanton, and he didn’t want to just dominate her but punish her for it.

While he and Roger had been alone at the grill, Blanton had tried to reason with the other man—indirectly, of course—to urge him toward Jessica, the beautiful woman available and in front of him, to throw him off the scent of his wife. On their way inside for dinner, he’d considered pulling Felicia aside, pleading with her for them to leave now, to leave forever, for her to stop this once and for all, for both their sakes, but he feared that such weakness might only drive her deeper into the other man’s arms.

And then, amidst the clamor of conversation, the clatter of forks and knives, the clink of the wineglasses, he realized something: There hadn’t been a plant in sight. Nothing green, nothing growing, no life. Could anyone really want to live in a place without that?

“Plants,” he told Jessica toward the end of dinner when she asked what he did. “Plants are my life, really. My plants and my wife, of course.” He wanted to reach out and touch Felicia’s hand, but he held back. He couldn’t even look at

her, afraid of what he might find in her expression. “A flower is a beautiful thing. Each of them has a personality, just like we do. Each of them should be respected, tended to, and cared for.”

He talked on then, talking to Jessica as if she were a student of his, speaking to her but pleading with his wife. He listed the plants they had at home: begonias and caladium, bromeliads and ferns, geraniums, succulents, oleanders, ivy . . . plant after plant, name after name. He explained the different kinds of pots—clay, plastic, ceramic—and discussed the need to watch the humidity and to keep the house temperature in flux, stressing the importance of learning what each plant most wanted. Even when Roger tried to interrupt, Blanton kept going, stressing the difference in yellowing due to water shortage and yellowing due to iron deficiency, explaining how to watch for dormancy, lecturing about how to adjust the lighting to what each plant needed, telling how he cleaned the leaves each week, some of them with a sponge and others—“the fuzzier ones”—with a special camel-hair brush. “And yet despite all that, plants are tougher than you think,” he said at one point. “They’re the most adaptable things, so many of them. They’ll survive even under the most adverse conditions.”

After a while, he wasn’t sure what he was talking about, what he was trying to imply—was it Felicia who was the plant and he the tender? Or was he the plant, tough and adaptable, deceptively so? Metaphors popped into his mind again—more plant names: the lipstick plant; the crown-of-thorns with its red flowers and sharp spines; the screw pine, which drops its lower leaves as it gets older and sends out aerial roots instead—desperately, he thought now, considering it. But he could save the relationship still, couldn’t he? Wasn’t this the way?

“What was it Thoreau said?” he asked Jessica as they entered the study for more drinks, readying his favorite quote. His students joked that each time he repeated it, he pretended he was remembering it for the first time. “The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet—”

But his words faltered when he saw the plant sitting on one of the shelves behind the couch—a plant that he recognized too well, the peperomia he’d given to Felicia when he offered her that window of sexual opportunity, that door toward infidelity.

“Yet what?” asked Jessica. She had been, he thought then, a front-of-the-class kind of girl, and for a moment he imagined what a relationship with her might have been like, how this evening might never have happened.

“Yet,” he said then, hearing the loss in his own words, the pity for himself and for them all, “Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly.”

The plant had never looked right anywhere—that’s what Felicia thought seeing it now. The peperomia with its spiky, phallic flowers.

After Blanton gave it to her, she’d kept it at home for a few days and then taken it to the office. She’d put it on the windowsill, and then at the corner of her desk and then up on a shelf. Wherever it was, it didn’t seem to belong. It caught her eye wrong, caught her mood wrong.

Or maybe it wasn’t the look of the plant itself, but the reminder it provided—opportunities, possibilities, desires, needs.

When she brought it to Roger’s place and placed it beside the bed, it looked even less like it belonged, but the context gave it a new life: responsibilities

instead of opportunities, duties instead of desires. Sometimes even in the more blinding heat of passion, she'd look over at the plant and feel the guilt even deeper than Roger's thrusts, feel the connection to Blanton even more than to the man rising above her.

The boy's name came to her then. Patrick it was. And she remembered how he'd stopped in the middle of their own lovemaking that night, after the incident in the pizza parlor, and looked down on her.

"You're not here," Patrick had told her, accusation in his voice, deprecation too. "This isn't . . . This isn't what you . . . You're thinking about *him*, aren't you?" And when she hadn't answered, he'd shaken his head, rolled off her, turned himself toward the wall. He'd known, he was right. That wasn't what she wanted. *He* wasn't what she wanted—this nervous boy who'd let someone steal his pizza, this panting thing who'd retreated into a sulk. What she wanted was someone who would've taken the action, fought furiously and recklessly. She wished Patrick had hit the frat boy, wished even that he'd hit her. He could've done something; he could've done *anything*.

Damn that Jessica. No sooner had Felicia's hubby finally stopped talking than she got him started again.

"It's fascinating," she said. "I grow some herbs at home, some basil and oregano and cilantro, a little mint."

"Oh," Blanton said. "Yes, I mean . . ." He reddened. "That reminds me." And he looked around him, patting himself at the same time. He was like a wind-up robot, Roger thought—completely still and then suddenly in motion, and then still again until someone wound him up once more. "I forgot that I was going to provide the after-dinner drinks," he said. "The mangoes and," he reached inside his pocket and smiled, "aha, there it is. The mint." He smiled—feebly, Roger thought—and started up on the plants again. "Could you be a dear and bring me those mangoes, Jessica? Proof that plants can give pleasure, certainly."

Roger turned away from his view of the other man's bulging belly and toward Felicia's slender, sculpted form. Throughout Blanton's tirade, Roger had tried to catch Felicia's eye, but she'd steadfastly avoided his gaze, and did so again now.

"Are these like the drinks you made for me the other day?" Felicia asked Blanton.

"Yes. Mango mojitos," he exclaimed. "These were a gift from one of my students," he told them as Jessica returned. "I teach botany at the college. One of my students asked for some advice on growing a mango plant from a pit, and so I . . ." On and on, wound up again.

Roger pitied those students. All those plants, all that lecturing about how plants are people too. *Animals*, Roger kept thinking. *We are animals*, not *plants*, imagining the next time Felicia came over. She seemed the dutiful wife as she took one of the drinks Blanton was offering around—not just demure but tamed, really—and he hated her suddenly for that too, and hated Blanton for turning the evening into a Latin American fiesta, the drinks not just a bad match for the meal, but poorly mixed too, bitter even, though everyone pretended to enjoy them, all of them tamed.

Well, *he* would tame Felicia in his own way next time. He would treat her rougher than normal, manhandle her a little, paw at her, grasp her. "Animals," he would growl into her ear. He would pet her, caress her haunches and her

loins, force some feline arch to her lithe little back. They would pant and moan and howl, driven wild with the scent of the other's sweat and desire. And then he would end it, push her aside, send her back to that pitiable man of hers. *That* would be her punishment.

Blanton had started a new lecture. "The difference is between sexual propagation, propagation by seeds, and vegetative propagation, where you just cut off a little part of the plant, and spread it somewhere else." He looked as if he was concentrating heavily, as if any of this mattered. "Take this plant here," he pointed to the plant Roger had placed in the study. Roger had forgotten about it. "*Peperomia obtusifolia*. Red margin. You could take a little cutting from this and plant it and it will grow on its own. But it also grows by seeds, and—"

"That was a gift from your wife," Roger said then. Felicia shot him an ugly look, then blushed slightly. Two emotions. Unlike her.

"I thought it might be," said Blanton, and he turned to Felicia. "A cutting, dear, or the original?"

"It's the one you gave me," said Felicia, composed again.

He nodded, and then to Roger: "She's very generous, don't you think?" And for the first time, Roger could see in the other man's eyes some spark of a challenge, some knowledge. He was finally catching on, and Roger felt his own blood begin to rise.

But before he could answer, Felicia cut him off.

"A toast," she said, "to these wonderful drinks. And to the student who gave you the mangoes. It's good to be appreciated."

"You can't use drinks to toast the drinks themselves," Roger snorted, but he raised his glass anyway.

"Then a toast to plants," said Blanton, and suddenly Roger just wanted the evening over and all of them gone.

"I'm sorry to cause any trouble," said Blanton, patting his pockets, "but I think I must have dropped my keys somewhere inside." The four of them stood in the driveway, had already said their goodbyes. "No, no, ladies. You can stay out here and talk. We'll take a look inside. Roger, you don't mind helping me, do you?"

Felicia could see the reluctance in Roger's expression, but he'd turned back toward the house anyway, leading Blanton inside, leaving her with Jessica. It was the first time they'd been truly alone.

"Well, the evening turned out better than I'd expected," Jessica said, and Felicia could feel the woman's eyes on her, some sense of judgment or curiosity. Maybe both.

"I'm going to end it," Felicia said, not meeting the other woman's look.

"With which one?" Jessica asked, and Felicia could tell from the tone that judgment was winning.

Felicia shook her head, leaned against her car. "What I've been doing, it's not . . ."

The moon was peeking over the tops of the pine trees in Roger's yard. Nearly a full moon, Felicia saw now. Other nights, there might have been something romantic about the image.

"Did you ever have boys fighting over you?" Felicia asked.

"Years ago," said Jessica. "A bar fight. Some guy sent over a drink, and my boyfriend got jealous. My *ex*-boyfriend, I should add."

“Who won?”

“Who knows? Both of them got kicked out of the bar. I decided to stay with my friends and keep drinking. Broke up with the guy by phone the next day. A real lunkhead.”

“There was a boy once,” Felicia said, and then she stopped, thinking about the word. *Boy* was right: needy, insecure, pitiful, really. “He wanted to fight for me, wanted to *have* fought for me, and the thing was, *I* wanted him to fight for me too. I was mad at him for not being more of a man, felt like I deserved a real man.” She shook her head again, she looked up at the moon. “I didn’t even know what a man was.”

“All of them disappoint,” said Jessica. “That’s the way they are.”

But that wasn’t what Felicia meant at all. She tried to imagine Blanton fighting for her, throwing fists, getting kicked out of a bar. But that wasn’t who he was. Instead, she pictured him making those mojitos, his struggle to stay poised, some nervous attempt at grace. She thought about how complicated the adult world was, more than she’d ever imagined. Compromises and negotiations. With others, with yourself. Things weren’t ever just how they looked. “I thought Blanton was weak like that boy was, but I was wrong.”

Blanton and Roger came out again. Roger stood tall, framed by the doorway. Blanton took the handrail as he made his way down the front steps.

“Don’t say anything about it tonight,” Felicia told Jessica quickly. She felt liberated, frightened. She still didn’t know what the future was going to be like, how she was going to handle her desires, her needs, how she’d explain things to either of the men. But she’d made her decision. “I’ll tell Roger tomorrow that it’s over. I will.”

Blanton had found his keys easily enough, sitting in the study, precisely where he’d left them. Before they turned away again, he paused once more over the peperomia, Felicia’s gift to her lover.

“It’s a beautiful plant,” he said

As he touched its leaves one last time, Blanton imagined other ways that this night could have played out. Nightshade would have been more fitting, he thought, more poetic even, and he had a particularly nice specimen of the plant at home, those purple bell-shaped flowers bowing mournfully, those shiny black berries aching to be plucked. Those he could have blended into a daiquiri.

Then, at some small moment with Roger, he might have looked over at his wife and muttered, “Belladonna,” under his breath, but just loud enough for the other man to hear him. “What?” Roger might have said, and Blanton would have repeated it, “Belladonna,” and gestured toward Felicia. “My beautiful lady.” And perhaps later, when that poison had begun to take effect, perhaps then his victim would have remembered and understood.

But the ricin was more effective, of course. More certain. And the castor-bean plants had been growing on their own in the yard, even without his care. A weed really, just waiting to be used. “A toast,” Blanton had said, “to plants”—seeing the little wince in Roger’s expression, that bitter taste, like castor oil itself, but the mangoes had sweetened it adequately enough, just as he’d expected.

“See here, Roger,” Blanton said now, before they left the study a second time. “See the way the leaves are yellowing a little? A little water, a little more atten-

tion might do this plant some good.”

He turned to Roger and saw the sneer in the other man’s face, the pride, and the hints of something else, something Roger wasn’t aware of himself. Soon, the symptoms would reveal themselves. The nausea would turn to vomiting, Roger’s body trying to send the poison back out the way it had arrived. And then trying to expel it out the other end, bloodily so. Yes, many trips to the bathroom tonight, soiling the elegance he’d displayed so proudly, soiling himself. And then dehydration, seizures, even hallucinations perhaps, before liver and spleen and kidneys began calling it quits. No antidote. The end unavoidable now.

“Come to think of it,” Blanton squinted his eyes, “a little water might do you some good too. You’re looking a little peaked yourself.”

When Blanton reached the car, his wife turned to face him.

“All done?” she asked.

He held up the keys. “Everything’s taken care of,” he replied, and they told Jessica goodbye and got in the car. Blanton wondered how long Jessica would stay, if she’d be there for the finale—nursemaid first, corpse-bearer later. He hoped she wouldn’t be drawn into cleaning it all up. A nice girl, she was, and Blanton felt sorry for what she might be forced to witness.

He and Felicia hardly talked on the way back, but things were different already, he could feel it. At one point, there in the silence, she reached over and touched his hand, and he felt a tingling in his loins, a stirring that he’d nearly forgotten. He pressed down slightly on the accelerator, hurrying them homeward.

He had a dose for her too. ●