

MAGNOLIA MACROPHYLLA

River Road descended from soybean fields into swampland on the drive to Jude's house. The covered dish rode shotgun. I went under the speed limit to avoid any jostling since I had plated the portions so carefully, arranging all of Jude's favorite foods in a spiral pattern. Corn pie, butter beans, red rice, and turkey breast formed the petals. For the center, I set three bright lemon twists in a bold red dollop of cranberry sauce like a pistil and stigma. The whole dish looked like a blossom. I knew my cousin would appreciate it. He was a botanist. A professor emeritus of botany.

Black water mirrored the sunset through cypress trees. I didn't come back here often enough. In my youth, my hunter uncles had taught me how to read the codes written into the South Carolina landscape by its wild game. I never took up the sport. Jude was the only man I knew around here who taught me there was something to look for in these woods besides trophies.

I knocked on his porch door, balancing the warm plate on one palm and stood back ready to unveil my creation to Jude; instead, Jimmie opened the door.

"I thought I would bring Jude a plate," I said in my holiday-glad voice. I added, in a minor key, "If I knew you were here, I would have brought you a plate too."

"Well, that is awful kind of you." He seemed startled, like he just woke up. I wasn't sure if he remembered it was Thanksgiving.

Jimmie slicked his black hair into place and slinked onto the porch, closing the door behind him. His belt cinched his pants tight to his tiny waist. His lips were bordered with fine lines from smoking cigarettes all his life, but they retained their delicacy. He was dark complected for a white man, and his poorly executed blue line tattoos, most likely drawn in a jailhouse somewhere, were almost undetectable on his rippling forearms. Jimmie was good looking, no one doubted that, like a faded movie star who always played the bad guy. He drove around town in Jude's truck and always seemed to be busy, yet the house and yard looked like a wreck from the road.

"I'm sure he'll appreciate it," Jimmie said as he took the plate.

I didn't let it go. "Can I go see him?"

"Buddy," his voice quaked, "he ain't up for no visitors today." His eyes welled up. I released the plate into his hands. "But I'll try to get him ready for you to come back tomorrow. Damn, this smells good. You got my number?"

I nodded, even though I didn't.

When the screen door banged shut, I felt like a coward. I should have fought him to see Jude, no matter what state he was in. But if I pressed Jimmie, I thought he might break. I couldn't tell if it was an act.

I drove back home faster, the night falling early, the smell of brush burning. I imagined Jude doped up and moaning in his bed, and Jimmie ravaging the plate of food I had made, not even noticing how pretty it was.

Jude was the picture of health just a few months before. The summer had kissed his arms and face pink. A little wisp of silver hair lay over the top of his head. He always wore the same uniform, even in the heat of the summer: long khaki pants and a white T-shirt, over which he buttoned a short-sleeved, cuffed and collared shirt all the way to the very top.

On a sweltering day last July, we had scampered over flooded timber, through vines and briars. I could barely keep up, even though I was almost twenty years younger. Jude led me to an old-growth forest that was cool and dark.

It was the best day of summer. Just me, Jude, and his plants. He wove together the forest's narratives, evolutionary history, and power. He embraced its beauty without needing anything in return. He revealed this landscape and his imagination to me—a multidimensional floral world, extending all around us, from the top-most buds to the depths of the water table.

I was an adult when I first met Jude, and I couldn't believe anyone like this was a part of my family. I had heard about a relative who studied science, but we never visited with him when I was a kid. Apparently, he knew about me too. When we were first introduced at my grandmother's funeral he said, "Oh, yes, the artist," beaming. My chosen career was something no one in my family knew how to talk about, except as some kind of disability. Jude always inquired about it. He admired it.

On our walk, we carried a pouch of field corn to bait the traps for the droves of nocturnal wild hogs that rummaged through the woods digging up the plants he loved. With both hands he gestured toward the black ground and proclaimed, "They're ravenous." But I couldn't tell if the soil was torn up or not.

In the darkest part of the forest, Jude recognized a plant with the glee of a crush. "Well, hello, beautiful," he said, introducing me to an awkward tree crouching near the massive trunk of a poplar. "This is the *Magnolia macrophylla*. The big leaf magnolia." Jude lifted the tip of a huge droopy leaf with his index finger. He peeked underneath and said, "Not one aphid." He offered the tree a congratulatory grin.

He turned to me. "It has the biggest leaves of any tree in North America. It's an understory tree. Extremely fragile."

"How does it survive in this dark?" I asked.

"Not very well at all. They don't produce viable seeds here. They just cling to a space and try to get tall enough to survive." He sounded resigned. "That's why they grow these huge and beautiful leaves." He spread one out to show me. It was the size of a man's torso, with threadlike ribs supporting translucent flesh. Jude let the leaf relax, and then he ran his hands up the tree's skinny trunk, coaxing it to arch down so he could see its fruiting body. He peered inside the apical bud and pinched the base of the top leaf, testing its give. He said something to the tree that I couldn't quite hear, then let the tree lurch back into the posture of a wiry teenager. Jude put his hands on his hips, nodded to himself, and said, "They are very decorative."

We left the tree looking shy and disheveled, but even from a distance, its leaves glowed in the forest.

That was the last walk in the woods I ever took with Jude. I went back to see him in September, but he didn't feel like going anywhere with me. He tried to get comfortable in his chair. I told him about my exhibitions, a subject he was usually curious about, but he seemed distracted. We ran out of things to say to each other. I fidgeted and made his dogs restless. I guess he felt obliged to have one more show-and-tell, and he finally struggled up and took me with him to check on his greenhouse. Jimmie watched us from the porch, a lean silhouette.

Jude's greenhouse was the size of a closet. He made it out of old windows and a storm door—or had it made, by Jimmie, who was lousy at construction. You could barely see the structure for the vines that covered it. They had let it all go.

Jimmie had rigged it up with a yard sprinkler hung upside down from the ceiling attached to a garden hose that ran all the way to the back-porch faucet such that Jude could reach over and turn it on from his chair. Every morning when he drank his coffee and every evening when he took his meds, he made it rain.

All spring the plants inside had patiently pressed their fronds against the glass until they pried their way out. The exterior of the greenhouse bloomed in rare vines, while the inside burgeoned with countless species of wildflowers.

"I'm so sorry about this mess. I've got to cut this all back," he said, as if he actually would. "This Clematis is going to take over everything." The admonishment in his voice disguised delight.

There was one plant in the greenhouse that he did not chide for growing too fast: *Citrus sulcata*, the sankoban orange tree. It was a tree by name only, just over two feet high and struggling. It looked out of place. Jude had fashioned wire coat hangers and sticks to train the vines to adhere to a guarded perimeter around the tree.

It was a tropical plant that couldn't be watered too much, so Jude had hung a sheet of plastic above the tree like a floating shroud. He checked the texture of its soil. He plucked a desiccated leaf and let it fall. He cupped the tiny orange in his hand to test its weight. It was healthy and dense. And even though the plant looked weak, inside the fruit a seed set was forming that Jude intended to propagate, but never did.

After Christmas, I heard that Jude had canceled a springtime trip he organized for the Kiwanis Club to go to British Columbia to see the Butchart Gardens. For as long as I knew him, Jude had fantasized about the infinite varieties of roses there. It worried everyone in town that he wasn't going.

I called to wish him Happy New Year.

"He's still not feeling well," Jimmie said, answering Jude's phone.

"Let me bring you something," I said.

"We're okay. I need to get him rested. We're going to the doctor tomorrow. His back."

"Has he been up walking? That's what he needs. To get outside."

"I'm doing best I can with him."

"I can come out there right now and help you."

"He's asleep right now. Maybe some other time."

Jimmie didn't trust me. I hadn't been inside their home since Jimmie moved in. People around here don't understand their kind of relationship, but I didn't judge them. I understood Jude—a brilliant scientist and a profound historian. A professor. My kindred spirit.

I had an intuition that Jude was hooked on painkillers. He had a hunger in his eyes. I imagined Jimmie was the source, but I couldn't prove it.

I was close to organizing an intervention when I got a call from my dad. The doctors had found cancer in Jude's lower spine, and it had metastasized all over. It had grown into his brain. Stage four. Six weeks.

About six weeks later, I drove to the hospital in Columbia to see Jude for the last time. I stopped by his house on the way. Winter had struck the trees bare. The place was abandoned. Jimmie had been run off by the parishioners soon after Jude was admitted. They found him alone in the driveway, sitting in Jude's truck listening to music. No one knew where he went after that. I climbed the stairs to the porch where Jude and I had last talked. The hose was still hooked up to the faucet, but the greenhouse hadn't been watered in weeks. The vines growing on the outside of the greenhouse had shed all their leaves, which made it much easier to find the door. Inside, it was warm and fecund.

The plants in pots on the shelves had withered, but their seeds had fallen into the seams between the floorboards. They hit soil where no deer or wild hog could venture. They grew, uninhibited by the competition of the outside world.

The orange tree, however, was almost dead. Its leaves fell off at the hint of a breath. Its limbs had dried like bones. Jude could probably nurse it back to life, but I was just here for a second, and after I left, there was no one who could turn on the rain. The single orange was shriveled and leathery. I snatched it from its limb and headed to the hospital.

The nurses on the fourth floor wheeled carts across floors polished to reflection. Monitors chirped in the distance. No one was expecting me. I wandered the halls, unsure if they would let me see him.

I lingered in the waiting-room area where Better Homes and Gardens magazines lay feathered out like a card trick. Solemn parents hunched in chairs while their toddler roamed around their legs. A nurse came in. "Ms. Andrews?" An older woman collected herself and obediently followed. What was I waiting on? My name to be called? I decided to go find Jude myself.

I rounded the corner. A giant white board loomed over the nurses' station.

DUBOSE E J, Room 216.

I went for it, 202, then 204. To avoid eye contact with nurses, my gaze was drawn into the ward's open doors. Bare backs were half-sheathed in fallen blue gowns and tangled in white sheets, like sinking in snow. Faces emerged from the frost, mouths agape. White vines ran into their noses. In 208, a whole back was exposed and an arm draped off the bed rail. The rooms were shady, and there was a smell you could almost see—sharp and glistening on top of every other odor.

Around a corner, the west side of the building swallowed the light, creating shadows of the supply carts in the hallway. Half the nurse's face was aglow. "Can I help you?"

"I'm going to 216," I said, instead of saying his name. "All right," she said, flashing away with an armful of eye drops.

The corridor took an angle, and I was facing north. The windows were bathed in blue. I had clear passage down the hallway. I smelled urine.

In 216, Jude was lying on his back facing the window. I came in from behind his headboard. The urine was his, dripping from his sheets, running down a black cable under the bed, puddling on the floor. His hand was on his bald head, and I could see the tips of his yellow toenails.

I rounded the bed, and saw that Jude was completely naked, but not bare. A bougainvillea vine and a mother of chestnut. A clematis flower and four versions of wild gardenia.

A drape of wood anemone with its five sepals blossomed around the dorsum of his foot, winding up his ankle. His right calf was covered in golden aster; his left was a swath of creeping phlox, the lavender variety, a sea of purple ping petals dotted by golden anthers. They gave way to a bouquet of jewelweed in bloom—yellow funnel

blossoms, with the spur drawn in a perfect teardrop. Two fringed polygalas, one red, one purple, entwined his scrotum, their flaring sepals disappearing underneath. His penis was a coral root orchid. The sepal fanned across his groin and the anther cap was the tip. His waist was wrapped in *Wisteria frutescens*. The sinewy vines seemed to constrict him, but bursting through the rugged wood was purple chicory blossom, a ragged sailor, its pistil filigreed white and its style red inside Jude's flat navel. The forest went from Appalachian to coastal on his upper body. On his right breast was drawn the jarring apex of a longleaf pine frond, the needles painted in three colors: iridescent emerald, night-forest green, and a strip of rich ochre. A pollen cone was erect across his right nipple, so real it was sticky looking. His left nipple was the apex of a leaf of the *Magnolia macrophylla*, the big leaf magnolia, life-sized. Pale greens, shaded veins, and a prominent midrib engulfed Jude's entire rib cage, done in a translucent jade, like light coming through. The base of the leaf and its petiole wrapped around his back unseen. His sternum was a meadow of dayflowers—Solomon's seal, and Queen Anne's lace—that was pruned sharp at his collar line, where he always buttoned up his shirt, where his skin was just skin.

I couldn't even say hello. I just stood there breathing. My shadow breached his face, and he stirred. "Oh, hello. I'm such a mess. Please. Such a mess. So sorry. Very ill. Made such a mess."

I have friends with elaborate tattoos, but I had never seen such color and dimension. Jude's skin had become so pale and white, almost translucent, and the artist's ink seemed to be filled with light coming from within. Before I could say anything, the nurse came in. "Oh my, I didn't know he would have visitors. I just left for a second. I didn't know he was like this. Let me get him cleaned up so you two can visit."

There was an awkward silence. What was left of his consciousness was pure politesse. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you. This is my friend."

The nurse got between Jude and me and motioned me out the door. "Just wait outside, sir, and come back in a few minutes. I'll have him all ready for you."

I walked around in the corridor and stole glances of the faces sinking into the snow. After Jude's body, the rooms seemed whiter. My eyes had acclimated briefly to the color of the tropics, or

springtime in the mountains. I stared into a room where a woman lay on her side, running her fingers through her hair. Her gown was open and I could see her back, brown with dark spots, the notches of her spine—her flexible, sheathed skeleton displaying the elaborate mechanics of breathing.

No one had ever mentioned Jude's tattoos. I assume no one in the community had ever seen his body. What did it feel like to know your body was both a dangerous secret and a beautiful revelation? In a place where boys' fantasies are molded into shooting a ten-point buck or catching the winning pass, how did Jude find his? Was wearing this skin a labor of love? Was his body in a constant state of release under his clothes? Was this evidence of a double life or just a single one, folded like a private note and kept inside the envelope. Who received this gift? Was it Jimmie?

I wanted to know everything. Surely, he could trust me. I am an artist.

But those blooms were not for my eyes.

The nurse found me in the hallway. "He's ready for you now," she said. I went back in. Jude and his bed were crisply cleaned, and his gown was tied neatly around his back. The jungle forest had disappeared. His forearms were bare white. Still, his shoulder around the edges of the gown and his shin that showed through the folds of the blanket were evidence of a planet in bloom.

I gathered he was embarrassed for me to see the jungle he had meticulously hidden for so long, so I avoided mentioning it. "I picked the orange from your tree," I said. It was the size of a handball. "Would you like a slice?"

"Yes. Sanbokan. *Citrus sulcata*. For you. Not hungry." It was difficult for Jude to both speak and breathe. He whispered, "*Sulcata*." Turning his eyes to mine, he asked, "The greenhouse?" I nodded. He managed to say, "Yes. Taste." He motioned to his mouth. As I fished out a pocketknife to cut the orange, he began to tell me its story. "Impossible to grow. Equator. And Japan. Malaysia. A colleague had seeds...*Citrus sulcata*."

I finally got the courage to say, "I love your ink."

"Yes. That...well...thank you. An upstanding gentleman. In Charlotte. Well respected. An artist of his trade."

I was nervous about the orange. I sliced it open, and its juice was darker than its skin. It flowed out down the blade of the knife, down my arm, and dripped off my elbow to stain the sheet.

"Wow, that's a juicy orange," I told Jude, to his delight.

"Yes, they survive drought. Tropical coast."

I put a slice into his hand. His palm had lost its pink, was white, like the sheets. The juice from the orange pooled up in a yellow puddle in his hand and left a yellow stain trailing down his chin and neck.

"They'll have to clean you up again," I joked.

"Yes. Yes. Hmm. Acidic." He managed to hold a seed in his fingers and squeezed it, testing its give. He held it close to his eyes and examined its shape and texture. He said yes to himself and rolled over on his side away from me and fell asleep.

His resplendent back gleamed through the parting of the gown. An orange flowering vine that began in the crack of his ass disappeared, winding around his waist. I was embarrassed, but I stared, until I heard footsteps in the hall. I covered him up with the cotton blanket, then left.

The next time I saw Jude was at his funeral. The members of the church were there, the Kiwanis Club, and a few botanists who taught at nearby colleges. They told stories about intrepid hikes into uncharted swamplands behind Dollar General stores and finding the rare *Helonias bullata*. One told of how he and Jude had found a species new to science in a patch of oconee bells on the side of the road in Georgia. Inside the casket were bouquets of weeds, each with tiny inch-wide flowers in a variety of shapes and colors. Each bouquet was different, and each was made by a botanist. His collar was buttoned to his neck, of course, and he wore an awkward tie. Onto his hands, crossed at his chest, someone had sprinkled tiny maroon seeds.

Dust to dust, man of mud.
The serviceberry has bloomed.
The casket was sealed and lowered.
Buried my kindred alive.