

KIRKWOOD

A Series of Short Stories

THE GARDENER

Lust

“Is it white fly or some kind of fungus?” Nancy asked worriedly, holding out a mottled brown leaf. “What’s your professional opinion?”

Richard took the leaf stoically, making sure the tips of his fingers brushed over her neatly trimmed, pale pink painted fingernails. The color reminded him of the delicate insides of clam and mussel shells and he felt a warm tingle as memories of his younger years spending summers in Cape Cod floated in. Richard took his time inspecting the leaf. He rubbed the dusty coating that clung to it before pinching off a section, thoughtfully rolling it between his fingers and smelling its pungent green odor.

“My ex-husband gave me this tree for our twentieth anniversary.” Nancy said, looking at him with anxious bright brown eyes, the color of young tree roots. “I couldn’t bear the thought of something happening to it now that he’s passed.”

“Bingo” thought Richard. He flashed her a wide, re-assuring smile. “Don’t you worry, Mrs. Pinkett. I have a lot of experience in this area and I won’t let anything happen to your tree.”

“Thank goodness.” She sighed in relief, clutching the front of her Co-Exist t-shirt. “And please, call me Nancy from now on” she said, reaching out, squeezing his shoulder thankfully.

“Of course, Nancy.” Richard replied feeling her squeeze and making quick calculations about his next move. He took a small notebook from his back pocket and pulled out the pencil he always tucked over his right ear. “I’m going to need to come back for at least four treatments.” he said, jotting down some numbers.

“Anything you need.”

“I don’t use anything poisonous or harmful to the environment. So it might take a bit longer to eradicate your problem.” Richard said, turning and walking toward the backyard gate.

"Of course. I agree completely" she said, following him. "The last company that came out couldn't guarantee the treatment wouldn't involve something harmful. I am so relieved to have such a thoughtful and professional person working on my Peter's tree."

Richard stopped abruptly causing Nancy to bump into him. Just firmly enough to find out what was underneath that stupid shirt. He was not disappointed. A smile curled at the edges of his mouth as he turned pulling out his card and handing it to her. "What a wonderful opportunity for me to help save a tree that means so much to someone. Thank you for choosing me. I'll be in touch." He smiled one last time, letting his twinkling blue eyes seal the deal before letting himself out the gate.

"Hopefully I'll see you soon." Nancy called after him.

"It was almost too easy." Richard thought, as he slid into the cabin of his truck. He reached beneath the front seat, pulling out a thick brown book. He opened it, leafing through the alphabetically arranged names until he came to the P's. He entered in Nancy's information next to the lines of other names. All the different woman he'd come to know over the years. Richard ran his finger delicately over the page as wisps of memory of each of his encounters danced in his head making him feel drunk. The clock read 3:35pm on his dashboard and he snapped the book firmly shut. There would be time for reminiscing later, he thought to himself. He had another appointment in West Hollywood at 5.

"Shit. Traffic is gonna get muddy" he mumbled, starting the truck and heading down the driveway.

Once he got to the bottom of the hill, as suspected, cars were already lined up along Laurel Canyon. "Doesn't anyone in this town have a normal work day?" Richard said, gripping the steering wheel in agitation. He eased the truck into the impatient traffic and inched his way forward with the rest of the line. He looked at the dashboard clock, figuring he'd arrive just in time for his client. Having done the math, Richard relaxed a bit, turning on the radio. *Good Golly Ms. Molly* by Little Richard blared out.

"Now this is my era" he said, singing along, smiling and jauntily, tipping his baseball cap to fellow Angelino's stuck in traffic. Most of them smiled back at the half crazed old man in his truck, a grateful look of escape in their eyes. Richard was happy to entertain them and happy to draw the gaze of the many beautiful women that passed by.

"This city does not disappoint." He thought, as a young woman in sunglasses and a wide, straw brim hat waved at him from her white convertible. The hat reminded him of home in Connecticut and he remembered how everyone he knew told him he was crazy to move to Los Angeles.

"Your kidding me." His friend Albert, said choking on his beer. "That place is nuts. Not to mention, stupid expensive."

Albert had been right. He had to acclimate from living in a comfortable, two story home in a nice neighborhood in Connecticut to living a small, one bedroom apartment in the valley. He'd barely gotten by in the beginning using the money he'd got from the sale of that home and the small savings his wife, Sally and he had pulled together over the years.

“Sally would have hated it here” Richard thought, turning left, out of one line of cars and into another line. “She’d never been much of a city gal.” Which had made it all the more easy for him to have dalliances on the side. He’d always loved Sally though and they were married for forty wonderful years until the cancer took her.

It was strange in all that time that she never mentioned his infidelities. He wondered if she knew, but suspected that she did. There were moments when he would catch her staring at him sadly and curiously like she didn’t know him at all. Sometimes, it was in the quiet mornings they spent together in the kitchen. No words between them over coffee, just the sharp clink of her spoon against her cup.

“He’d never meant to hurt her.” Richard thought, turning right out of traffic and ascending into the hills of West Hollywood. “It’s just that he couldn’t help it.” For as long as he could remember, women were all that he saw, wherever he went.

“I got into landscaping because of women.” Richard thought, taking another sharp turn and grinding the truck into a lower gear to make it up the steep hills. Working the earth, tilling and nurturing mother nature with his hands like a patient lover. It was what made him good at his job and well sought after by his community. He had a successful business in Connecticut and now, after two years here in Los Angeles, he was working his way up the ladder again.

Richard spied an address nailed to a tree at the end of a driveway and turned onto it. The driveway stretched further up, weaving into a dense patch of oak trees.

“Beautiful” he thought, staring at the trees mature, curvy trunks.

He was no spring chicken, that’s for sure. Sixty-seven next October. But with age comes experience and people paid handsomely for that. Richard drove the truck around another curve and a stylish Hollywood mansion came into view.

“Now that’s classy.” He said out-loud.

It wasn’t the first mansion he’d see here but it certainly was the best cared for. It was a quality he admired. Something he always did for the women in his life.

Richard remembered how he’d try to explain to his friend Albert about his dalliances one evening after a few beers.

“Jesus Richard” Albert had said. “I’ve known you since grade school and I’m telling you, it’s just not right.”

“You don’t understand” Richard remembered telling him. “I love them and treat them fairly.”

“I understand all right.” Albert snapped back. “Your making all sorts of crazy excuses for fooling around on Sally.”

“I love Sally.” He’d told him.

“I don’t doubt that but you fooling around on her is just not fair to her.” Albert argued with him.

Richard felt his blood pressure rise as he thought about their conversation. "He'd never fooled around in his life." To put it like that was debasing the time and care he had spent with each and every one of those women. Including Sally.

"What did Albert know anyway" He thought. He'd been with the same god damned woman since high school."

Richard stopped the truck in front of the stately mansion and put it in park. He sat, his heartbeat pounding in his ears, his breathing a little too hard. He took deep, relaxing breaths, reminding himself to look to the future and forget about his past. To nurture his life here with all of it's beautiful opportunities. He calmed, opening his eyes and looking toward the mansion.

"Holy shit" he whispered, his breath catching in his throat. The most beautiful women he'd ever laid eyes on, stood in the doorway. She was tall, but not too tall. Curvy in all the right places. In her 50's or early 60's, it was hard to tell the way she took such good care of herself.

"Classy. Like the house." Richard thought, his palms starting to sweat nervously. He checked his reflection in the mirror, wiping away any dirt from his face and checking his teeth for leftover lunch. "Your old tricks aren't going to work with this one." He said out-loud to his reflection before grabbing his clipboard and exiting the truck.

"Hello!" he called out, waving cheerfully toward the woman. 'Your trying to hard' Richard thought angrily to himself, pulling his arm down.

"Mr. Truant" the woman said, gliding down the steps gracefully. "You made it on time."

"I pride myself on my punctuality. It's what gets the bills paid."

"I'm sure the quality of your work helps that as well." She extended her hand. "I'm Marlene. Nice to meet you."

"The pleasure is mine." He took her hand, leaning down and kissing it. 'Like some god damned knight' he thought, pulling back, clearing his throat embarrassed.

"Very old fashioned" Marlene said, smiling.

"That's me" Richard stuttered, feeling like a school boy in front of his first crush.

"The orchard is in the back. Please follow me." She said, turning and heading back toward the house.

"Get a hold of yourself" Richard thought following her. They passed through the heavy wood double doors and into the Spanish tiled foyer. Two, half moon shaped staircases led to the second floor in front of them. " Probably to her bedroom" Richard thought. His mind filled with images of a four poster bed draped in billowy fabric and high thread count sheets with Marlene's naked body in the middle of all of it.

"It's through the living room." She said, snapping him out of his lustful daydream. They passed through an arched doorway and into an opulent, sunken sitting room. Lush couches and chairs

were gathered around a huge fireplace. Exotic paintings adorned the walls. A grand piano took up the corner.

“Do you play?” Richard asked.

“When the mood strikes me.”

“Cherrywood?” he said, reaching out, wanting to touch its smooth wood surface. The piano was lovingly polished with beeswax and shone a deep, almost pulsing maroon color.

“Mahogany. Please don’t touch it.” Marlene said sharply.

Richard pulled his hand back abruptly like a scolded child. He felt his cheeks grow hot and his chest tighten as his embarrassment grew into quick anger. “Who did this woman think she was, barking at him like that?” He thought, letting out a snort of discontent. “He didn’t care that she was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. She was a bitch and that was a no go for him.

“Mrs..”

“Ms.” she interrupted.

“Ms. Marlene.” Richard corrected, squaring his shoulders, trying to get the upper hand. “I’m not sure my services are going to work for you. You seem to have something very particular in mind and I am a busy man”

“That you are, Richard” Marlene said.

“How did she know his first name? Had he given it to her?” He thought. He couldn’t remember. Richard shook his head, trying to wake his brain up. Seemed like everything was getting foggier these days.

“Before you refuse me, please, just take a look and tell me what you think.” Marlene said, swinging open a set of French doors at the far end of the living room.

“My God” he whispered, looking out over the backyard, mouth agape. It was the garden of Eden or at least as close as he remembered it to be from the descriptions in the Bible. His mind was suddenly propelled back to being a little boy in Catholic church with his mother. He remembered his feet swinging a foot off the ground as he sat on the worn wood benches listening to the priest. He hadn’t understood a word of the sermon but he did remember gazing at the beautiful calves and dainty feet of the women around him, smelling their perfumes like a blossom of flowers on a spring day. Richard closed his eyes, immersing himself in the memory, feeling his pants swell like they had on those Sundays.

“Yes. It’s quite lovely, isn’t it?” Marlene cooed.

“It’s a god damned paradise” he answered, opening his eyes, taking it all in. Giant oak trees bursting with nuts peppered the near acre of land. They created a delicate canopy over the plants and flowers to protect them from hot California sun. An tree dripping with ripe apples was to the right of the doorway and a peach tree similarly dripping with fruit was to the left.

Wildflowers were scattered in tufts here and there amidst wild grasses and sages native to the hollywood hills. Dragonflies, butterflies and bees danced happily to and fro. A hummingbird zipped up, hovered inches in front of Richard's face before taking off through the branches.

"Do you tend all of this yourself?" He asked, completely forgetting his hot anger from moments before.

"Most of it" Marlene said, gliding down the blue/green slate stairway and onto a pathway of finely shredded wood chips. "But I have help from time to time."

"You certainly don't look like a woman who gets her hands dirty" Richard remarked, following her.

"And what does a woman look like who gets her hands dirty?"

"Plain. Dowdy. Like a farmer's wife." he said, matter of fact.

"My mother was a farmers wife." Marlene answered, leading him through the dense foliage.

"Bet she didn't look like you." Richard said crassly.

"We were remarkably similar."

"My Sally was a bit of a hands dirty gal. Simple. Plain. In that beautifully necessary kind of a way" he said.

"I highly doubt that, Richard. People are complicated. Especially women."

"You can say that again" he snorted. "I haven't been able to figure you lot out since I left the womb."

"It's simple." Marlene said. "We aren't to be 'figured out'. Women are not a problem to solve or a mountain to be climbed or a field to be tilled. We are our own individual creatures."

"Then why is it I can't get you out of my mind all the time?" Richard snapped. "It's like you do it on purpose. To punish us."

"Us?"

"Men."

"Not all men have your problem, Richard." Marlene answered, coolly.

"Well, they should" he spat angrily at her. "It's not fair that I have to deal with these 'feelings' all the time." He stomped his feet along the path like a child having a temper tantrum.

"Your right. It isn't fair." Marlene conceded, diffusing the conversation. "But I didn't bring you here to discuss the male/female relationship. I brought you here to look at a sick tree."

“Well you started it” he pouted.

“Here we are.” Marlene said, motioning to a tree in front of her. Richard’s pout immediately dissolved as he walked up to the tree. He placed his hands on the thick trunk, feeling the ripples of time and weather before looking back.

“I’ve never seen anything like it. What species is this?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. My grandfather brought it back from Africa when I was born and planted it for me.”

“That can’t be. This tree looks like it’s a hundred years old.” He flashed her a mischievous smile. “You definitely don’t look that old.”

“All in the eye of the beholder, Richard.”

“My mother used to say the same thing” he said, the mischief draining from his eyes.

“Sounds like a smart woman.”

“I dunno. We weren’t close.” He answered, shaking his head to dispel the foggy memories and painful nostalgia creeping in. He turned back toward the tree, looking it up and down. “Anyhow, she’s healthy. I don’t see any problems here.”

“It’s at the roots” Marlene answered, pointing downward. “I noticed something was digging and eating away at them.

“I’d be surprised if anything in these hills could get through them. These roots are too big and strong.” Richard answered, squatting down, clearing a layer of leaves. “Well I’ll be damned.” He said out-loud. Something had gnarled extensively at the base. It left a blacking mold that reached back into the soil with the root. He took a small knife from his pocket and folded it open. His dad’s voice echoed in his mind. ‘Always carry a knife, son. You never know when you may need it.’ Richard smiled. He used this pocket knife for everything from cutting cord to slicing apples to checking bark for worms. It had been a handy little device over the years, though his father probably meant for him to use it as protection. Richard had been lucky and never needed to pull it out for defense. He scraped at the mold with the knife, smearing a bit of it on his finger and sniffing it. He pulled back quickly, his nose wrinkling in disgust. It smelled like tar.

“Are you sure it’s safe to smell like that? Looks like black mold to me.” Marlene questioned.

“Do you think I would have done that if it was?” Richard snapped back at her. “Who’s the professional here?”

“Your right. I’ll stop hovering and leave you to it.” She said, turning and gliding gracefully back down the path.

Richard stayed crouched, his brows furrowed, his head foggy again.

“Wait!” he called after her, standing up and turning. But it was too late. She’d gone back to the house. “What the hell is wrong with you?” He said out-loud, scratching his head. On a normal

day he would have called her over to take a look with him. He would get a whiff of her perfumed hair and definitely a gander at those beautiful breasts begging to spill out of that dress. "A missed opportunity of grand proportions. Must be getting old." He said out-loud again before turning to look at the tree. Did it look different? Richard stared at it, trying to place what had changed. The texture of the bark? The color of the leaves? The width of the trunk?

"Strange." he said, leaning down and plunging his fingers into the soil. He wiggled them around to see if the tar like material was seeping from the roots. His fingers came up clean. Richard scratched his head again perplexed. That's when the roots moved.

"Jesus!" he yelled, jumping back and falling flat on his butt. He stared for a good five minutes, not moving, his heart beating like a bird against the wind.

"Get a hold of yourself." He slapped himself hard in the face. "That woman really got your head turned around backward." He got up, brushed himself off and fixed a look. "Let's show her that I can do the job and that I'm not just a pretty face."

Richard leaned down, pulling at the root again. This time he reached his fingers deep into the rotten grooves in search of solid wood. He dug, working past the wrist and up to the forearm. The roots seemed to move out of his way. In fact, they seemed to part like they were letting him inside to help. Richard reached further. Up to the elbow now.

A light breeze passed through the air rustling the leaves. He could swear that the tree sighed like a woman pleased. He lay on his side, reaching deeper, up to his shoulder. The ground was soft and warm from the sun. The roots undulated and wiggled around his body. Richard's mind grew foggy again and he was suddenly blanketed by the memories of all the woman he'd been with. All of them as beautiful, mysterious and addicting as they'd been the day he had them. Richard moaned, unable to contain himself. He pressed against the trunk and closed his eyes but it was no longer a trunk. It was the bodies, the waists, the hips, the breasts of all of his lovers. They straddled him, firmly pulling Richard closer to them. His nose filled rich scents of perfume, sweat, ecstasy. "If this was going senile, he'd take it." Richard thought, readying himself for another deep inhale. It didn't come. He couldn't breath. His eyes popped open. Instead of lovers around him, he was met with dark. Pitch dark. Like he was underground or in a closet or....

"In a tree" a voice hissed next to his ear.

Richard tried to scream but he couldn't He tried to move but it was no use. His thoughts raced, panic setting full in. He didn't want to die like this. "The knife!" he thought, working to wiggle his fingers toward his right pocket. He did it. Feeling the cold, sharp steel in this damp, rotted place. He stabbed at the dark with the knife, feeling the soft rotted wood give way. The disease had weakened it. His dad had been right. After all these years he finally needed it for protection. Richard continued to hack away, plunging the knife over and over into the wood until finally a sliver of light and a rush of fresh air hit his burning lungs.

"Help!" he screamed through the puncture. "Somebody help me!"

"Oh my dear" a familiar voice answered. "there will be no help for you this time."

“Sally?” Richard said in shock. “Is that you?”

A pair of green eyes peered at him mischievously through the hole. “You’ve been a bad boy.” she said.

“I...I... I always loved you.” Richard stammered. “Please. Help me.”

Sally leaned in, kissing Richard deeply through the small space. Her kiss was warm and hungry and for a moment, he was lost in his desires again. A sharp pain sliced through him as his mouth filled with blood. The tree tightened and he felt the hands of his lovers drawing him deeper back.

“Sally. No!!!” he screamed.

She smiled, her mouth filled with sharp teeth stained with his warm blood. The tree closed and Richard was swallowed into the blackness of his own sins forever.