

Flower in a Wall

They must have arrived during the night. This morning the shutters are opened, and a white Toyota is parked in the driveway. A slender Saudi man in his sixties rocks in a lawn chair inside the walled garden of the house across the street.

Later, passing by the living room window, I glance over at my neighbor's house. The man is reading on the shaded porch, and a young Asian woman is serving him juice. He takes the glass without looking up at the maid.

I study her smooth face, the slender arms under the long sleeved white blouse and her plain, loose-fitting brown skirt,

She is bare-footed, with cocoa brown skin. No more than twenty-eight, she looks Indonesian or Malaysian. The maid wears no jewelry and walks back along the porch, mopping the tiles and sweeping the steps.

Returning from school at dusk, I find the Saudi's house lighted and the sound of voices conversing inside. Going into my apartment, I wait to turn on the lights. I watch the maid arrange table and chairs for dinner in the garden. Three Saudi men sit with the owner on the porch as the maid carries dishes and silverware out and sets the places. She works for several minutes, then looks around and goes to the gate, opens it, and walks into the street. She peers both ways and sits down on the marble steps. Dropping her head onto her palms, she leans forward on her knees and stares into the dusty street.

Sunset stretches of shadow slice across the building but do not touch her. She seems built of patience, like a woman waiting beside a river for a leaf or raft to float by. She must be bored, so young and lovely, and where is her life?

The woman reaches up and pulls the band from her hair. The black tresses shimmer down her shoulders. Shaking her head to free the loose strands of hair, the maid stares into the dust. Reaching down, she takes a pebble from the road, rubs it back and forth, until the sun sinks deeper and deeper behind the mountains.

Then an Arabic voice calls from the house.

The maid drops the pebble, puts her hair back into a tight bun and goes inside.

This afternoon the woman is washing the garden walls when I leave to go shopping.

When I return home, she is on the front steps again. It is as though sunset is when she rests between chores.

She must notice me looking in her direction. It would be risky for me, an American, to walk across the street and begin speaking to her. The Saudis would punish us both, her more than me. I simply would be deported, she would be beaten. So I make no sign that I ever see her, for this is Saudi Arabia, and someone is always watching.

Back inside the apartment, I can't help admiring the way she sits motionless on the stoop, without an expression, staring at the road and the sky.

Her only doorway to the day is its end. Maybe she had to come to Saudi Arabia from Panang or Djakarta to overcome a bad love affair, or to get away for a while in the Middle East. But I doubt it. She is far too beautiful, far too intelligent looking to flee any suitor but one -- poverty.

She is a princess trapped in someone else's castle.

I don't see the maid for a day.

This morning on the way to the supermarket, I glimpse her polishing the gate. She has become my little Cinderella without any chance of a slipper.

Later, on the way to work, I stop beside the water tower, climb out, and pluck a red wild flower from beside the road.

I drive back to the apartment and park.

Making certain that no one is watching, I cross the road, stick the flower into the gate, between the hinges and the wall, above the steps where the woman sits every afternoon, then I return to my sterile apartment.

At sunset, she walks out on the porch, hangs a dust rag on the metal awning and opens the gate. Perhaps she doesn't see my offering. She leans back against the metal entrance, staring at the light dissolving over the hills. Then she notices the red flower.

Reaching over, she brushes her hand against the petal. Leaning closer, she sees it is not growing from the stone, but planted in the crack of cement. She takes the flower, gently pries it loose and grips the stem in her hand. For a minute her eyes roam up and down the street, from the mosque at the corner, across to the small grocery store, past the goat herder's shack, then her gaze lifts up the building where I stand watching her.

She can't see me through the tinted window. The sun is behind the roof and she has to cup her hand to look in my direction. After a moment, she whispers to herself, takes the flower and tucks the flower down the front of her blouse.

Getting up, she walks back inside the house, pausing to glance back at my building before disappearing from sight.

A mere flower, love letter between strangers.

The End