



Lilac Season

Danielle Winterton

All of my plants were gifts from Arthur: an African violet, an agave, an aloe, a jade, a Christmas cactus, an orchid cactus, several spider plants, various breeds of hostas, some variegated ivy, a few bromeliads, the china lily, the betel palm, and the Venus fly trap, which ensnares insects, decomposes them, and digests their nutrients. The leaves clamp down when stimulated with pressure. Arthur showed me how to trick the plant and activate

the trap with the tip of a pencil. He warned me not to do it too often: the plant has a finite number of traps in its lifespan, he said, and too many false alarms without food will weaken it.

My favorite was the rainbow fern, whose tiny green leaves glinted with a multicolored sheen on the surface. I took it into the shower with me in the morning and held it under the gentle spray, then let it hang while I soaped up so it could enjoy the steam and humidity. When I returned it to its perch in the sunny window, water droplets acted like prisms and refracted the light, casting rainbows to skitter about on cream-colored walls: rainbows on rainbows on dark green foliage that looked like a wild mane of hair as it spilled out of the front of its hanging basket and cascaded downward for two feet, like weeping willow branches hanging over the mossy earth. I daydreamed when I stared into the tangled mass of foliage; I saw elaborate faraway lands, sloping hills, deep valleys, dense thickets, and forests, and unicorns, rivers running rampant, fairies spritzing

about, infinitesimal gnomes hiding under tiny piles of leaves. This ritual, in which I regularly indulged, brought relief from the clutches of the Wild Torment, the presence of which was outrageous that particular spring, and seemed always to be lurking in the places where safety and comfort should have been, waiting to descend on us at any time.

When Arthur stayed with me, we showered together, grocery shopped and did laundry together, cooked, cleaned and took care of my plants together. We dressed alike, in ripped faded Levi's, black and white Calvin Klein tank tops, white T-shirts from the Gap with blue-lined collars and sleeves, gray fleece pullovers from LL Bean. We were skinny, all neck and rib and hipbones. I cut my hair short, above the ears. Arthur kept his cut close to the scalp. Mine was brown, and his was blond. I was 21 years old and had just embarked on the spring semester of my junior year in college; I shared a small two-bedroom apartment with another student in Pleasantville and worked in a nearby coffee shop with

Arthur's boyfriend Paul.

At 30 years of age, Arthur had almost completed an associate's degree at a CUNY school while working weekdays in a Katonah nursery. Arthur and I once lived as roommates in a Brewster farmhouse, but now Arthur didn't have his own home. He stayed at my house, Paul's house, and at the home of his grandmother, who was housebound and perpetually ill. Arthur bathed her, fed her cats, washed her dishes, and cut the grass in her yard. Paul quipped that Arthur was holding out for a chunk of her inheritance, and Arthur didn't deny it. He carried a huge hiker's pack on his back as he traveled from work to the city to school to wherever he would lay his head down for the night. Sometimes he hustled for money and could score a place to stay in New York. He was thin and blond and muscled, charming and sweet, outrageously blunt, an AA dropout, an adult who survived copious amounts of parental abuse, a regular in the psychiatric (suicidal) ward of Putnam Hospital—a true case, he would sometimes say.

When the first blooms of spring arrived, Arthur taught me how to use flowers and foliage to create extravagant floral arrangements. I frequented the nursery where he worked and helped him with tasks, trading labor for education. We watered plants, hauled bags of topsoil and peat, moved flats and repotted seedlings. He taught me how to propagate an orchid, mount a tillandsia, and coach a vine into growing the way you wanted it to. The greenhouse was a place of perpetual quiet and light. It reminded me of the church sanctuary in which I prayed as a child. The plants seemed to vibrate and hum, and I thought I could hear them breathe as the air in the room pulsed gently, rhythmically, in-out, in-out, in-out.

Arthur began to present me with crumpled garbage bags stuffed with flowers when he returned from his travels around the county. "Hello, sunshine, and how is my little delphinium doing today?" he said gleefully as he leaned over to kiss my cheek, then swept past me into the kitchen. "These have to go into water at once!" Sometimes it was magnolia, crab apple, or

American redbud, dogwood or forsythia, or any of the fruit blossoms; cherry, peach or pear. Some of the branches he put into vases, which he placed around my apartment, and the rest remained swaddled in wet paper towels and Saran-Wrap, stacked delicately on top of each other in my refrigerator. At first Arthur avoided my questions as to where he came up with so many different kinds of blossoms and in such abundance, but finally he told me, with great pride in his eyes and excitement in his voice, that he met up with some floral designers in Chelsea who now paid him cash to bring fresh-cut flowers down to the city.

“And it’s only just beginning!” he yelled from the other room. I was in the kitchen, bent over in front of the open refrigerator, trying to make space for bags of severed blooms. “Soon it will be lilac season, and Mother’s Day, Memorial Day! I’m going to clean up on this!”

“Arthur, there’s no room for food in here!”

“Listen, Danielle, I’ll cut you in on it, just don’t hassle me,” he said, appearing in the open doorway.

He rubbed the back of his head with his palm. “Let me at least store them in your refrigerator overnight. First thing tomorrow, we’ll all be gone, me and the clippings, I have to take the 6 a.m. train and get there before the blooms start to wilt.”

He would get \$300 for what was in the fridge at that moment, he said, and each time he sold flowers I could have \$100 for storage fees and for letting him stay overnight when he needed to make a delivery, since I lived closer to New York than any of his other options. He remained true to his word, and came home the next evening from the city with a thick wad of bills. Over the course of the next several weeks, rhododendrons, tulips, crocuses, delphinium, tiger lilies, iris, hyacinth, and daffodils all passed through my refrigerator as part of their journey to an urban floral arrangement. I knew Arthur cut the flowers from other people’s yards, that he trespassed into their gardens to gather his bounty, but my delight in the audacious absurdity of his behavior, coupled with my financial need, overcame lingering

traces of guilt. He started to carry garbage bags and pruning shears in his pants pockets wherever he went, and he often made me stop the car so he could clip a particularly abundant peach blossom tree or azalea bush. I knew we were stealing, but Arthur argued that no one could truly claim ownership over a plant, and said he was proud to provide joy for claustrophobic city people who need more flora and foliage in their day-to-day lives. He said he never razed a plant, only clipped from the edges and took the extra blooms that needed to be pinched away for the plant to regenerate. I didn't fully believe him, based on the sheer quantity of blooms he lugged home, but I also couldn't give up the opportunity to make quick cash with no overhead costs.

"Just wait until the fall," he said one afternoon, looking out the window as we drove through the narrow back roads of Bedford Hills and Chappaqua. "Think about it, I could make autumn arrangements with red and yellow leaves, and maybe some potted mums, for office lobbies and fall weddings." His clear blue eyes

skirted the impeccably groomed lawns that we passed, scouting out trees to molest. They were stationed majestically near the road, and he called them out by name and by color, Japanese maple for true red leaves, sugar maple and yellow buckeye for orange and rust, American beech for golden bronze, overcup oak, green ash, and silver maple for yellow, mountain ash and dogwood for purple-red.

Paul was a giddy and gracious host who liked to put on a show in the kitchen and serve hearty meals for dinner guests, even though it was usually just the three of us. On my own, I usually ate minimal amounts of fast food and frozen dinners, but Paul impressed upon me a healthier diet. "Honey, you have to eat!" he urged when he caught me staring at my food. "And you wonder why you don't have any energy!" Equal parts protein and carbohydrates, he said, at least four servings of leafy greens and fruit every day, and two glasses of water after each cup of coffee or alcoholic drink. For breakfast and

lunch, we ate bland cereals, peanut butter sandwiches, small green salads, cold beans, and fruit. At dinner there were large portions of salad, pasta, chicken and rice, acorn squash, root vegetables, bitter greens, and lentils, followed by pie or pastry and espresso with hot foamed milk. After dinner we reclined on the couch, dopey and stuffed, and passed around a joint. Then Arthur ran a bath for me while Paul cleaned up in the kitchen. Arthur liked to sit on the floor next to the tub and ease the bar of soap over my arms, legs, torso and feet, and then squeeze a sponge over my shoulders, stomach and back to rinse me off. When I stepped out dripping and cold, he toweled me down and rubbed olive oil into my skin, then sat on the toilet, smoked cigarettes, and flipped through porn mags while I brushed my teeth, tweezed my eyebrows and stared at my distorted reflection in the cracked mirror, which had splintered during a fistfight between Arthur and Paul. Arthur said Paul pushed his head into it. Paul said Arthur punched the glass surface in a fit of frustration.

Paul transformed the tiny side bedroom into a haven for me; he covered the single bed with an ivory damask bedcloth etched with a rosebud pattern, littered frangipani blooms and rose petals on the pillow, and lit a cut tin-can lantern that hung from the middle of the room and skittered star-shaped shadows down the walls and across the ceiling. After he kissed me good-night, he lit a stick of incense and stuck it in the wood paneling near the door. Only a blanket hung in the doorway between their room and mine, and I always brought along a Walkman to drown out the raucous noises of their prolonged lovemaking. Usually I was so high, relaxed and well-fed that I fell asleep immediately, but sometimes Arthur's garbled cries would wake me up.

When they weren't fucking, they were fighting, and sometimes I couldn't tell which act was provoking the banging thumps against the wall and the floor. Arthur emerged with black eyes and bloody noses, Paul with bruises and swollen scratches on his face. Paul fumed

over Arthur's lack of initiative around the house when he stayed with him; he said Arthur made messes, wasted resources, and made no effort to pitch in with chores. He called Arthur a disgusting drunk who couldn't get it up, and he accused him of cheating when he stayed overnight in the city. Arthur said Paul was overbearing, that he used his mind, his mouth, and his cock as conquering weapons, that he sucked Puerto Rican day laborer dick down at the train station, and that he was forced to fight to stay present in the relationship.

Did Arthur ask me for Dexedrine, or did I offer it to him? I can't remember. He started to use it regularly; he said it helped him concentrate on his studies. After that he was hooked, and I made extra money by selling him part of my prescription. I could no longer afford sessions with my psychiatrist, but the kind doctor continued to write me prescriptions and leave them with her secretary for me to pick up. I reasoned that Arthur was a grown man in control of his faculties

and capable of making his own choices about substance use, and that my doctor was an absolute saint who was willing to do something illegal to make sure I got my meds.

The Wild Torment persisted whether I got my meds or not, however. Indignant at being forgotten or ignored, the Wild Torment was likely to deposit a swell of rage into my head, which was deafening, quick-at-the-ready to roar into recognition as I went about my daily tasks, or else it blanketed me with Radical Depression, which nibbled at my vitality until I was laid out flat and deflated, rendered immobile for days at a time. The hot bites were the worst part of the RDs, tiny needle teeth behind the ears and at the base of the neck. The Wild Torment would work its way into my skull, presumably using my ears as a point of access, although perhaps it was the nostrils, I'm not exactly sure, because the Wild Torment is ethereal, it has never been seen by any living being endowed with the capacity for sight, and it has to lodge itself into the fleshy structure of an animal being

in order to have form. But it is not enough to have Form, the Wild Torment must, as any organic being is wont to do, make the necessary alterations to its space to ensure its survival and comfort after it has moved in. So while it didn't really surprise me to feel the Monster pressing at the surface of my skin from the interior depths of my being, it was truly a dismay each time it occurred, because it meant that all human functioning must cease until, for reasons unknown to me, the Monster relaxed, and went to sleep deep within the code of my DNA.

Arthur and I sought reprieve in intoxication. One night, after picking up my prescription and buying a case of Milwaukee's Best to take home and enjoy on my front stoop, Arthur and I sat parked in front of the 7-11 with our friend Josh in the backseat. There were two bandanas in my lap as I counted out the pills: two for me, one for Arthur, two for me, one for Arthur, who sat beside me in the passenger seat and rolled a blunt. Josh, on probation for cocaine possession, complained from the backseat that we were being stupid and obvious,

and did we realize a cop had just pulled into the lot and was parked a few spots away. We were just like spoiled little children, he muttered, with all the arrogance of amateurs.

I worked in a coffee shop for food and beer and pot money, of which there was never enough. One night after searching for change in the return slots of vending machines and payphones, I sat alone in the running car with Arthur. We hadn't found anything, and we didn't talk or look at each other as we waited for the car to warm up. Our breath was frosty as the engine sputtered and turned. There was a lone cigarette left, a stale Marlboro 100, which hung from my lips as I sifted through handfuls of empty matchbooks in the center console, searching for a lone match. My fingers fluttered and shook as I cursed and punched in the cigarette lighter. Arthur watched me with wide eyes. "Amazing," he said. "What a mess you are." He held out a yellow lighter and discharged it. As I held the cigarette over the flame, the engine sputtered again. It was then

Arthur told me that he was not alone in his mother's womb. "My twin was born dead," he said, "my sister. There would have been two of me." Frozen and fearful, I didn't reply; I drew off my cigarette and watched as the gas level sagged below the E and dangled well into the red zone. Then the dashboard lights blinked out and everything went dark.

May loomed heavy and warm as I lay in my bed and stared outside at the tops of nearby oak trees, longing for cessation, or at the least, a pause, a respite. There seemed no end to the black abyss of desire that opened up and demanded to be nourished, into which we continuously poured our dwindling resources in exchange for a mere moment or two of relaxation, no end to the stretched-out hours of the days that extended past the visibility line of the far-distant horizon. It was exhausting to contemplate. The perfumed scent of lilac drifted through the open window. It brought with it memories of my childhood bedroom, where I smelled lilac on the crest of late spring breezes before opening my eyes in

the morning. Now there were lilac bushes in front of my house, on the terrace at the coffee shop, and amassed near the west side of Paul's front porch. I took it as a sign and went looking for the mythical and historical lore of the lavender bloom. *Syringa vulgaris*, the Latin term for Lilac, means "belonging to the masses," but its common name derives from an Arabic word: Lilak, or "bluish." Lilac migrated from Western China to Persia in the 1200s, from Turkey to Europe in the 1500s, and from Europe to America with the settlers; Jefferson planted it and Washington transplanted it. Lilac, which indicated enchantment and the first emotions of love in a Victorian bouquet, is also a symbol of remembrance: when Lincoln was killed, Whitman broke a sprig of lilac with its flower and offered it to the passing coffin in the funeral procession, and "lilac and star and bird" became "Twined with the chant of (his) mind." The next year a May day was designated "for the purpose of strewing with flowers" the graves of Civil War soldiers, a tradition reflected in the Memorial Day Boy Scout

ritual of placing lilacs on local monuments.

Arthur's grandmother died in mid-May, and a few days later I arrived at Paul's apartment at 7 a.m. to give them a ride to the funeral. I rang the bell three times before Paul answered the door, and I could see that the Monster had gotten to him as well: his foul mood was apparent in his stooped posture, furrowed brow, and bitter complaints. Arthur was mostly silent on the ride down. When I asked how he felt, he screwed up his face and said he dreaded seeing his mother. As we neared the funeral home, twenty minutes late, Arthur waffled about which way to go. I slowed down, took turns at his direction, ambled across roads that ended in T-intersections, and turned around in more than one parking lot before he blurted out that we were lost.

"Guys, listen, can we just chill out here for a minute?" he mumbled as I threw the car in reverse and cut the wheel. I braked and exhaled, then looked at Arthur hard in the rearview mirror. His head hung low and he chewed his bottom lip.

"Can we just go home, have a nice breakfast and a walk in the woods? We're already late, and I don't -"

The back door slammed and Arthur was out of the car, gone.

I found Arthur's disappearing acts to be insulting and infuriating, while Paul maintained that Arthur would return once he had exhausted himself and needed shelter, which often didn't take very long. I focused instead on the overhead cloud cover that was heavy gray in spots and pierced through with sunlight and blue sky in others. It seemed to move quickly, sweeping from west to east across the panorama of the windshield. Within moments I saw Arthur emerge from the alleyway across the parking lot. He was backlit by late morning sun and his creamy skin glowed ivory, his hair blanched and golden. In his left hand he held a black Hefty garbage bag that looked almost full, and in his right he clutched a pair of pruning shears. I couldn't see his hands in detail, but I imagined them as I had seen them before, his skin toughened and cracked, encrusted

with the remains of wet soil and dried blood.

“Lilacs!” he said when he got into the car, a sloppy, malicious smile taking over his face. “There were like five full bushes in front of the funeral home!”

“You knew exactly where we were the whole time,” Paul said.

“You razed a funeral home?” I said.

“Oh, relax,” Arthur said. “Do you know how much I can get for these? It’s the end of the season for them anyway. Just drive home, will you?”

Back in Brewster, Arthur and I sat barefoot on the porch while Paul cooked breakfast. The sky had cleared and Paul’s multi-colored prayer flags fluttered crisply in the breeze. The brisk air contained traces of lingering chill, and wind chimes skittered and rang out overhead. Arthur sat next to me on the top porch step, smiled sadly, wrapped his arm around my waist, and drew me into his chest. For the moment the RDs were silent and unmenacing, and I shivered and tingled as I relaxed into Arthur’s warmth, the way a frosty limb will throb

with pins and needles when plunged into a pool of hot water.

Inside we sat cross-legged on the floor, held our plates up to our mouths, and ate eggs, sunny side up, bacon, wheat toast, and potatoes that were browned with rosemary, thyme and chives from the garden. There was orange juice that Paul squeezed out with a juicer, with fleshy pieces of floating pulp, hot sauce he pickled and saved from last winter, and warm frothed cream for the coffee that he whipped up in a round steel bowl. After we ate we took bong hits and fell asleep on Paul’s queen-sized bed, our bodies tangled up in each other, our breathing slowed and laborious, while early afternoon sun sifted through the blinds and streamed across our skin, and traffic groaned and rattled on the outside roadways.

In the next two days, we weren’t so lucky. I spent the time laid up in bed in my apartment, my swollen tongue covered in speed bumps, my head laid siege by the march of the Wild Torment. I remember I heard

the phone ring, several times, and ignored it. I heard Paul on the machine. He and Arthur got into a fight. No big surprise. I limped out of bed and turned the volume down, then got back under the covers. The phone rang again a few minutes later. Again – and again. I heard the machine click on, click off, back on, then off again. My heart rate quickened. My skin tingled and flushed. Why didn't they know when to leave me alone? I threw back the covers and moved toward the phone. "I'm allowed to be unavailable!" I shouted at the answering machine. The low scream in my ears amplified in volume and density. Another message clicked on the machine. 8 messages, then 9, 10. I leaned over and pulled the plug out of the wall, then picked up the receiver and dropped it back down in the cradle. It bounced out and dangled off the side of the table. The Monster roared. I hooked the cord with my foot and pulled it back until it crashed to the floor.

13 messages when I got up to use the bathroom a few hours later. My roommate must have hooked the phone

back up when I came in. 16 messages when I cooked ramen noodles at 2 a.m. 19 messages when I flew out of the house on my way to work the next morning.

Josh called me almost as soon as I'd arrived. "Where have you been?" he asked. "Do you know how long we've been trying to reach you?" The shift was busy and I balanced the phone against my ear as I heated soy milk for a latte. I couldn't hear him over the hiss of the steam, and when I finally turned the knob and cut the pressure off, he was shouting: "I said, Arthur's in jail! Where have you been?"

19 messages, some from Josh, but most were from Paul, most of which he left from a payphone at the hospital, in which he begged me to come pick him up. "I don't know anyone else with a car," he said, his voice scratchy and low. "And Arthur's in jail, I have to get out of here, and get to him, he'll never make it in there."

Their fight started over twenty bucks and a bag of weed, Paul said. That Arthur owed him money and wouldn't share his pot. That he stood behind Arthur,

who was crouched over his backpack on the floor, acting as if he were retrieving the money from his wallet, when suddenly he stood, whirled around, grabbed a nearby standup halogen lamp, and swung it like a baseball bat to land flush against Paul's face, which split open as the cheekbone collapsed. Blood splattered against the brown paneled walls and drip-dropped in smatters on the shag olive carpet. It was Arthur who started to scream, as Paul stood still and held his hand to his face. "You fucking idiot," Paul reputedly said. "Shut up and call an ambulance."

He didn't want to press charges, Paul said, he yelled at the police to leave Arthur alone as they handcuffed him and searched his pockets and came up with two 20 bags of weed and a handful of Dexedrine, which he was on at the time of the fight. Arthur was arrested, charged with felony assault, and held on \$3000 bail, which his mother refused to pay. Paul's face was sewn up with 24 tight neat stitches, and he took a bus home from the hospital to an apartment still littered with the debris of

their fight.

Thereafter my own apartment was deeply silent in Arthur's absence. Later Arthur would access the money his grandmother left him to bail himself out, and disappear into Manhattan to hustle for a living; later Paul's scar would pus and swell as he sat cross-legged on my carpet and wept over a Polaroid photo of Arthur. The rainbow fern finally wilted, its outer foliage browned and crisp. The thick sagging smell of dead lilac permeated the atmosphere and clung to my hair. In the poem "Piss Factory," Patti Smith watches schoolboys flap their legs under their desks and imagines the way their "dicks droop like lilacs, with all the odor and ammonia rising." To me the impotent clusters of blooms looked more like horse cocks as they sagged over the edges of their containers, and twisted and strained to kiss the countertops.