

## Blooming

Your boyfriend, a very sweet and aspiring yuppie, has begun to irritate you. He leaves the toilet seat up. You have, more than once, plunged bottom first into the toilet bowl. In addition, his Brooks Brothers' shirts now strain to encase his midriff. You attribute this to his nightly happy hour/male bonding sessions, from which he returns home horny and smelling of onion dip. You break up with him, though he is probably the only man who will want to marry you and produce the obligatory 2.5 children with you.

You lose your job at a Chicago publishing company. There is a personality conflict. The office manager, a four foot, seven inch Filipino, whom you'd like to ship bookrate back to her mother-land, doesn't like you. You are charming, witty, and speak perfect English. You correct her grammar on the circulating memos before passing them on. She wears tight polyester pants the color of your mother's Dodge Dart Swinger. You think up clever names for her while you should be computing credit memos...Dodge Ass, Assful Dodger, etc.. Smile sweetly at her when she piles invoices on your desk. Do not ask her how she breathes in those pants.

When your boss fires you, listen to his patronizing anecdote about being a Jewish kid from Jersey and his first job hauling hay on a farm.

"The job just wasn't right for me," he says, "just like this one isn't right for you, Hannah." He wants you to relate to his Jewish origins. He has keenly observed your nose, your tossing kinky, dark hair. Say: "Shalom," and gather up your personal belongings.

Abe, the man you are foolishly in love with, whom you aren't, under any circumstances, allowed to call your boyfriend, significant other, or main squeeze, decides to flee the segmentation of urban life and opts instead for a Meditation center in upstate New York. He will cut wood and sow fields to pay for his room and board and all the yoga and meditation lessons necessary to reach Nirvana. You suspect he is going there to engage in tantric sex, and have visions of flat chested girls in gauzy blouses stroking his freckled shoulders. You write him long, whiny letters you don't send and smoke lots of cigarettes.

You decide to move back home to Bloomington, Indiana. It is the rational thing to do. You will save money, eat right, and not be flashed weekly at your El stop. You were beginning to feel like you wore a T-shirt that read "SHOW ME YOUR PENIS." Often you wanted to shout, "Look, I know you're oppressed, but could you zip up your goddamned pants?" You come from a long line of NAACP donators; you understand the plight of the downtrodden. You find it amazing how much a penis can look like a weapon. You have taken to riding taxis and tipping too much.

Your father comes to pick you up in a Ryder truck. This has always been his job—taking you places and bringing you home. This is how he shows his love. You get nervous as you leave the city, wonder if you are making the right decision. You are fairly certain you can't get Thai food in Bloomington. Your father pats your knee.

“You okay, babe?”

“Yup,” you say, and look out the window.

You stop at a Holiday Inn for the night. Realize that you haven't seen your father in his pajamas since you were twelve. You refused to visit him in the summer time, as his home didn't have central air-conditioning. This made your face break out. He looks to you now like someone else's father, a T.V. show character.

Eat a greasy breakfast in the hotel restaurant amidst baby-blue haired ladies who chain smoke. You wonder about the correlation between lung cancer and blue hair. Ponder the ratio of smokers with blue hair. In your transitional stage, these seem to you important things. Your egg yolks have coagulated like a scab just before it begins to itch. Smile at your father and say: “Let's hit the road, Pops.”

Back in Bloomington, you look for a job. Your first interview is with a shoe store in an outlet mall. The store is in the process of becoming a discount store. Racks line the store front. The regular priced items are being moved to the new store in the New Bloomington mall. It will be called new, you are sure, well into the twenty-first century. You don't like the new mall. Your brain turns into hot pink lucite when you are there.

During your interview, the store manager asks you what your goals are.

Say: “I'm in a transitional stage right now.”

She nods.

You add: “Like the store.” Groan inwardly and look her straight in the eye, confident, poised, just as a job hunter should be.

You start work the next day. Everyone you work with is married and younger than you. When not at work, they work on finishing their dinnerware starter sets or becoming pregnant. They think you are nice, but a little weird. One girl remembers you from your high school cheerleading days. To her you are a fallen angel, once the envy of all Bridemont High, now an old maid. They offer you make-up tips. Tracey recommends lipstick. You watch her blot her lips.

“Like this,” she says, holding her lips taut and opened against a Kleenex. When she pulls it away, a precise hot pink circle glares at you.

There is a wedding in the mall. All the stores give the couple gifts; living room furniture from Montgomery Ward, an area rug from K-Mart, a pair of shoes for both the bride and groom from your store. Furr's Cafeteria supplies the happy couple with a reception.

The wedding draws a crowd. The parents of the bride own the Tall and Big Mans Shop. The mother dabs her eyes throughout the ceremony. You tell yourself she is upset her baby isn't having a church wedding. Later, you will find out this was her idea. The matrimony bells have brought business to the dying mall.

You catch the bouquet. Your fellow workers are elated. You wonder which store donated the flowers. They are pink, and match the crepe paper streamers hanging above you on the mall sign. A reporter finds you in the crowd.

"Will you have your wedding in a mall?" he asks, ramming a microphone into your face.

Say: "I don't believe in malls. They all end in divorce anyway."

He looks at you blankly.

"I've been thinking about having illegitimate children, actually," you say, and wander off smelling your bouquet.

With your first paycheck buy several house plants. Name them Raskolnikov, Clea, Nelly. Set them in the sun, by the picture window in the library. Water them religiously.

Things are going slowly at the shoe store. Some days you sit in the storage room and pull shoes from boxes and write up price tags for them. You don't particularly hate this because you can let your mind wander. You compose poetry in your head. You think of the imprisoned Soviet writers who, denied pen and paper, scratched their poems onto bars of soap. You consider writing a poem on the sole of a Van Eli pump.

You pull a pair of clunky platform shoes from a box. Say: "These are hideous!"

Your manager comes from behind you and observes the shoes.

"No matter how much you hate them, someone out there will just love them," she says.

"Yes," you say, "Yes!"

Your manager looks at you skeptically. She is unaware of the profundity of her statement.

At night you find yourself reading beauty magazines. Begin drinking eight glasses of water a day. Make facial masks out of oatmeal, egg yolk and honey, or lemon and yogurt. Put cucumber slices on your puffy eyelids. Your skin glows. Sit in your downstairs bedroom, alone, with your peaches and cream complexion.

Other nights, your old friend Audrey picks you up. She too lives at home. To socialize in private, you drive through Bloomington smoking and drinking diet soda. Audrey is a travel agent by day and has recently been attending seminars on Asia, London, and Orlando, in hopes of winning tickets to these vacation spots.

"I want to go somewhere warm," you say, "somewhere where no one wears shoes. How about Morocco? Win us tickets there."

“I don’t see you working real hard to get us out of the country in that shoe store, for God’s sake,” Audrey says.

Audrey tells you that her parents still watch her bank account and won’t allow her to have credit cards.

“Move out,” you say. “You must be crazy to stay there.”

“Birds of a feather flock together, for God’s sake,” Audrey says, lighting a cigarette and making fierce eye contact with you at the same time.

Your mother has resumed her maternal duties. The porch light has been left on for you. Every morning she leaves piles of vitamins on the breakfast table. She understands your stress level is high.

In Chicago you were the one who cajoled your friends to leave bars and night clubs before dawn, the one who made homemade chicken soup and felt strongly about safe sex. Even as a child you were responsible, cautious. You remember stepping carefully into the bathtub, so you wouldn’t slip and crack your skull open, which would undoubtedly have made your mother hysterical. This was to be avoided.

Now that you are home, you want to go to a glittery disco dressed in black silk, drink Amaretto Sours and go home with strange men. They will say, “Hey babe, you’ve got beautiful skin, wanna boogie?” You are under your mother’s wing again—reduced to a rebellious teen with a green thumb.

Your plants are flourishing. You are rewarded with tiny blossoms on your *Adromischus*, a plant, the florist told you, that rarely blooms indoors. Due to your recent success, buy more plants. In the back yard, you start an herb garden of marjoram, dill, summer savory. Often you have dirt under your fingernails when you get to work. The sun has bleached your leg hairs though, so you no longer live in fear that your co-workers will discover that you don’t shave them. You have integrity. You will not shave your legs for \$3.50 an hour.

You receive a collect call from Abe, the meditator. He tells you he is trying to lead the “Peaceful Life.” You tell him about your plants. He tells you about a two week long seminar he just finished.

“In order to experience life as the cave-dwelling monks did,” he says, “we covered the windows of our cabins with black paper.”

You imagine what your bougainvillea would look like without light for two weeks. Imagine that Abe is now a pallid lima bean. Do not giggle. He will take umbrage.

He is calling, he tells you, because he won’t be able to visit you as planned.

“Oh, ok, um. . . why not?” you ask, careful not to let your voice grow bitter. That might not be peaceful. He explains that it would be difficult to leave the center at this point. He has so much to learn. Yes, you think, indeed. Say: “No matter how much you hate me Abe, someone out there will love me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Hannah. I don’t hate you,” he says.

You remember being at a party of Abe’s friends. He had snapped at you for following him around. “Hannah, you know I don’t like it when you’re a clingy-vine. You’re an attractive woman. Surely you can find someone to talk to.” And he’d left you standing by the table of unidentifiable h’ors d’oeuvres. Realize that Abe wants you to be an accent, like paprika on potato salad, like a carnation on a lapel. You are not to get in the way.

You think you hear Abe chanting or humming on the other end.

“Peace,” he says and hangs up. You are left with the hum, which you now realize is only static.

The fall shoes have arrived at the store. Your co-workers buy a pair in every color. Splurge on a red pair. Click your heels together and hope the scenery will change from black and white to luxurious color.

You receive a post card from the yuppie. He is vacationing on the Cape with his new girl friend. She is a graphic artist, he writes. He is a nice man, a faithful correspondent. You feel no regrets.

Abe sends you a letter decorated with peace signs, squiggly hieroglyphics, spirals, big daisies. You consider getting him in touch with the yuppie’s new friend. He writes that he is leaving the meditation center to hang with the aborigines in Australia.

You spend a lot of time listening to Janis Joplin. Call Abe and bellow into the phone: “All you have to do is be a good man to one woman, one time!”

Your herbs are green and pungent. You like the way they grow taller, lusher, but stay in their neat little rows. They are well behaved babies, not soiling their jumpsuits, maturing before your eyes. Make pasta dishes with tomatoes, olive oil and fresh basil.

“It’s delicious,” your mother says, using her finger to wipe the sauce from her plate.

“Cheers,” you say, and drink your wine.

After dinner you go to the symphony. Because your tickets were bought late, you and your mother sit separately. You take the balcony seat. In the dark, smell the spicy perfume of the woman next to you, the traces of pipe smoke from the professorial type in front of you. Listen to the violins straggling and the flutes quivering to the high notes, as they warm up. You come to the conclusion that if everyone’s thoughts were released from their minds and into this auditorium, they would sound exactly like this. You are dizzy, exhilarated.

The conductor arrives and the music begins. You sink down in your seat, letting your head rest on the plush velvet. Shut your eyes. The music is wrapping itself around you as softly as a baby’s blanket. This is a luxury, you think, like the

birth control pills you continue to swallow nightly. It is a luxury to be surrounded by good friends as you were in Chicago. In fact, you concede, you are lucky to have them even far away. The orchestra crescendoes and the music fans out like hands reaching you, fortifying you.

You stop accepting Abe's collect calls. You can use the money to buy plants, fertilizer, peat moss. His letters are discordant and bitter. You no longer care what continent he is exploring, what food the natives eat. Growth can occur without movement. Of this you feel certain.

You cannot possibly use all the herbs your garden produces. Try giving them to your co-workers. They eye you suspiciously and claim to only use Accent. You decide to take them to a nursery downtown, in hopes you can package them and sell them there.

You have never been to Ivy's Nursery. The hours are sporadic, but today it's open. The sun comes in through dusty stained glass windows. You smell the sweetness of dirt. Dried flowers hang from the ceiling, and in the rear, fig trees and ferns are clustered around a rotund woman on a green love seat. She is wearing more Indian print than you have ever seen, even in a college dormitory. She holds her needlepointing up for you to see.

"It's Wordsworth, you know," she says and reads out loud, 'And 'tis my faith that every flower enjoys the air it breathes.' I'm going to put it there, above the seeds."

Smile kindly and watch her needle move in and out, as she finishes the vine.

"And how exquisite to have a customer. How can I help you?"

Give her your spiel about your herbs. Tell her how exquisite they are. She takes your sample and sniffs at it.

"Ah, heavenly," she says. "I find it hard to trust people who don't grow things. Can I offer you a cup of tea or a job?" She stands and bustles to the back.

Watch her as she boils water over a hot plate. She is as round as the center of a sunflower. In your mind you are already rearranging the place, removing clutter, stacking the fertilizer in the rear. Decide your herbs would look nice in little glass jars with cork lids. You will put them by the cash register.

She returns with your tea in unmatched china. "I don't like time commitments," she says. "They are such a bother. By the way dear, I'm Vivian. Ivy went into the gift shop business last year and I'm too lazy to change the name."

You begin work the next day. Resod the ferns quietly dying in the rear. Pick off the yellowing leaves. Vivian doddles in at noon, a new cross stitch in her hands. "Henceforth I shall know that Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure," she reads, and heads for the love seat.

Business picks up at the nursery, now that it is open regularly. Your herbs are selling. Vivian is amazed at what you've done to the shop. She has taken to

calling you “Sweet Pea” or “Morning Glory” and you don’t even mind.

You decide the shop needs to stock tropical flowers. Start with African violets and Laellas, an orchid from Mexico. You install light fixtures. They make the shop glow with a soft purple light. The orchids grow delicately in the shade, their pale petals fanning out like bows. Your customers admire them.

“They are epiphytes,” you say. “In nature they grow on tree branches, clinging to the bark, but obtaining their nourishment from the air and the rain.”

The customer nods and checks the price tag on the ceramic pot.

“They aren’t parasites, as you can see by the way this one is flourishing on its own. They simply grow better with the other plant’s support.”

The customer decides to buy one for her bedroom. She wants to browse a little longer. You carry the flower to the counter for her. Touch the petals. A dewy orange powder covers your fingertips. Think of Abe on the other side of the world, watching crimson sunsets. Smile. Realize that it should be as simple as this—a flower on a tree.

-Rachel Hall