

*Margherita Arco*

## JACINTO SHAVES

It is the day that Jacinto decides to shave that his boss's life changes forever. Jacinto rinses the soap from his razor and lifts it to his cheek. He knows he will be fired today. At least he will be fired looking his best.

The white people always say they have difficulty guessing Jacinto's age. He too must guess it. He was born before they built the bridge. He remembers taking the ferry, as a small child, to the monastery school. The date when it was built has been inscribed in the stone. 1972. Jacinto is strong. His eyes are gray.

As he opens the screen door of his ochre colored house to walk to the main house of the farm, he sees that the pages on the calendar have not been ripped off. September 16th. The national holiday. *El Grito del Dolor*, cry of pain. Two hundred years to the day since insurgents took up arms in Querétaro to fight colonial rule.

Jacinto's wife has fallen into a bad spell. She drank too much tequila, celebrating the drink more than the revolutionaries. Since then, she has been a shadow between sober and drunk.

She has not moved from the yellowing plastic chair in front of the television. Jacinto rips the pages from the calendar, letting them fall to the floor. He stops at September 21st. His wife does not notice, not even when he switches off the television. Even the cock has stopped crowing since the national holiday, and the chickens have been hiding their eggs.

Weeks ago, he planted the fields at the bottom of the mountains with bright yellow, orange, and pink flowers that will bloom on the day of the wedding. The owner's niece will marry a musician on the second Saturday of October. The musician is the son of the president. Jacinto's boss's excitement is visible.

But earlier in the day when Jacinto went to the fields to water them before the sun rose over the mountains to heat the valley, the flowers had begun to bloom: white and eighteen days early.

Only after lunch, when the owner of the farm has finished his business, does he have time to see Jacinto. The owner strides ahead, impatient on the walk from the main house to the fields. His wife and Jacinto struggle to keep up.

As they pass the ancient trees with knotted roots that extend and then disappear beneath the ground, Jacinto feels the sting of his earlier shave. He wonders whether these trees knew his ancestors. The owner's wife has decorated the tree with plastic leprechauns clutching pots of gold.

When they reach the fields, the flowers have almost completely opened, unrelentingly white. Not one of them yellow, orange, or pink as Jacinto's boss had ordered.

"Were you drunk when you planted the seeds in the fields?" the owner demands, shaking Jacinto's shoulder.

"No," Jacinto says, then adds, "Sir."

"And you made sure to plant only the theme colors of the wedding?"

Jacinto clutches his hat and stares at the dark earth. He knows what is coming.

"Yes, sir."

But everything happens differently.

The owner's sister appears suddenly on the other side of the field, causing him to shade his eyes with his hand, unsure he actually saw her or whether it was an illusion of the sun. But she advances at a determined pace. The owner takes a step back. It's a three-hour drive from Mexico City to the farm. He wasn't expecting her. He concentrates on her pink polished nails as she

draws closer, her car keys dangling from her hand. And then, instinctively, he knows and thrusts his arms in front of him as if to fend her off. His sister stops several paces away. His wife plucks at her husband's sleeve, unable to comprehend the horror spreading across his face.

His sister delivers the message in a controlled voice. The owner's son has drowned. His *gallo*, his eldest son, his heir, his beloved rooster has drowned. He was with his *gringa* girlfriend on the Pacific Coast. This cannot be, he thinks. There must be some mistake. He wants to move, spring into action, correct this misinformation. But he is paralyzed. He cannot move.

His wife tries to scream, then speak, but her voice has fallen silent. All she can do is observe the fields as they grow whiter and whiter. Only at nightfall will the flowers stop blooming. The valley is in an ocean of white. She knows this is her son saying good-bye.

For the eighteen days until the wedding, which will not be called off, people come to see the flowers. Strangers, family, friends.

A week later, a photograph of the miraculous flowers appears in the local paper. A year later, the same photograph will be used in an advertisement for industrial weed killer.

Today, however, the owner, his wife, his sister, and Jacinto stare at the fields of blooming white flowers. The owner remembers his son walking across the field from the pool to the main house accompanied by his fellow law students; his wife remembers her son with a tricycle at four years old, wearing black rubber boots and shorts; the owner's sister remembers her nephew at the edge of the field, an adolescent sneaking a kiss from a local girl; and Jacinto remembers the owner's son always bringing him and his wife *conchas*, a sweetened bread, from a famous bakery in the city when he came to visit his parents.

Jacinto feels his beard growing back. And when he enters his garden, the rooster begins to crow. His wife has not moved, but she turns her head. Perhaps she too has heard the cock crow.