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How Did You Ever Get These to Grow in Decatur?

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Sam Harrison is an English major. He wishes he were interested in things like good coffee and fine art. He does like board games. In his senior year of high school he told his guidance counselor he didn't know how to tie his shoes. She believed him.

How Did You Ever Get These to Grow in Decatur?

Mabel hated the dry cleaner's on the corner of Broad Street and 7th in Decatur, Mississippi. The windows were never clean and the linoleum tile inside had an orange tint from rust that made her cringe. Given that it was the only dry cleaner's in town open on Sunday, Mabel had little choice but to visit it on this day.

"That'll be fourteen dollars and fifty one cents Ms. Hoxfield," the young clerk said. His nametag read 'Jamal.' Mabel hadn't ever met anyone else named Jamal before. In fact, she wasn't even sure how it was pronounced. The new children in this town, with their new names, Mabel thought; it was overwhelming.

Mabel handed him fifteen dollars and tapped her fingers on the dirty counter impatiently while the boy counted out the change. The boy looked up from the register, his dark eyes scowled at Mabel. "Is something the matter, m'am?" Mabel didn't answer.

"Forty-nine cents is your change, have a nice day," the boy said, and put the change on the counter. Mabel slid the coins off the edge and into her hands one by one in an exaggerated motion. There was a mason jar full of change on the counter for the food pantry, and as she pulled her cleaned clothes off the counter, she knocked the jar off the counter and it broke on the floor. Broken glass and coins spilled all over the rust-covered floor. Mabel looked up at the boy, his dark face framing his accusing eyes. She looked once more at the mess on the floor and walked towards the door.

"Don't worry about it," the boy said, "I'll clean it up." There was a thick layer of sarcasm in the boy's tone; he was clearly frustrated she hadn't said anything. She could feel the blood rush to her face. She was tense and angry, though she didn't know why. She threw open the dirty glass doors, and walked out of the store.

The dry cleaner's hadn't always been such a horrible place to go, Mabel thought. Eight years ago, before Carlos, the town entrepreneur who owned half the businesses on Broad Street, the cleaner's had been owned by a man Mabel went to church with. It was a clean, respectable store then, but the owner had retired, and Carlos had moved in, with his rusty floors.

As Mabel hung her dry cleaning from the hook in the back seat of her car and started the short drive home, she thought about the way Decatur had changed, and the way it was still changing. She hated that the people that worked at the gas station didn't always speak English. Decatur used to be a town where everyone knew everyone else, and now, the faces seemed different. The new children didn't seem to respect the town's old guard like she had once respected her elders. The once beautiful houses that bordered the town were now old and decrepit. Strange kids hung around corners, with no apparent business to be there. The crime rate had gone up and the police officers weren't as friendly anymore. When the high schools had been integrated thirty years ago, the new families moved into town to attend the one central high school. Mabel had seen her once beautiful and simple town run down by outsiders. She missed the Decatur of her childhood; there was less confusion and things were simpler then.

Then Mabel thought about her neighbor, Desmond. She thought about his dark brown eyes, how the flecks of silver in his curly black hair made him seem wise. He was different than these new people in the town. He had a quiet respect and a deep love for Mississippi, like Mabel. It seemed odd that he could be this way. He had graduated in the first class of the integrated high school, ten years after Mabel, and he seemed like he should

have been just like all the other things in Decatur that were changing beyond Mabel's control. But he wasn't. Since they'd met, Mabel had stopped questioning the providence that had brought him into her life, as it seemed to defy even her own expectations.

Seven weeks before, Mabel had badly sprained her ankle while gardening, and Desmond, also an avid gardener (Mabel had been admiring his black-eyed susans in secret for weeks) came rushing over to help her. She'd immediately resented it when he took off her shoe to examine the swelling, and then rushed inside to grab some ice. His hands felt course and he smelled strange and unfamiliar. He was entirely too forward. Mabel had felt mortified and violated immediately. She was clearly a decade older than this man, and yet he had no problem barging onto her property, touching her without being asked. He carried her inside, despite her protest, and set her on the couch just inside the door. She repeatedly denied his request to call a doctor and she thanked him quickly, mostly in an attempt to rid him from her house and end the intrusion. She had taken a deep breath as soon as he walked out, relieved that the awkward moment had passed.

It wasn't until later that evening that Mabel had softened up to Desmond. Around eight o'clock in the evening, he had shown up at her door. Before opening it, she was a little irritated that someone would consider calling on her that late at night, but any annoyance faded as quickly as she saw the flowers in Desmond's hands. He was holding a vase overflowing with brilliant white Cala lilies. There was perhaps nothing Mabel loved more than flowers.

"Just thought I'd bring by some flowers to help cheer you up Ms. Hoxfield. My name's Desmond Jones," he said. She remembered smiling, just a little, despite her best efforts to remain poker faced.

"How did you ever get these to grow in Decatur? I've been trying for nearly twenty years and never gotten so much as one healthy plant. Too much clay in the soil, I think," she said.

Desmond laughed and pointed from the front porch over to his back yard. "The light is just right back there. The light back there and a lot of water, that usually does the trick. You'd be surprised at what can grow here with the right amount of care."

Mabel stared at the delicate purple edges of the white lilies. Her grandmother had grown them in North Carolina when she was a girl. She remembered running through the backyard, overflowing with beautiful white flowers. They only bloomed for a couple months in the summer, and this only made Mabel love them more. Their transient, short-lived nature excited Mabel. They were something pure and beautiful that needed to be appreciated in the small moment they were alive.

"Can I come in?" Desmond said.

"Yes...yes you can." She was still having trouble getting words out. Her gaze was locked on the flowers.

Desmond lifted his large boots over the threshold and onto the immaculate wood flooring in the entryway of Mabel's home.

"Let me get some water for them," she said. She made an awkward grab for the glass vase in his hands, and he released it with little protest.

"This is a really lovely home you have, Ms. Hoxfield. You have quite a knack for decorating," he said. He ran his hands over the beautiful antique pictures that were hung on the wall, each one clearly cherished, and framed beautifully.

"You can call me Mabel...and thank you," she said. Mabel filled the large vase with water, and continued to make small talk with Desmond from the kitchen.

He hadn't stayed long that Sunday, but the visits had stretched out each week after. Two weeks later, he stayed past midnight. They'd sat on her porch, smoking cigarettes and talking for hours. Mabel couldn't remember the last time she had stayed up that late, but it had seemed as though time had flown by, and before she knew it, it was well into the

night. He had a deep laugh that made her smile. She hadn't been able to remember the last person she was that able to talk to in Decatur. It had gone on like this for six Sundays, and each week's visit growing longer than the last's. The lilies would fade and be renewed week by week; it was a patient rhythm.

Two Sundays later, they'd stayed up nearly all night on the back porch, talking about Decatur, the way they both noticed it changing. Desmond worked two towns over in Gatesville managing a paper plant. His job gave him a bit of political clout in both Decatur and Gatesville, and Mabel found herself increasingly impressed by Desmond's professional life. He was so confident, yet at the same time, had a driving humility and self-awareness that kept him honest. It reminded Mabel of the way people in Decatur used to be. It seemed so odd that Desmond could be like this.

Every week after that, Mabel counted down the days until Sunday. She tried not to concern herself with cynical thoughts; she focused only on Desmond. She focused on how they could talk about politics, religion, the way Decatur was changing, anything. They agreed about little of what they spoke, and yet still fought about nothing. Their conversations had a poetic depth and yet still always seemed playful and light hearted. It was on the fifth Sunday they met, that Mabel first admitted to herself that she was romantically attracted to Desmond. She'd found him handsome ever since he'd arrived on her doorstep, lilies in hand, but now it was more than that, it was a feeling she felt in the pit of her stomach. He was beautiful, she thought, with his dark eyes, his grey hair and his scratchy voice. He made her happy.

As Mabel returned to her house from the dry cleaner's, her thoughts fell back to the Sunday one week ago. Desmond had shown up on her door with a bottle of wine, and another dozen Cala lilies in his hand. They'd spent that entire night on the back porch, drinking the wine and reminiscing. Mabel usually detested the bitter taste of red wine, but in the humid Mississippi air, with Desmond at her side, she'd found that wine's flavor sweet and wonderful. They'd talked about the people in Decatur, how neighbors didn't seem so friendly anymore, how people didn't go to church every Sunday anymore and the lukewarm paper market in the Delta. Desmond was far smarter than she, Mabel conceded. He had an ability to see the change in Decatur, the uncontrollable rollover of people as the opportunity to remake their town. Mabel wasn't sure she'd ever wanted to lose the old Decatur, but when Desmond talked about it, the enthusiasm in his voice brought her in, made her trust him. She loved to hear him talk. At two o'clock in the morning, Desmond had gone back to his house to get another bottle of wine. He returned a few minutes later, and they'd stayed up the rest of the night finishing the wine and eventually watching the sun creep up over the marshland behind her house. Mabel was sure on more than one occasion Desmond's hand had brushed against hers in a way that seemed not-so-accidental. She didn't mind.

As Desmond walked out the door that morning, he caught Mabel by the hand, and in one swing of his arm about hers, he'd spun her towards him and kissed her. Mabel was too surprised to resist. His hands no long felt rough like the first Sunday they had met; they were smooth and strong now. She felt her body press closer to his instinctually. Mabel felt light-headed, and she could feel the strength in her knees wavering. Desmond smiled at her, his wrinkled cheeks seemed even darker and more handsome than usual to Mabel. He lifted his large boots over the threshold and walked back down the sidewalk to his house. Mabel couldn't move.

Mabel hadn't kissed a man in years, and certainly had never had the breath literally taken from her like that. There was an unknown passion in it. She wasn't sure if it was the smooth, uneasy flow of her intoxication, or the fact her heart hadn't stopped pounding, but she needed to lie down. As she did, she thought about Desmond, the way he smelled, the way he touched her hands with his. There were a lot of complicated

feelings, and Mabel wasn't sure she completely understood all of them. She wasn't sure if the alcohol had given her a confident but false sense of cognizance or if the feelings were genuine, but above anything else, she was sure she felt love.

Mabel had spent the week after that in a haze. It had been a week full of comfortable, sunny days, but she'd spent most of them inside, looking at the lilies. Their immediate beauty was ever-fading, but always present. She thought about Desmond, too. She spent hours contemplating going over to visit him on a weeknight. On Wednesday, she'd even gotten as far as putting her shoes on and walking towards the front door, but something stopped her. It didn't seem right. For some reason, it only seemed natural that Desmond was the one who initiated their visits. He had a cool confidence in their relationship that Mabel needed. Small talk with him seemed interesting, and deep conversations were easy. On Thursday, Mabel had gone to the liquor store in town to buy two more bottles of red wine, just in case Desmond forgot. She wanted this Sunday to be as special as the last had been.

Mabel walked in the house, and set her dry cleaning on the couch. She paused momentarily to look at the pictures on the wall. There was a picture of her with her father when she was young, and a picture of her laughing with friends in high school. The gray, faded pictures made Mabel smile. She glanced over at the clock in the living room; it was five-thirty. That gave her two and a half hours to get ready, she thought. She walked inside and eagerly began preparing the house for Desmond's arrival. The house was already perfectly clean, but Mabel found herself checking and double-checking every room, scrubbing countertops that had already been scrubbed. She wasn't sure what this week's visit would bring, and whatever it was, she couldn't wait. Small neighborly chatter had changed slowly into far more, and tonight seemed equally promising. She walked into the kitchen and pulled out a bottle of red wine from the cupboard, paused, and then upon thinking about it, pulled out a second. She checked the cabinet to see that there were clean wine glasses, and she pulled two more packs of cigarettes from the carton in the pantry, and put them in her purse. She slowly compiled a list of things yet done in her head, but she was stopped by the sound of the doorbell.

Mabel shot a tense look at the kitchen clock; it was six-thirty. She wondered who it could be. Desmond always arrived after eight o'clock, never earlier. In fact she'd never seen him before nightfall. She opened the door, nonetheless, to Desmond's tall frame, illuminated by the sun perched on the horizon. The light made a pale white glow around him and Mabel was very surprised to see him standing there. He was holding a single white lily in a small glass vase; she looked at it.

"It's the last one!" he said, "I can't believe you cleaned out my whole garden like this."

Mabel smiled softly and looked him in the eyes. She was still a little confused why he had shown up so early.

"I figured I would make up for the lack of flowers by taking you out to dinner. I got us a reservation in town...I figured we ought to finally go somewhere together," he said.

Mabel felt her vision go blurry as he uttered the last word. She could feel the heat of the blood rushing to her face, like it had at the dry cleaner's earlier that day. Mabel looked into Desmond's dark eyes. She was sure her face was noticeably red, and she could feel her hands begin to shake.

In a single, quick motion, she slammed the door shut. Mabel exhaled. A thick layer of oak was now standing firmly between her and the black man on her porch. She stepped back slowly from the door in disbelief. There was a long pause, and then she heard Desmond step off the front porch and mumble something to himself. She waited longer, not sure for what she was waiting. There was the momentary sound of glass shattering on the sidewalk.