

The Allotment

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Alma's allotment sat between a main road and the coast, on the ridge of a slope that led down to the sea. If you were good at keeping your hedge trimmed, you could face your chair towards the ocean and pretend there weren't any cars at all, especially on quiet days. Alma was very good at keeping her hedge trimmed. She paid one of the boys from the village to chop it with her wife's old cutters, so she could always see the water.

The allotment was Alma's favourite place, she went every morning and worked on her vegetables until she could see the freckles on her arms. When the air cooled and the wind came in from the water, she would turn her chair to face the sea, and watch until it was almost dark. On the weekdays she always tried to arrive at her allotment earlier and leave later, so she was there when the families from the village walked to work and school and back again. She liked to overhear words from their conversations and knit them together to make a whole life.

There were five other allotments in the patch, but none of the owners seemed to come as often as Alma. Before she died, her wife Zora would join her on the weekends. Alma would give Zora the tour, show her how all the vegetables and fruits were doing. Zora liked to hitch her trousers up from the thigh and squat until her cheeks almost touched the earth, her nose in the cabbages. She always gave good feedback on any recent growth, even on one occasion when they arrived to discover a slug infestation in the spinach. Without saying a word Zora stood straight up and disappeared from the allotment, returning ten or so minutes later with slug killer. Alma waited until Zora had sat down with her thermos to tip the chemical out in the corner of the allotment. She replaced it with water and scattered it over the leaves as Zora watched. After Zora went home Alma picked up the slugs and relocated them closer to the water, which she thought they might like.

Alma liked the way time moved in her allotment. Since she retired and began finding it more difficult to walk down the slope to the sea, she used the shoots and leaves and upturned soil to mark her years. Her days and hours were moved by a twist of pole bean around bamboo and the angle of her hat against the sun. She liked to watch the way her vegetables changed. Some days she would arrive and, with her ruler, be able to measure an inch of new green shoot on the garlic in her small greenhouse, or dig her fingers into the earth and gently tap the beginnings of a potato underneath long green leaves.

Once Alma's vegetables and fruits had reached a certain age and she was forced to harvest them, things got more difficult. Every time she tried to cook and eat the food she had grown, instead of ripe flesh and flavour, she tasted salt. She was too full of the memory of the plants growing, the way she had nurtured them. The more she thought about the season behind her, the more her mouth seemed to fill with the taste of salt, like a rock pool when the tide goes out. But after sharing a courgette with a neighbour, she realised that it was only her mouth that tasted the salt, and so began gifting her harvests to people in the village.

She noticed it first in late May. She had planted the butternut squash seeds only a few weeks ago, kept them indoors until the last frost had passed, and then transferred them into her larger bed. It had only been a week or so but already a new fruit was growing, forcing its way through the earth. She got on her knees to examine it. It was small but she could trace her fingers along the lines of its body like a stick in sand. The green leaves that held it were flawless and unbitten. This one must be special. She made a note in the book that she kept and spent the walk home thinking about how it might grow in the next few weeks, how heavy it would be in her arms. That night when Alma was washing her face she thought about when her daughter was young and they would walk by the ocean together. Her daughter would comb the beach for seashells with holes in their narrow ends and count them into a special box when she got home. As they walked Alma told her daughter stories of how the shells had got there, the creatures that used to carry their homes around the floor of the ocean, how the sand she scooped into her little hands was made of the shells that no one had taken home. In the morning when Alma woke she phoned her daughter. The voicemail answered but she hung up before the beep.

The squash grew big. Taller than the length of Alma's arm and plump like a full stomach. Alma felt something bitter rising from her gut at the thought of harvesting it. This had happened before. Not long ago she had tended so carefully to a patch of courgettes that she couldn't bear to pluck them from their roots when the time came. She watched as the plants gradually swelled before beginning to wither and lose their colour. Eventually she arrived to find the courgettes almost entirely disappeared. She watches the patch in case the seeds might reflower.

Each day Alma went straight to the squash plot, to see how her sturdy friend was getting on. They only had a few weeks together before the squash would be ripe, marked by the notes Alma had taken since first planting the seed. She knew any longer than that and it would soften and she would be forced to watch the life of it fold in on itself like a crisp packet in a microwave. Although she still watered and cared for her other fruits and vegetables, she found herself spending more and more time next to the squash, often now abandoning her chair and rooting herself firmly on the earth. Alma and the squash watched the sky getting darker over the ocean together.

Her wife died in two months. In June she started coughing during a trip to London to see a show. When the cough didn't stop, Alma told Zora to go to the doctors in the same way you remind your children to wash their hands before dinner. They X-rayed her straight away, diagnosed her within the week. It was too late for treatment but Zora shaved her head anyway, said she wanted to see the way her skull was shaped before she died. Alma did the same.

Sometimes as she sat beside the squash Alma ran her fingers across the green stem that tied the fruit to the earth. Would it be possible to separate it from the patch, just for a day or two, to take the squash and find her way down the slope to the water's edge where they could sit and feel the spray of the water at high tide. She longed to lick her lips and taste the waves, to feel her skin crack against the wind and share the water with someone.

As the days passed, Alma began to wake up feeling nauseous and breathless, as though she'd been sleeping near the exhaust of a car. She arrived home later and later each day

and found her appetite waning. She avoided looking at her calendar and stepped quickly past mirrors, the dusty bones and swallowed skin that greeted her no match for the sights of her garden and the compost in the lines of her hands. The boxes of harvested fruits and vegetables she had meant to deliver around the village ran in a line from her front door to the nearest chair in which she now often slept, breadcrumbing her daily movements after returning from the allotment.

When the squash began bursting at its roots, Alma spent her days on the other side of the allotment, planting rows of carnations in such a way that their faces might grow towards the ocean. She read a book during her breaks, shaking her head when thoughts of harvesting the squash came to her. But when finally the squash became too large for a book to offer distraction, she sat down next to the patch. With shaking hands, she wrapped her fingers around the squash's stem and held its body with her other hand. The tiny bristles on the length of the stem brushed against her palm. Sometimes when Zora couldn't sleep Alma had stroked her shaved head to calm her, felt the sharp hairs growing after just a few weeks. It could have been a year but it was only two months and Alma woke in the night and found her cold.

As she cut through the flesh of the squash's stem, breaking it loose from its roots, Alma raised her head to the sky and closed her eyes. She could smell the sea and the memories of her life next to it. She lifted the squash and held it against her body like a child, her fingers moulding furrows in its ripe skin. The squash had left a large round indent in the ground, and pushing her fingers into the earth, Alma could feel the warmth of the fruit; the shape its body had made in the soil. Her overalls were damp with dew and stuck to her like honey on a spoon as she lifted her body into the plot and curled her spine around the squash. As they lay together she willed the roots of her vegetables to come up. To wrap their tendrils around her and let her rest. Her body sighed and the soil took her in, pulling her down in small gulps and inhales, the empty patch just large enough to hold her life.