

On Boys and Plants

(a short fiction loosely based on my experience of foster-parenting nature's children)



I see him most days when he comes into the office to water the plants. There's a girl from the company which supplied them in the first place who comes occasionally – to prune dead leaves and wipe dust from waxy stems. But he always makes sure to come too, or more often now, on his own. Carrying a watering can of sturdy green plastic, and going from plant to plant flushing life through those brown clay balls of latter-day container horticulture. Until the little bobble in its clear plastic shunt indicates enough. That's enough today, thank you.

All so urban and not of their original bush homes. But what is now home, I wonder, as I watch. How does it feel to be transplanted thus, to so sterile an environment? This place of chrome and glass and grey. Do they know, or understand, or feel the shift intuitively? Or is it like chooks. Or refugees. Knowing nothing else. No other home. Just a tiny flicker of ancestral memory, of something different, warmer, truer perhaps. Maybe a scent on the wind the reminder, or sunlight shafting through particles of dust, pricking behind always moist eyes. This knowledge – this shift in the stomach that something doesn't feel right. I speculate – but I know. And so does he, this boy. So he comes into the office whistling or humming, laughing or calling hello to this one or that, denying that which he knows.

It's like he always has springs in his shoes, this bouncing walk he affects. Hello, Miss Carey, is his cheery greeting to me. Always, Miss Carey.

Marcelo, I say, on (what is) a regular basis. You can call me Jane, you know.

And then he stops, as if shot. Sprung shoes rooted to the floor as he stares me full in the face, measuring intent. With eyes wide open and deeply black, these eyes: Oh Miss Carey, that's just not possible! You are always Miss Carey to me. And then smiles and shrugs while I too smile and shrug.

It's like a secret game, these things we know. And he resumes his bouncing from plant to plant, while I turn back to the files on my desk.

I wonder if I should remind him of the first time we met – there at the airport, me with lost luggage. I had stood at the carousel for ages until eventually, as is always the case, there is no one left standing, and no other luggage left circling the belt. Until eventually, the belt stops altogether.

And I think – great, just great; welcome to downtown Switzerland – followed by the procedure of going to the lost luggage counter and completing a form, until, in the midst of its penning, the thought suddenly arises: Oh, but he's waiting for me, this driver, out there on the other side of customs. I hope he doesn't leave. Then what would I do?

I rummage in my bag for the letter from the company which, fortunately, for just such occasions as this, contains the name and mobile phone number of the driver who would ferry me to the conference location. I call and explain the situation.

Shall I come through and help you? he asks, in a voice of genuine concern.

No, I'll only be a few more minutes, I reply. But how will I find you? is my more immediate worry.

I ask it thus, not accustomed to such service. You could hear his smile down the phone at my ignorance: Oh, you'll know who I am, Miss Carey.

And I push out through the crowd to see he is right – a slim dark-haired boy with deeply black eyes holding a big sign that says: Miss Carey. Because that's how it started. Not Carey, then company name, as is generally the case. Simply Miss Carey.

I recall still how he immediately began to fuss in that adorable way of gay boys. Asking if I was fatigued by the long journey, should he go back out to the airport and check on my luggage, what could he carry for me (at the same time absently pecking a piece of fluff from my coat), on and on.

No, I had replied, as a catch-all to the quantum of fussing, before specifically reporting:

They said they'd send the luggage out to the hotel when it arrives. It must have missed the connection in London – you know, with the change of terminal and time short. They said it should get here by tomorrow at the latest ... My voice had trailed off in a monotone of fatigue.

I remember sitting and staring out at the solemn landscape as he drove and chattered. The roads, the farmland, the signs, the language – all blurred together in an unfamiliar mush of late-autumn browns, greys and cold with the leaves of the trees all but fallen to earth, trod sodden there. I remember all I wanted was to wash my hair after 33 hours in transit. Instead I had been greeted by the departmental head of corporate HQ as a long-lost best friend, even though we had only spent an afternoon together the previous year on his trip to the Antipodes, thrilled to bits by his first sighting of a kangaroo in the wild (actually a pretty-faced wallaby hopping casually across the road at one of our production facilities fringed by bush).

He was serious when told of the lost luggage by Marcelo, as if personally responsible for the flaws in airport baggage handling.

Don't worry about it, I said. I just need my room key and a decent sleep.

Yes, yes, he fussed (was it a national pre-occupation?), but what about – you know –his voice lowered discreetly – clean underwear and so on. We're not quite advanced here in Switzerland ...

What, I interjected, you don't sell underwear? (But I didn't know then that the Swiss are too literal for jokes.)

Oh no! came the wide-eyed response. But there are no shops open here on Sundays!

I sighed. Well Thomas, I won't tell anyone if you won't. And headed off upstairs to my room – minimalist and orange as I recall, Switzerland at its funkiest, which prompted the thought: Great, I travel halfway round the world to spend a week in a room with the ambience of a 1970s department store cafeteria.

But still I slept. Until the phone rang. Miss Carey, Miss Carey, Marcelo chirruped in my ear. Your luggage will arrive at 8pm!

When the Swiss say 8pm, they mean 8pm. Of course, that was of no help to me. At that precise hour I was in the midst of a welcome cocktail party for all HQ's far-flung outpost representatives. Of which I was the only one in day-old jeans, grungy undies and unwashed hair. Around me, the women sparkled, the men murmured. But in any case, I was incapable of either. Jetlag saw to that.

During the conference week that followed, Marcelo had remained on duty. A gopher for this or that, rustling up whatever was needed by whom and by when – to the second. On occasion you'd see him deep in conversation with Thomas, and then, like a faithful dog certain of his instructions, off he'd lope to fulfil his master's wishes.

Where on earth did you find him? I asked Thomas during a lull in proceedings. Could we clone a Marcelo do you think?

Thomas smiled. I've known him for a while, he replied. He was between jobs and this fits his skill-set as a short-term proposition.

Skill-set! I remember scoffing. The guy is gifted. And he's devoted to you, I added. Perhaps unnecessarily. Yet it's a thing that's always inspired me about the gay community. How they help and support each other achieve in a society which persistently marginalises them.

Thomas finished his wine without answering, smiled in a non-committal way, and moved on to the next group as was required.

It would be years until I would see Marcelo again. Thomas and I became close when I moved permanently to HQ and occasionally I'd ask about the boy.

He's fine, was one report. He's gotten himself a job as a travelling companion to an elderly gent through Latin America.

Heavens! I exclaimed, does that sort of job still exist? (Thinking back to those tales of 19th century excursionists.)

Oh, there's no funny business, Thomas was quick to point out. This gent is loaded yet doesn't want to join even upper-market tours to exotic locations. He wants to do it alone, but with someone organising everything for him personally. Marcelo had to have impeccable references, and of course his five languages are a big bonus.

How wildly romantic, I mused.

Yes, he said. What a way to travel. No expense spared. I received a postcard the other day. They're in five-star hotels the whole way, of course, and ordering personal guides and drivers like you would bottled water. The old man is keen to educate his protégée-cum-servant, involving him in all the tours and so on. It really is quite touching.

After working at the head office on the lake several years, the announcement was made of the move to new premises. It was a sterile location, this new HQ, chrome and glass and grey, with no view of anything except the building site next door where a replica chrome and glass and grey edifice would soon sprout from the earth. I purposefully didn't go there often, instead being on the road, travelling, or

later working from home when the baby was small. But one day I happened to be there. Talking with the girls on reception, discussing the pros and cons of cymbidium orchids, a wonderfully floral example of which was on the counter to greet visitors.

A small man shuffled by. Glancing at each other, there was acknowledgement of said presence with the standard 'Gruezi wohl' of strangers. Until I saw his eyes – deeply black. Reminiscent of the inky stain of Amazonian leaf litter. I seemed to remember those eyes, but couldn't place them with the rest of the person. Until he stopped and said soberly: Hello Miss Carey.

Air sucked into my lungs in an audible rush and my hand involuntary covered an open mouth. The message of my eyes must have been just as amazed, but the words I eventually found to confront the situation were moderating, I hoped: Oh goodness, Marcelo. I'm sorry I didn't recognize you. It's been so many years! And we exchanged the customary kisses. Right, left, right cheek again.

He had changed so much. His black eyes sat in a pudgy sweaty face, hair lank over forehead and cheeks, shoulders rounded, belly slouched over the top of his trousers. It was impossible to reconcile the spectre with memory.

He smiled weakly at my unspoken admission. Yet trying to muster energy from reserves deep within, he asked: Are you visiting us for another time?

Oh no, Marcelo, I work here now in Switzerland. Shifting my thoughts. Actually it's been five years already.

That's nice, Miss Carey, and he started to shuffle on. Maybe I'll see you another day.

Upstairs in the office, I called Thomas immediately. It was impossible not to. I just saw Marcelo downstairs, I blurted. He looks awful!

Yes, came the reply. But he's on the mend now.

And I sat, even more dumbstruck than before, as he told of the accident the previous year. On safari in Africa with the elderly gent, their 4WD had been charged by a rare black rhino the old man had insisted on following. The guide had panicked, careening the truck off the track, down an embankment. All occupants unbelted, it had rolled, of course, before coming to rest on its side. The old man killed instantly. The black guide knocked unconscious. And Marcelo, dear sweet innocent Marcelo, pinned under the truck, his back broken, with a pig-eyed rhino staring resolutely at his fate from the roadside above.

It's amazing, Thomas was saying, as I stared out the office window in a daze. Three operations over the course of a year, several pins holding vertebrae together, and he can walk. We needed someone to sort and deliver the mail here in the new office. It seemed the ideal thing to get him back on his feet slowly.

Thomas, you're a saint, I hiccupped as tears slowly trolled my cheeks. Once again he remained quiet and we ended the call soon after.

In the months that followed, the administrative personnel made an executive decision. We need greenery in the workplace! they cried. To soften all that chrome and glass and grey. A list was sent around. Everyone had the opportunity to choose a plant from the stock list of a local supplier.

The list was badly photocopied, but we discussed the dark fuzzy pictures at length. Peter wanted a dracaena, Helene a cactus, and I ordered a fig to remind me of the lushness of home. We agreed on another, different variety of fig for the spare corner by the printer.

Firstly, it was the girl from the plant supply company who came to feed their needs. But over time, as he regained his health, it was Marcelo who carried the watering can at her side, and then, gradually, took over the weekly care of the plants himself.

It was lovely to see him grow well enough to add this duty to his list of daily tasks. He slimmed down quickly with the inherent metabolism of the young and the joyous, the sparkle returned to those black eyes and the pudginess melted from his face. Plus there were those inevitable springs in his shoes, bouncing him around as if on moon walk patrol.

We often chatted when he popped in to water the plants after those first early days of shared shyness at comradeship rediscovered.

This is a nice part of your day isn't it, Marcelo, I'd begin.

Yes, he'd respond. I'm happy with the plants.

One day he touched my fig with a gentle hand. Yours is very healthy, he commented, and figs are known to get depressed easily. Do you talk to it?

Not especially, I replied. But my Mum always said her tomatoes grew better when she gave them a pep talk.

It's true, he said. My mother also talked with each of the lemon trees in our grove in Spain. I think she missed them as much as they missed her after we moved here. They grew sad and she grew sad. You could tell.

His eyes misted, before location and context brought him back to the conversation. You know, Miss Carey, he continued, absently stroking the succulent waxy leaves of the fig by my desk, I walk around here all the time, into every office to check the plants, and give them water. And the ones in offices like this, where there's always people talking and things going on, are healthier than in the silent rooms.

Really? I was interested.

Oh yes, he replied, with the earnestness of someone who knows intuitively to speak the truth. There are some offices here where the room is used maybe once or twice a month. You know, the regional managers' ones or those business planning guys always travelling, he reminded. And in there, I've seen the plants get sicker and sicker, drop their leaves, wilt. Sad. Just sad.

They're lonely? I suggested.

Yes, that's what I think, he agreed. They don't feel loved. So I've started to spend time in those rooms, you know. Just sit in there for a while. Maybe use the phone or write some letters. Hum a tune. Have a chat. Maybe tell them things directly. Let them know I care, and that I'll be coming back soon. And you know what? They're now so much better. He seemed surprised despite his conviction.

Isn't that wonderful, Marcelo, I said, to inspire the natural world, just as it inspires us. To give something back to those that make the air OK for us to breathe.

He shifted uneasily with the modesty redolent in Swiss social contexts. Well, I don't know about that, Miss Carey, he said. It's just that there's not much love in this place from what I've seen. And when you know that, you have to try and change it somehow to make – what did you say? – the air OK to breathe? And he bounced out the door with a cheery ‘cheerio’ – something I smiled at, for he had learnt the expression from me.

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*“Love gives naught but itself and takes naught but from itself ...
For love is sufficient unto love.” Kahlil Gibran*

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Not much love in this place, she repeated, touching the fig leaves herself. That was true enough. Not much of any emotion or passion, and certainly no expression of same. And no recognition of welcoming those who seemed lost in this alien culture into the fold. The plants whose homes were in far-off corners of the world ending up in an artificial space of chrome and glass and grey. The expats wooed by the thought of working for such a grand company similarly left to wilt, curl up their leaves and die a slow death of nothingness in an environment of stale monotony.

That night she left the chrome and glass and grey to return to her home of wood and warmth and colour, and looked afresh at the twin oak tree saplings on the back verandah. She remembered how her husband had collected the acorns from a forest path during a walk in the hills south of the Alps to celebrate their marriage three years prior. Two acorns that he'd popped into a terracotta pot on their return to the north and left in the cellar till, the following spring, just as their child was born, they had burst forth from the soil in the tiny space they shared. Their tender pale green shoots had grown all summer until she transplanted them into a bigger pot, all their six inches of growth, in readiness for over-wintering in the cellar.

They have to stay together now, she had told her husband. I wouldn't be able to separate the roots without one or both of them dying.

Like Siamese twins in a way, he'd said.

Like us, she'd smiled. One life now lived.

She took the oak tree twins to the cellar where they were watered occasionally, but generally left to their own devices in the half-light and not-too-awful chill. Until the following spring, when, blinking like a criminal returned from solitary, they were brought out into the soft light of an early-dewed morning. But the little potted oaks weren't happy. They looked ill.

Are we going to lose them? he said, and shrugged. I guess it was just an experiment, though his voice spoke disappointment. It's just too cold north of the Alps for this species of oak, was his justification.

It was then she remembered the boy and his plants, and the love he had spoken of. The love he had received to get back on his feet. And the love he had given naturally, of himself, to the ill plants in his care. She had marvelled that day – at how perfectly natural it was for him to commune thus, return to the earth the gifts which had been given.

It's OK, she told her husband. I should have explained to them what we needed to do.

And she bent down, there and then, and started whispering to the tender saplings borne of two seeds and two loving hearts, snug-wrapped, entwined, rooted together, transformed into a twin-trunked single baby tree. Do you know each other's thoughts as we do ours? she asked, and set to describing why over-wintering in the cellar had been necessary, that she was sorry she hadn't come down to relieve their loneliness, that she did indeed know what it was to be living in a place that wasn't home, a place colder than they were used to, but that they could do it together. Put down roots in this land, grow strong together, and happy in love.

What doing, Mummy? A small voice breathed hot and sweet in her ear.

She smiled. I'm telling little oak tree not to be sick anymore, darling.

To the boy she said: You help me, Danny. You tell little oak tree it'll be OK.

The child solemnly repeated her words and they watched together as this young life grew taller and sturdier all summer in its pot on the back verandah, to the accompaniment of childish squeals, twilight meals and much sniffing by curious cats.

She showed the boy a big oak tree in the forest one day. So big!

Little oak tree will be that big one day, she confirmed.

Mummy, Mummy, he chattered. Danny push over big oak tree!

She feigned surprise. Goodness, Danny – do you really think that's possible?

Yes, look! And with little hands and then chest and then his whole body grunting and pushing against its bark, he did indeed try.

Hmmm, she observed.

Daddy do it! he proposed.

Alright, she smiled.

Home they walked. Up the hill, in through the garden gate, past the rabbit hutch, and then to the growing oak encased in terracotta, there on the verandah in the lee of the wall, protected from the worst of the frosts and the winds from the west.

Night, night, little oak tree, Danny said. Don't you be sick anymore!

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*“Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself...
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.”*
Kahlil Gibran

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It is time. Now it is time for her to reflect again. Go down deep in that well of consideration and introspection, and observe behaviour and reaction, cause and effect, depth and design. For a new challenge awaits. An 18-inch high oak is to be planted out in the garden that autumn. No more over-wintering, she said. We have to try. And she tells it thus to the oak.

You're just like me, she explains. I can't over-winter anymore either. This is where our family is, this is where the love is, this is where our home is now. So we have to try. We'll do it together, she promised. I'll be here for you.

They planted out the oak tree together, as a family, in the garden. Excitedly, the boy said: Mummy, Mummy. Little oak tree one day big oak tree, Mummy.

Yes Danny, she said.

Then – Danny push little oak tree over!

She laughed. Only when little oak tree is big and strong, she counselled.

Like big oak tree in the forest, he finished for her.

It might not work, her husband said. It's not its natural habitat after all.

I know, she said. But at least we're trying. She turned and sniffed the air for the familiar scent of home. There's a lot of love around this place, she observed, trying to be objective and scientific about this thing that science couldn't describe. All we need do is channel it.

As they watched, the boy stood in front of the oak, whispering words and stroking autumn-brown leaves as if it were the most natural thing in the world to commune with trees.

She stepped back from their intercourse, this boy and his plant. It was they who would continue the journey now. Of growth. Of trunk and limbs, tall straight strong and true, till both were big enough to be pushed over.

Night-night, little oak tree, he was saying. Sleep well. And don't you be sick anymore! he reminded, popping a sticky chubby-sucked hand out of his mouth and into her own warm embrace, as twilight softness folded into a cocoon of mist-risen night.