

Semillas de Girasol

“Pleasant—that’s the word. Today is *pleasant*,” said Mr. Bettenstill.

“Yes, sir.”

“Oliver, when’s the last time we had a day such as this?”

“I believe we had this weather on Sunday, sir.”

“Hmm. Perhaps we did, perhaps we did... But, Oliver, I can’t remember the last time we had a day so *pleasant*. Sundays ought to be nice days anyway. But today—it’s not Sunday today?”

“Today is Tuesday, sir—”

“Tuesday! Yes. Oliver, Tuesdays aren’t supposed to be nice days like Sundays are. Tuesdays are average. But this is exceptional. I might just stay out here all day.” He spoke as though the dark stubble on his chin had long been gray.

Bettenstill took his drink from the metal patio table and leaned back in his chair. The glass sweated coolly on his palm. “Have you the day off today?”

Oliver checked his pocket watch and peered over the stone rail, his back turned to Mr. Bettenstill. “No. Some of the sunflowers are infested with a kind of beetle. Your wife,” he cleared his throat, “your wife asked me to take care of it before lunch.” He gazed out at the

expansive yard and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “After that I meant to finish repairing your chair in the dining-”

“Oh you oughtn’t be working like that today, Oliver. Take the day off and join me out here. Have a drink with me, it’s *Tuesday* and this *pleasant* for God’s sake.” Mr. Bettenstill sipped, watching the bit of lime pulp that squirmed between the ice and gin.

Oliver turned to face him, “Thank you, sir... but your wife said it was important, She is having guests over later and doesn’t want them to see how the beetles have eaten the flowers...” He looked down at his hands and rubbed his sweating palm.

Bettenstill’s eyebrows hardened, and he squeezed the glass in his hand. “Non-sense. Margarita hasn’t even been outside yet today. Once she gets outside and sees just how pleasant a day it is she won’t mind you taking the day off. She won’t mind at all. Really, take the day off.” He sipped again, looking out over the massive lawn. Two pristine rows of boxwood shrubs ran along either side of downward sloping field. A weave of several thin stone paths curled artfully toward the field’s center, where a large stone fountain lay, surrounded by a circle of sunflowers. The Florida sun’s hot rays reflected off the surface of the water, and the aquatic shimmer could be made out from Bettenstill’s seat a hundred yards away.

Oliver approached Mr. Bettenstill with a soft smile, “I really don’t mind sir, it’s not hard work, and your wife-”

“I never liked the sunflowers anyway. Give the beetles a head start and tend to it tomorrow.” He sucked out the remaining drops of liquid and chewed on a piece of ice. “Come now, Oliver. Refill my glass and get one for yourself. You’re going to have a drink with me.”

“Of course, sir.” Oliver’s smile shrunk to a flat line. Receiving Bettenstill’s glass, Oliver left the patio.

Bettenstill, keeping his eyes on the lawn, listened for the soft impact of the heavy wooden door against its stone frame. He got up and leaned on the rail. He extended his hands out a few inches into the direct sunlight; the roof of the estate house casted shade over most of the patio. He examined his hands. They had long since lost their hard callouses, and now the softened skin bore splinters from having thrown the chair the night before. He looked towards the garden, where the tall sunflowers pulled gently in the wind, watching him—almost *spying*, he thought. He sighed.

The doors swung open, and Oliver joined him at the patio’s stone rail, setting one glass beside him, and holding another in his hand, both smelling of citrus and alcohol.

“They never ought to have been planted, those flowers. We started that garden when Margarita moved here, you know.” Mr. Bettenstill picked up his glass and smelled it, his eyes still on the flowers. “She insisted on the sunflowers, and I let her have them, but they really don’t look like they belong. That was quite a while ago...about a year and a half before you joined us

here, Oliver.” He took a long slow sip, feeling the cool liquid against his dry tongue. “Did I ever tell you how I met her?”

Oliver looked at the sunflowers then put his head down. “No, sir. I don’t believe you did.”

“It began with the limes. My father worked for a gentleman who raised and sold a variety of produce. It was nothing grand—just a small shop, sufficient to provide for a family. My father had a keen eye for quality, and he knew the limes this man sold were really no good; it’s too far north on the gulf here to grow a proper lime. So in 1880 he left and began taking voyages to the Yucatan on his own. He built a business relation with several of the Mexican farmers; You see, he bought crates upon crates of limes from them—very good quality—and then he brought them back up here to sell at a premium. Anyway, it wasn’t long before the business came to be really quite remarkable.” He took another generous sip.

“I was thirteen when I first joined him in his travels to Mexico. He taught me about the business: how to make a deal, how to tell a good fruit from a bad one, how to make good business relations. He’d have me negotiate some of the trades for practice if they spoke English—he tried to teach me Spanish but I never took to it. Even now I only know just enough to get by.

“It’s a funny story, in the first negotiation I ever did I ended up canceling all our orders with this particular man.” He chuckled. “My father was actually proud of me. The man had given my father trouble before with completing orders. He said he’d make it up and give us a few extra crates on top of it. I didn’t trust him so I went out and counted his trees. You wouldn’t believe it: he didn’t have nearly enough trees to cover even half the order. I was infuriated; I told him not to expect our business anymore. You see that’s the key: to be good in business you have to have everything planned. This man didn’t have anything planned—either that or he lied. There’s nothing worse than that if you ask me: Dishonesty.” He shook his head and looked down.

Bettenstill opened his mouth and paused momentarily. He turned to Oliver. “My father passed away when I was eighteen. I took over the business. He made sure to leave me in a good place too; with the way my father taught me you ought to think I could have taken it over when I was fifteen were it necessary. And it wasn’t a surprise. My father never had the strongest health. He was damn quick-witted and always cheery—one of those types that makes business happen. But his lungs, you see, they were never great, and he never bothered with a doctor about it...and you know...so naturally he wasn’t on this earth for as long as he ought to have been.

A soft breeze swept over the patio, and Oliver closed his eyes. For a moment he relaxed his face. He was listening, but the story wasn’t new to him; just new from Bettenstill’s perspective. Margarita told him most of it already. It sounded less touching when she told it.

Frowning, Oliver raised the glass to his lips and, before sipping, convinced Bettenstill, “I’m sorry to hear you lost your father at such a young age.”

“Oh that’s quite all right. He lived a good life, and that was a long time ago. Anyway, what I really meant to get at was our trips to Mexico. You see, while my father worked out the details of his deals, he would send me to the nearby towns and cities to get supplies. I frequented the city of Merida, and they held a public market for produce and art and such. There was a vendor there who sold mangos. Sometimes I bought one, but I often just watched the stand from a distance. There was this girl who worked there. She was the daughter of the farmer who owned the stand, and she had this long brown hair with the gentlest waves. Her blue eyes stood out the most, though; most all the people around there have those brown eyes, like yours. To be frank, I like the way brown eyes look better, but hers just stood out so starkly against the others.”

“Margarita,” Oliver said.

“Yes.” Bettenstill drained his glass, and set it down. He looked at Oliver. “She was a hard worker. Her father wasn’t the best at selling—lazy if you ask me—so often she was the only one working the stand. She did everything herself. I was so...er...*captivated* watching her work. I thought her kind of like me I suppose. I mean my father was a fantastic salesman...but with his health...I knew I’d be running a stand all on my own one day too. You know, she still doesn’t know that I watched her then: when she was so young, before I worked with her father.”

From inside they heard a knock on the front door, followed by conversation. *Hola, Margarita! Ha pasado mucho tiempo, Rosa! Cómo Están?*

Oliver put down his glass and turned quickly towards the door, explaining, “Sir, I have to go fix the chair. Your wife said they will have lunch in the dining hall.”

Mr. Bettenstill frowned and his eyebrows angled towards his nose. He rested his eyes on the garden again. “Very well. A shame. A shame that sort of work must be done today. It’s such a *pleasant day.*”

Oliver moved towards the door, and as he opened it Mr. Bettenstill caught him once more. “Oliver.”

“Yes, sir?”

“When you are done with all that get me another drink.”

“Of course, sir.” He stepped inside and closed the door.

The estate house was set up on a mild slope, so that the back patio was raised several feet above the back lawn. The patio was mostly made from a light gray stone—immaculate stone. It was rough, yet composed—well planned and intentional. The railing’s balusters stood proud, like a uniform row of half-sized Bettenstills.

On the other side of the patio’s heavy wooden door lay the main dining hall. A long, heavy, dark-stained oak table dominated the room; its lacquer was so thick one could hardly

notice the fresh scratches on its surface. It wasn't old, but it was built to be so: The richness of its color and texture, the hardened outer coat, and its sheer size emanated an aura of maturity.

Sixteen matching hand carved chairs surrounded it: one on the South end, seven on each side, and one out of place, tipped over near the far doorway, which lead to the tea room. Another door to the right lead to the main kitchen.

Here Oliver wet a small washcloth as he listened through the door to the entryway. *Oh, Rosa, I was so pleased to hear you are in town! What a great surprise! How long are you here? Oh, let's sit down and talk.* He moved quickly to the dining hall, picking up the fallen chair and returning it to its position at the North end of the table. On the way he caught Margarita's eye near the doorway. Hers widened and she turned around, moving back into the tea room. "Let's sit in here a moment while Oliver finishes setting the table. He will put lunch out in a few minutes."

Oliver knelt by the chair and pushed the loose dowel back through the leg and into the crossbar. He then scratched at the dried blood at the corner of the seat and wiped it off. He couldn't remove it all, and, weighing his time, pushed the chair in close to the table so that the blood would not be seen. He walked by the doorway where the chair had been and stepped on the washcloth, wiping up the bloodstain on the floor as best as he could while remaining quiet.

In the tea room he heard Rosa, "Margarita, your hat is lovely, but since when do you wear one indoors?"

“Gracias, Rosa. I don’t usually, but today is so nice I thought I’d be in and out doors all the time.”

Oliver washed his hands in the kitchen and then brought out a tray of sandwiches and tea, setting them close to the South end of the table. He placed a few small plates around it and then led the women into the room.

“¿Oliver, cómo estás? ¿Va todo bien?” Rosa asked.

“Sí sí, Rosa, muy bien. Siempre es refrescante escuchar a alguien que hable de manera fluida.”

“Claro que lo es.” She smiled. “This lunch looks delightful.”

“It is delightful to have you. I’ll be back soon if you need something.”

Oliver exited to the patio, where Mr. Bettenstill was lounging in his chair once more. His eyes were mostly closed. Both glasses were sitting on the table, empty.

“I’ll fill this up now, sir.”

Opening his eyes, Mr. Bettenstill sat forward in his chair. “Yes, yes. Thank you, Oliver. Has the company left now?” He turned his head towards the heavy door.

“No, sir. They just started lunch.”

“Ahh. Very well. I think I’ll stay out here a bit longer. It’s just so *pleasant* out today.”

“Yes it is, sir. Is there anything else you’d like?” Oliver took the glasses.

Mr. Bettenstill slumped in his chair and threw his head back. He stretched and yawned.

“Your company, Oliver. I must finish telling you my story.”

“Of course, sir.”

Mr. Bettenstill closed his eyes again. Oliver went back inside.

“-and how is Jackson Junior doing? I suppose he’s been outside all day?” asked Rosa to Margarita.

Margarita responded, “We let him sleep in today, he had trouble sleeping last night. Although he should be up by now.” She watched Oliver move through the room towards the kitchen. “Oliver? Would you get Junior up, and bring him down here?” He nodded and continued to the kitchen.

He set down the glasses next to the bottle of gin and the limes, and went into the entryway where the stairs were. Up the stairs and down the hall, he opened the door to Junior’s room. The child was asleep, spread out on his twin-sized bed. His small frame rose and fell subtly with his breath. Mid-length black-brown hair and deeply tanned skin lay smooth against the wrinkled cream sheets. The room was still except for the bright squares of sunlight on the floor, which flickered lightly as thin, see-through clouds floated by.

Oliver came to the child’s side silently. *You are beautiful, like your mother*, he thought. *If only we could raise you the way you deserve.* There were faint streaks of dirt running down from

Junior's eyes, which had residue in the corners from dried tears. Leaning close, Oliver gently brushed the boy's cheek with the back of his hand. Then he pressed his frowning lips to the boy's forehead—lightly enough so as not to wake him, yet hard enough so that he might, in his dream, feel and appreciate the warmth.

Clearing his throat and wiping his eyes, Oliver stood and clapped his hands. "Time to get up, Junior. Your mother is downstairs with a guest she wants you to meet."

Big brown eyes opened. Jackson Junior straightened his arms above his head, stretching. He wiped his eyes and sat up. Turning to Oliver he yawned, "Ollie?"

"Come now, Junior, your mother wants you up."

"Are Mommy and Daddy okay?"

"Yes...yes, Junior everything is alright. Lunch is ready downstairs, now get dressed and come down." Oliver left the room and made his way downstairs.

As he entered the dining hall, Junior zipped past him and jumped up on his mother's lap.

"It's about time you got up, little man," said Margarita, smiling at her son.

Rosa laughed, "He is so big now! ¡*Que guapo!* He's got your skin, Mar—such a lovely color. And those big brown eyes. Hey, Junior you know when you grow up all the young ladies will want you," she poked at him.

Junior smiled and laughed. His cheeks flushed and he covered his face with his hands.

Then turning to his mother, he pulled at her hat.

“Hey, Jackson. Oi! Stop that, Jackson.” Margarita panicked slightly, holding the hat to her head. Junior did not understand her urgency and continue grabbing at her wide-brimmed hat.

“Jackson!”

The hat slipped off Margarita’s head revealing a long gash that ran along her hairline. Junior, unaware of this, ran off with the hat as his prize, squealing gleefully.

“¡Dios mio, Margarita! What happened? Dear, are you alright?” cried Rosa, getting up to examine the wound.

“Oh well I didn’t want you to see and have it worry you. I’m fine. Really.”

Rosa tried to dab at the wound, which was re-opened from rubbing on the hat, but Margarita shooed her back to her seat. “But what happened?” Rosa asked again.

Margarita cleared her throat and caught a quick glimpse at Oliver, who stood in the doorway to the kitchen. “Oh we just have a bad step on the stairs. I slipped on it last night, that’s all. It looks worse than it feels, really.”

Rosa looked at Oliver. “That stair should be fixed right away. That’s asking for trouble.”

“-Yes,” interjected Margarita, now also looking at Oliver, “perhaps *you* should have done more to prevent this, *Oliver*.” Her voice rose in volume and her eyes narrowed.

Rosa's eyes widened at the outburst. She once again came to Margarita's side and placed her hand on her shoulder. In a calm voice, "Oi, amiga. These things happen. They are accidents. We can not blame anyone but luck."

"Yes, I suppose you are right," said Margarita, tightening her hands around themselves in her lap. "Oliver, why don't we bring out some of those pastries from the kitchen." She rose, not waiting for a reply, and pushed past Oliver through the doorway. He followed, closing the door.

In the kitchen, Margarita shuffled through the pantry. She was angry, and a few tears ran down her cheek. She pulled out a bin of cookies and a platter and began arranging the cookies on it.

Oliver went to her and put his hand on her back, "Margarita-

"No!" she whispered, slapping his hand down. Hushed, in Spanish, "*Why didn't you stop him? Why didn't you stop him, you coward!*"

"Margarita, I wanted to but I couldn't. I couldn't stop him like that."

"But you did nothing, Antonio. Nothing!" she wiped the tears, which came more rapidly now.

"Shh! Don't say my name. Margarita, I couldn't stop him! Don't you think he would have known? It's not my place. I'm his servant. Don't you think he'd be suspicious? Margarita, I hate

to see that gash on your head, but it's better than having the hole of a round through both our chests!"

She stood, no longer angry, but distraught. She wept quietly as she placed the cookies on the tray.

"Besides," whispered Oliver, *"I had to keep Junior from coming downstairs. He still thinks you were just yelling. Don't you think he might have gotten some of that chair too if he were around?"*

Margarita collapsed to her forearms on the table, covering her face in her hands to muffle the sobs. *"Please, stop talking like that, Antonio. Please stop. I can't take it to think of that."*

Oliver went to her side and rubbed her arms. Now in English "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry this all happened. I shouldn't have left. It would have gotten sorted out. Not a day goes by that I don't regret that. If I knew about Junior I would have stayed. But I found you. I found him, and I'm here now. We will be okay." He lifted her up and turned her towards him. "Be strong, Margarita. Be strong for Junior. You were strong for him before."

"And you were little help before too. At least Jackson can feed Junior." She stood and cleared her throat and wiped her eyes, returning the bin to the pantry. Without looking at Oliver she took the tray out to the dining hall.

Oliver stayed back and squeezed several limes and some sugar into each glass. He was hurt by her words, but he understood. She was hardened—she had to look out for herself. She had always been independent. Earning her forgiveness would take time. He filled the glasses the rest of the way with gin and made his way towards the patio.

Rosa watched him move across the dining hall, and just before he made it to the door, she stopped him. “Oliver?”

“Yes?” he replied, hand on the doorknob.

“I always wanted to ask you: what’s your real name? I know it can’t really be Oliver, and I’ve always wanted to ask.” She raised an eyebrow.

Oliver’s stoic composure hid the panic in his head. “Si, Rosa. My name at birth was of course not Oliver. But I’d rather not say it.” He turned again to the door.

“Well why not?” Asked Rosa. She tilted her head at him.

Oliver sighed and coughed a few times before answering. “Well I always wanted to live in America...So when I came here I wanted to really be an American...so I took a new name, and I’ve gone by it ever since.” Again he attempted to open the door and was interrupted.

“Well that doesn’t mean you must forget your old name. Does it? Come now I am curious.”

He caught Margarita's eye for a moment. "My birth name...was Juan. Juan Martínez. Now really I must deliver this, Mr. Bettenstill has been waiting for a while." The heavy door opened and *thudded* shut.

Out on the patio, Mr. Bettenstill sat, still looking at the garden. His eyes were glazed, and they did not move when he took the glass from Oliver, who sat down next to him.

Time passed and neither of them moved. Occasionally Mr. Bettenstill would rock one way or another and then return upright in the chair. Oliver watched him out of the corner of his eye, thankful that the man was a tired drunk. The sunflowers, slightly wilted from the sun and beetles, swayed back and forth. They teased Bettenstill. Oliver yawned and set down his glass, leaning back to rest his eyes. The two of them fell asleep in the warm breeze.

"I only did business with him to get to her in the first place," said Mr. Bettenstill, out of the blue at around four o' clock. It had been awhile since Rosa left.

Oliver awoke and sat up. "Sorry, sir?"

"Margarita's father." He hiccupped. "I only... er...did business with him to get to her." He shifted his weight back and shut his eyes. "The business was doing fine. I didn't have to expand to the mangos and the lemons. I didn't-" He hiccupped again.

"Sir, are you alright?" Oliver rose to his feet.

Seeing this, Mr. Bettenstill flailed his arms and said, “Sit the hell down, I’m telling you a story.” Oliver obliged.

“After I took over the operation, I went to him and made these deals, but every time I was there I never saw her around anymore. So one day I asked him where she went all this time, and he said he didn’t have a clue. He disowned her. She ran off with some criminal. Some damn criminal swept her up and she went with him. Margarita didn’t deserve that.” He lost focus momentarily, then continued.

“But I kept doing business with the guy, I don’t know why. You know, the mangos sold alright, but I didn’t need them.” He coughed loudly and continued. “So a few years after I started doing business with him I took another trip down to his farm, and who do I see crying at the man’s doorstep but Margarita. She’s asking him to take her back in and he’s not having it. He oughtn’ta had it either! A great girl, but running off with some criminal! What kind of plan is that!” He spilled his drink, and licked some of it off his hand.

“But I felt bad for her, you know? I know what it’s like to be on my own. So I talk to the man and tell him I’ll take her in if only she’ll come with me. The poor thing was so in need of help I hardly had to convince her. So I take her with me and she explains how her boyfriend, this criminal, left her without anything. He was wanted, a big name. *Antonio Girasoles*. Murder, or

bank robbing, I think—or something of that sort. So he fled the authorities and left her behind without a word. Some gentleman!”

Oliver added, quiet but firm, “I heard there wasn’t any evidence. Maybe he was framed.”

They were quiet for a moment. Bettenstill either didn’t hear him or didn’t care, his glazed eyes fixed on the sunflowers. They began to tear up. “I ought’ve known. Junior had such brown skin, and she does too but I ought’ve known with those brown eyes.” His tears turned to sobs. “It’s just she told me she hadn’t been with Girasoles for months when I took her in. Months! She practically made it sound like it had been a year! And my brother had a child at eight months and he was fine so I thought, you know... but she lied.”

He rose to his feet and hardened his face, wobbling precariously to the stone rail. “I guess I knew it for a while, but the way she said it last night—‘*me and my son*’—I couldn’t take it. I wouldn’t have been so mad if she hadn’t lied all this time. I would’ve still raised him my own. But she lied, and when it came out yesterday, I got so damned mad.” He turned to Oliver, pleading, “I didn’t want to hurt her, I swear. You’ve got to understand that, Oliver. I was just so damn mad she lied. Oh god it was a damn lie, all of it!” He downed the last of his drink and dropped his glass to the floor. Then he came down after it—without grace. He collapsed to the floor and began snoring. His slumped body surrounded by glass looked out of place against the otherwise pristine patio.

The heavy door opened, and Jackson Junior came out, with the hat on upside-down.

“Ollie look at my-” He stopped abruptly, letting the hat fall off his head. He looked at Mr.

Bettenstill lying on the glass and then at Oliver. “Ollie, is daddy alright?”

“Yes, Junior. Don’t worry. Daddy will be all right. He just doesn’t feel too well right now.

Go back inside and sit with your mother.”

Junior, frowning, picked up the hat, and backed up through the door, staring at Mr.

Bettenstill as he pulled the door softly shut.

Oliver rose and went to the rail. He looked out towards the sunflowers. Bettenstill’s words rung through his head, *they never ought to have been planted.*