

## January in the North

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The sensation of snow under her feet makes her feel unbalanced, as if a floor of clouds had all of a sudden replaced the solid ground. Her feet feel colder as she walks. There are people swirling and rushing around her but their heat doesn't reach her. Clara remembers her Tía Antonia's voice, like a warm blanket fighting to keep away from her skin the cold turning Clara's body into an ice statue. Clara remembers Tía Antonia's stories about her life in New York and her job at the flower shop. Clara joins the crowd moving around her, as if she didn't exist. She searches for Tía Antonia's face amidst all those faces rushing past her, not looking at her. "January in the north," she says to herself and she takes a deep breath that becomes a mist cloud coming out of her mouth. She keeps looking for Tía Antonia's in the crowd around her. Her stories about how she survived her first winter in New York is compressed in that phrase "January in the north"; a phrase she learned to say in the same accented English Tía Antonia used to say it. One of the few phrases she learned in English, even before she had any sense of what north meant.

"It could have been worse," Tía Antonia used to say at the end of her story. "At least I got to be around some green." At this point, Tía Antonia would pause and gaze out the nearest window. "Perhaps that was the hardest thing about winter in the north, the lack of colors."

Clara looks around her, searching for a dot of color that would warm up her surroundings. Besides the occasional bright color of some winter coat there isn't much and the bright color of the coat ends up looking unnatural, out of place. Even the sky suffers from lack of color. Clara shivers. She starts walking again toward her apartment. She anticipates the warmth that will return the sense of feeling to her body, the humming of the furnace as the hot air enclosed inside the four walls creates the artificial warmth.

Clara comes to the flower shop as she turns at the corner. She vaguely remembers passing by it before. She never paid too much

attention to it. After eight hours standing behind the cash register at "Cordova's Food Market" all she wants to do is get home and close the door behind her. Forget the frigid air outside, the treacherous ice looking so innocent on the ground. Close the door and dream of tropical spring days, with orange trees full of ripe fruit, with guava bushes with branches touching the ground caused by the amount of ripe fruit hanging on them. Plants and green should be something natural to the landscape. But the landscape she knows so well has changed and today the green radiating from inside the shop makes her stop. She looks through the big display window. The green inside the shop works as such a powerful call, that she finds herself inside, feeling her eyes becoming a big dot of lush green.

"Can I help you, Miss?" The woman emerges from among the tall hibiscuses topiaries with a watering can in her hands.

"No, solamente estoy mirando." Her own voice surprises Clara. She meant to answer in English but at the last minute the words escaped her, as if they had been migrating south to a more hospitable environment. The woman looks at her, this time she can hide her suspicion behind her polite smile. Clara even notices the tiny steps she has taken back. The woman points at the plants.

"Do...you...want...a...plant...?" she says slowly, carefully pronouncing every syllable. Clara shakes her head.

"No, no plant. Just looking." The woman walks to the counter and stands behind the cash register, putting down the watering can. This time the response comes to her in English. Clara stands in front of the potted tropical plants displayed on benches and on hanging baskets from the ceiling. She discovers why the green radiating from inside the small store seems so overwhelming. She has thought it was just the shock of taking all the green inside the store all at once after slowly watching everything die for the past four months. But as she steps closer to the plants she discovers the big mirror running from the ceiling to floor behind the plants. This creates the illusion that there are more plants in the store than actually there are. It is when she looks in the mirror that she discovers the second woman now standing next to the first one behind the cash register. Clara sees the look of distrust they give each other, as they observe her as she walks around the plants. It is this second woman who would come a couple

of minutes later, when they get tired of spying on her and offers help.

"Can... I...help...you...with...something...?" she asks smiling. "These...just...got...in..." The hibiscus plants she points to have a shinny patina Clara doesn't remember ever seeing on any plant, and she had seen many, many plants. Besides, twenty dollars for a plant? Clara feels it is sacrilegious to pay for plants she used to enjoy for free. The woman staring at her thinks better of her offer. She points to the African violets placed under the florescent light. "Perhaps...you...prefer...this..." The African violets sell for four ninety eight.

"No, no plant." Clara says to the woman. "Just looking" But she doesn't go away to let her enjoy the plants, like the other woman did. On the mirror, Clara sees the reflection of the woman standing by the cash register. She remembers Tia Antonia telling her that in New York some stores had a hidden bottom near the cash register. If somebody attempts a robbery or is caught shoplifting the store's owner could call the police station immediately.

"Are...you...sure...I...can't...be...of...some...help...?" the woman insists, her smile a grimace petrified on her face. Clara turns around and looks straight at her, not through the mirror but face to face. The woman takes a step back. The other woman stands at attention behind the cash register, like a squirrel that has heard something move. Clara imagines a swarm of policemen descending on the shop, dragging her away to some dark cell. She remembers how Tia Antonia used to tell stories of people who were taken away never to be seen again. Clara quickly walks out of the store. Once outside she looks through the display window again. The first woman had gone back watering the plants. The second one is spraying something onto the plants, making their leaves shine in an unnatural way. The cash register is not being attended.