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## Watermelons

Theresa Delgadillo

### I.

Ramón heard two thumps—bodies landing on the concrete walk next to his bedroom window. He scrambled out of bed and into the hallway where he switched on the outdoor floodlamp. The harsh light revealed two melons, large and egglike on a bed of vines that spread throughout the backyard. They were covered with what looked like the stringy blood that clings to a newborn calf, spelling out “W,” “B” and “P.” Ramón was not surprised by the initials spraypainted on the top of each melon. Instead, he was relieved.

It was not the first time he had seen these and other letters on his property. For several years, his garage had been routinely tagged by rival gangs. He had learned to keep a can of paint handy to cover the graffiti whenever they struck, but they had never targeted anything other than the garage.

When he heard the noise, Ramón feared that the melons had been cracked open, before they were fully ripe, but they were still whole, still growing. The initials, on melons that already weighed more than 150 pounds each, meant that the melons would be allowed to thrive, at least by the members of WetBack Power.

He went into his shed and brought out the paint remover, which he carefully applied to each melon with a clean rag, methodically wiping off the paint. Since it was fresh, this did not take long. He then hooked up his hose, turned on the water, and gently bathed his two melons.

Ramón, who had not planted or tended to any crop since he was a young man, had, in his old age, become obsessed with growing giant watermelons.

He had come upon the idea by accident, when looking through packets of fruit and vegetable seeds with his daughter, Mercedes, and his wife, Muya. They were trying to interest him in starting a garden. It was last year, his first year of retirement,

and even now he did not like to think back on it. When Mercedes picked up the envelope he was absentmindedly staring at while he thought about what might be going on at the plant that day, he half-listened as she translated the information on the packet. He laughed when she said "*hasta doscientas libras,*" and thought that his daughter had made another of her not infrequent translation errors.

"*No, Mercedes, serán 20 libras.*"

"*No, Apá. Here it says 'hasta 200.'*"

She showed him the numbers on the back of the envelope, and Maya, who was standing on the other side of Mercedes, also leaned in to look.

"*Pues, lo que Dios no nos provee, los Estados Unidos lo hace,*" said Maya. "*Hasta las sandías más grandes del mundo!*"

He bought those seeds, over the objections of his wife and daughter, both of whom had envisioned a corner plot of squash and beans—a suitable hobby for a retired tannery worker. But Ramón started dreaming of growing the biggest melons in the world—green outside, red inside—in his Milwaukee yard.

¿*Y ahora?* What would Hernán say now? If he could see these melons. If he were here. If he had spent most of his life far away from the towns, llanos and mountains of his country. But Hernán had never left México. His work had been enough to get him and his family through those lean times so many years ago.

Five years now, Hernán was dead. The news had come from Hernán's nephew, now living in the adobe house that his uncle had built on what was then the edge of the small town where Ramón had also once lived. Funny. He hadn't thought of Hernán in so long, and here he was, growing the fruit that his partner had loved.

Ay, he felt tired. He knew he really was too old to stay up all night, even if he had left his night job reluctantly. The last few years of staying awake all night had been too hard on his body.

*Lo fresquecito del verano en la noche* felt good to Ramón. Before he started growing watermelons, he would stand out here on weekend nights, sprinkling water over the lawn and the flower

beds, like the priest anointing each member of the church at Sunday mass, a light flick of holy water reaching into every pew. Somewhere along the way, his daughter had bought him an attachment for the hose, an oval shaped tube with pinholes that would cut down on the time it took him to water the lawn. But he rarely used it. He didn't care for all the time-saving things his children piled on him, especially now that he had all the time in the world.

*Pero ya.* It was time to get back to sleep. He turned off the water and rolled up the hose. He looked around carefully, not wanting to get ambushed in his own garage, then put things away and locked up.

In the house, he set the bolt, then put the chain in place on the door. He looked around the kitchen. It smelled of coffee. He noticed the orange light on the coffeemaker and switched it off. Maya must have been up. He felt the warm pot. No, he didn't really want any at this time of night. He decided just to go to sleep. He went to his own room, took off his *botas* and glanced out the window at his melons before getting back into bed.

Well, at least they didn't bust the melons or break into his garage, although someone had clearly tried to break into it two months ago. Were they claiming the melons? Or had they been trying to get into the garage through the side door? What would they do with his tools anyway? They didn't garden or repair or paint. They would just exchange them for beer money or drug money. Whatever those kids did these days.

His own kids had done it. He had seen them drunk, stumbling in on Saturday nights, or worse, Sunday mornings, his own restless sleep disturbed by their entrance. He had yelled at them. He had been angry at their foolhardy behavior. There was no reason for it. No reason. They had their parents. Not like his half-brother Filomeno, abandoned by both his mother and their father. Filomeno, whose lively violin music he could still hear, drank himself to death. But here he was, for his family. He never ran away. To do what? Drink and carouse? Leave children behind to work in the fields until they died and never know their father?

His father. At least he had known him. Had seen him. At least his father had shown him what was possible during those years when he had permitted them to live on his land, work for his ranch. His father wasn't wrong to kick him off. No. His father was in the right. He was the one who should have asked permission to collect deadwood for extra money. It was his own fault. *Pero fue su padre. Su propio padre.*

He couldn't sleep now. He kicked the blanket and got out of bed. He went to the window in the living room and watched the street. He stood there for a long time before he went back to sleep.

## II.

His footsteps woke her. Ramón wasn't light on his feet, and the floorboards of their house, even carpeted, were not noiseless. They were creaky and warped, having shifted over the years, unlike the neat, flat, perfect fitting floorboards in her son's new home. What a home. Beautiful rooms.

She heard the back door open and reached for her robe to find out what was going on. The floodlamp was on and Ramón stood over the melons in his pajamas and work boots. Was this becoming a nighttime obsession, too? What was he looking for in the middle of the night?

When Ramón moved to open the garage door, she saw the "WBP" spraypainted on his melons. Those *malcriados pendejos sinvergüenzas!* Hasta the melons! Pretty soon they would be spraypainting her and her husband whenever they went outside. Everyone in the neighborhood would be marked by the local gang initials the minute they stepped out the door!

Oh, those good-for-nothings. *Y qué* what did it prove? Did they really think they were "owners" now of something just because they scribbled their initials on it? Maya couldn't believe they were so stupid. Even she, with only her 6th grade education, knew what it took to own something, even something as modest as their *casita*, and she knew that if it was just a matter of putting your initials on it, we would all be Rockefellers.

*Bueno*, he's going to clean it off tonight. Fine. She just hoped that they didn't strike again before morning.

It was too late for real *café*. She poured water into the coffeemaker, leaving the afternoon's grounds in place, and as the weak coffee dripped into the pot, she watched Ramón cleaning. Her stomach tightened as she imagined young men leaping from the bush or over the fence to assault Ramón and steal his tools. She pulled a chair up to the back window, checked the phone and sat down to watch him work.

The watermelons were impressive. She had never seen fruit so large. They looked almost holy—each enthroned in its own nest of vines. Yet after Ramón harvested them, the yard would just be dirt, ugly and unattractive as the lot behind their house in México was—just dirt, until she started planting her rose bushes along the back wall.

Her rose bush. For so long it had given her fragrant red roses in this house, until Ramón took over the back garden. It was the first time in all her married life with Ramón that she didn't have a rose bush. Well, if you didn't count the first six years here, when they had lived in apartments, and "tell the truth," she often didn't count them.

To make up for the loss of the rose bush, her daughters had purchased a dozen flowering potted plants: azaleas, cyclamen, geraniums, african violets, wax plants and impatiens that now filled the front porch and hallway of Maya and Ramón's house, and every morning of Maya's life.

She saw him putting away the paint remover and she cleaned her cup and put the chair back. When she saw him coming towards the back door, she went to her room, waited to hear the door locks fall into place and then got back into bed.

She was relieved that he was back in the house, doors locked, that no harm had come to him tonight. It was the same feeling she used to have when Ramón came home from work at six o'clock in the morning.

"Ramón, how do you feel?"

"*Cansado, vieja, cansado.*"

Sometimes she made him warm milk to help him sleep,

or ten, if he was showing signs of a cold. He told her who he had seen at work and how the night went. He usually didn't say much, enjoying a warm drink in the comfort of his own kitchen before going to sleep.

If Maya was having a problem with one of the children—José getting into fights or a poor report card for Jorge, she did not tell him then. He did not like to be agitated before going to sleep. She might tell him in the afternoon, when he woke up, but usually, even then she would not mention it because he did not like to be agitated before going to work either.

But as the children grew, there were things she had to tell him. It was too much for her alone. Ramón just got angry at his sons, and later his daughters, for causing problems, but they hadn't always accepted his discipline: "Tell the truth," Maya knew that it wasn't just Ramón's long hours that had made it difficult between him and his children. There had been other things happening in their lives here, things she couldn't understand, let alone explain to her husband. Cristina was a help. Cristina had always been a help. It was Jorge, José, Ramón *pequeño* and Mercedes, ah Mercedes especially, who became something other than their children. And now, were they really her children? Oh, she loved them all. No doubt about that. *La madre nunca se olvida de sus hijos*. But how many were really her children in the way that she had always thought they would be?

### III.

Maya was standing at the wooden desk set against one of the kitchen windows, where they kept the coffeemaker, toaster and mugs, about to pour herself a cup of coffee when Ramón appeared, his flannel robe tightly wrapped around his rotund body. He stopped at the door to the kitchen and nodded to his wife.

Maya greeted him with an "Oh, you're up early," and asked if he wanted coffee, but not in the way that most people who live in this northern city would ask this question: "Do you want coffee?" or "Would you like some coffee?" Instead, it was, as always: "Shall I serve you coffee?" It was the kind of expres-

sion unusual among most people here, the too-proud descendants of industrious Germans and Scandinavians who had immigrated to this place long ago and who had little patience for indirectness or taking orders.

Ramón answered, "Well, yes, serve me some," as if he were agreeing out of politeness, and sat at the faded yellow table, set against the other kitchen window, glancing outside to see whose car was making so much noise on the street. It was a Chevrolet Impala, a beet color mottled by splotches of gray primer and in need of a new muffler. The driver, stopped in front of the duplex across the street, waited for someone to emerge. In a minute, one of the young men who lived there came out to the car and they left in a hurry.

"Didn't you sleep well?" she asked.

"*Ya, bien,*" he answered. "It was just those *carajos* that woke me up last night."

"*¿Qué pasó?*"

"Me pintaron the watermelons."

"They didn't break them?"

"*No, no, allí estan.*"

She took her coffee and returned to the porch to water her plants.

Ramón drank his coffee black and slowly, wondering why Maya was on the porch. Usually, she served him breakfast shortly after he sat down at the table. He waited patiently.

He hadn't slept well after the night's disturbance and he didn't realize that he was awake before Maya had even gone to the morning mass she attended everyday.

For the thirty-three years that Ramón had worked nights at the tannery, he did not get up until two in the afternoon, long after Maya returned from church, tended to the garden, did the laundry, cleaned the house, made lunch for the kids and watched her favorite soap opera. Maya had always prepared a big meal for her husband and served him as soon as he sat down to eat. It was the least she could do for a man who worked such long hours.

When he retired last year and, at Maya's suggestion, started a garden in the backyard, he began rising earlier than he

ever had since leaving the *rancho*. And Maya also rose earlier, taking care of her plants then going to mass, arriving home just in time to feed Ramón breakfast when he woke up.

From his seat by the window, he watched the neighbors leave for work and wondered, for the five hundred and forty-first time, why Maya spent so much time on plants that produced no useful food or herbs.

Maya tugged at the dead blooms and leaves on her begonias more harshly than usual. She could go back into the kitchen, make breakfast, and do her gardening later in the day or she could make breakfast as soon as she was done with the plants, skipping mass. She pressed her finger into the soil of each pot, checking to see if it was dry, before pouring. Then she picked up an old Windex bottle filled with water and sprayed the dust from the plant leaves. When she finished it was time to go to mass. She returned to the kitchen, poured Ramón another cup of coffee and left for church through the back door.

Ramón picked up his mug and was wondering what Maya was going to get from the garage when he heard the gate and jumped up in time to see her close it and turn onto the sidewalk, headed for church. He looked at the clock on the kitchen wall, then around the room, then down at his coffee. After a few minutes, he went to shower and shave.

When Maya returned from mass, Ramón was already working in his watermelon patch.

"¿Y no quieres de comer?" she asked, ready now to fix him his breakfast.

"No, no. No tengo hambre," he answered. His voice was not petulant, or annoyed, but flat.

"Bueno."

Ramón carefully trimmed the roots of the vines. Then he wheeled soil from his gardening shed to the center of the yard. He scooped dirt from the wheelbarrow and spread it over an area next to the melons, creating a fresh bed of dirt for each one. Taking care to avoid breaking the vines, he then pushed each one several times until it rolled over onto the new dirt.

Ramón's next step was usually to water and fertilize, but

today he decided to finish a special project first: the construction of a cover to protect the developing melons from the summer sun.

Ramón had already assembled materials for a covering over the melons, so he set to work on the frame. He sawed off a few lengths of wood from an old board he had found in the alley, then cut a piece of blue tarp. He drove several pieces of lumber into the ground around the melons, two taller pieces in the center and then long flat slats linking the center pieces with the outside ring. After stapling the tarp to the frame, he stepped back to look at the miniature tent. The light was different under it. The melons were no longer two shades of green but two shades of blue-green.

The tent was crooked, an umbrella that had been damaged in the rain, but standing. He evened out the sticks, and cut some of the jagged tarp. That was better. Though he knew it looked amateurish, he took pride. The circle was fairly even.

He heard Maya come out the back door and he waited for her to approach.

It was already after one o'clock and she wondered if he still wanted lunch.

"I made flour tortillas," she told him.

"Oh," said Ramón, thinking how much he wanted food.

Maya waited for an answer as he walked over, stooped under the tent and put his hand on the hard skin of a melon. It was warm. He put his cheek, then the whole side of his face down on it, his ear pressed to the hull. The upper part of his body, resting against the smooth oval under the tent, shone blue.

He lifted his head and murmured to his wife of almost 45 years, "your tortillas are very good."



Debi Cooper, *Ana, Alone and Bold*. Redwood City, California. September 21, 1996.

## Unnatural Acts

### Ibis Gómez-Vega

The office was abuzz with whispering about the whole affair. Muffy Pruitt had told Martha Wosley point blank about Carmen, the Latina lab instructor she had always liked so much. Muffy, apparently, didn't want to be the one to tell, or so she claimed in her thunderously loud voice in the middle of the hall, but someone had to. Didn't they? The few faculty members keeping office hours leaned out their office doors to hear the news. They had already heard the commotion coming from Martha's office earlier, so Muffy told. Carmen García had made a pass at Rosa, the work-study student in the lab, who everybody knew was a married woman.

"We're handling it, Muffy, thank you," Martha Wosley answered in her capacity as reluctant Acting Chair of the department. She had, earlier, listened to Rosa as she sat in her office and cried. The message, warbled by the tears, had something to do with Carmen and her talking to Rosa about sex.

"I thought you should know," Muffy Pruitt insisted, but Martha Wosley had neither the time nor the inclination to discuss Carmen's newest faux pas in the middle of the hall. She opened the door to her office and walked in, passed Luisa, her secretary, who rolled her eyes and made faces as she answered the phone, leaving Muffy Pruitt to the audience of faculty members leaning against the convenient shelter of their office doors.

"The poor, dear heart couldn't stop crying," Muffy reported.

"Carmen must be losing her touch, if she's making women cry these days," Claire Underwood piped in. Tom and Fabian agreed, both of them bemoaning how the lack of usage could cramp anyone's style.

"I never thought she was into that sappy stuff," Tom added.

"What sappy stuff?" Claire wondered.

"Making poor, dear hearts cry," Tom camped. The