



Breathing in Blossoms

by Margo McCall

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Carla whisks off the black plastic cape and touches her sleeping customer's shoulders. "All right, Mrs. Garabedian. You're done."

Mrs. Garabedian opens her eyes slowly, appearing startled to find herself in a beauty salon. Carla doesn't know where the old lady goes when she falls asleep in the chair like that. The other stylists roll their eyes, whisper about her behind the cupped shells of their hands.

Poor Mrs. Garabedian, she's lost her husband. But he's not the one who's lost. He has a new home at Forest Lawn that Mrs. Garabedian visits every Sunday, picnicking on hummus and flatbread by his grave. The rest of the time, she wanders Hollywood Boulevard in her widow's weeds. No one comes to visit her in her small apartment. Not the son swallowed by the past. Not the daughter raising her own children up in Glendale.

Carla knows this, knows many things. The clients who collapse in her chair and let themselves be spun around, offering their heads and hoping for transformation, reveal a litany of loves, betrayals, and dreams that make Carla feel more like confessor than cosmetician.

But Mrs. Garabedian is silent. There's just the rasp of Carla brushing on the hair dye, the crinkle of her wrapping the strands in foil, the hairdryer whirring above the soft beat of music as Mrs. Garabedian takes her afternoon nap. But Carla still knows what goes on inside her head.

Awake now, eyes darting like crazy, black olives, Mrs. Garabedian seems not to recognize herself when Carla holds up the mirror. "Ahh, good," she finally says, touching hair that Carla "make red" as instructed.

Carla hopes for a generous tip as she watches Mrs. Garabedian's bent fingers extract bills from the secret pocket of her purse. "You look pretty," Carla says encouragingly. "You like?"

The old lady nods absently, hoists herself up and jerks wildly toward the open door, the bills fluttering in her hand like trapped birds.

"Mrs. Garabedian," Carla calls out anxiously. "Aren't you going to pay me?" Carla's mind flashes to the unpaid utility bills at home on the kitchen counter, the rent check she'll have to write this week, the food she'll have to buy for herself, her daughter Marta, and her mother Essie.

The old lady looks confused as Carla pries open her wrinkled hand and extracts the bills. And then Mrs. Garabedian walks out onto the boulevard and is gone, swallowed by the roar of traffic.

With her last customer finished, Carla can let her own thoughts drift: to

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Marta, probably walking home from school right now, and her mother absently opening and closing the fridge and wondering what to make for dinner.

The other stylists are hungry for fresh gossip. "Did she tell you anything today?" asks Leticia, her gold front tooth gleaming wildly. Francesca, the scar-faced Serb with haunted eyes, listens solemnly, trying to comprehend what's being said.

"Nothing," says Carla. "Same as always."

"You think she ever get over husband die?" asks Tami, a Thai mail-order bride who used to work in a brothel. Her horse tail of hair swishes restlessly as she picks at her long acrylic nails.

"Your old man take same bus," Leticia jokes, tugging at the t-shirt riding up over her stomach, swollen from too many kids and tortillas y frijoles. "Maybe you join widow club soon."

Tami's eyes flash. "He not that old!"

Tami's husband Roger works for the post office. When he picks up Tami from work, he swats her ass playfully, making her whinny with delight. Carla doesn't like to imagine them in bed, Tami's skinny thighs straddling an expanse of white flesh as big as America, covered, Carla imagines, with stringy hairs writhing like poisonous snakes.

Tami's the only one of them with a man. Leticia's too busy feeding herself and her kids to miss her husband in an Arizona detention center. Francesca lives with a Serbian family and is saving for surgery to repair her jagged scar. And Carla gave up men a long time ago after all the agony with Eduardo.

Mrs. Garabedian's their deepest, secret fear, what they see when they close their eyes and raft down the river of fear. Give yourself to love and you'll end up with nothing. They're so much smarter, keeping the doors of their hearts locked. And when someone knocks in the middle of the night, they'll just roll over and keep on dreaming.

Leticia plops in her chair, examines the strip of stomach peeking out from her t-shirt. "You think South Beach diet work for me?"

"No, you always be fat," Tami shouts, getting back at Leticia for the comment about her husband.

Leticia's always on a diet. Tami's always picking at her nails. Francesca's always trying to hide her scar. And what does Carla always do? Worry about moving her daughter to a better neighborhood.

The vision of a new apartment twirls in her head like a sweet confection in a bakery display case. Clean and modern, with white ice cream walls, a soft

cake of white carpeting, a big kitchen with new appliances and smooth counter tops, enough bedrooms so no one has to sleep on the couch—all covered with a creamy white frosting of quiet.

Tami and Leticia's bickering bursts her bubble. "Your husband, he must like the boys, eh, marrying skinny girl like you," Leticia sneers.

Carla tosses the black cape that covered Mrs. Garabedian's shoulders into the laundry bag, rinses the leftover red dye from the bowl and brush, and picks up the blow dryer. Standing on the squishy rubber mat by her chair, Carla's overtaken by a sudden wave of emotion. That's what it's like for her, the feeling that she absorbs when her hands touch their heads, returning to haunt her later.

"Poor old Mrs. Garabedian," she says to her chair neighbor Francesca. "Such a long life, and only sadness at the end."

Francesca looks up from sweeping sprigs of hair scattered around the base of her own chair, and sighs sympathetically. "Ah yes, life it is not easy," she says, her blood-red lips struggling with the foreign words.

Francesca uses that phrase a lot, along with: *cut and color, just a trim, that will be forty dollars, and you look very nice*. If it wasn't for the rippling white line hiding behind that veil of dark hair, Francesca could have been a model.

Carla's touched Francesca's head while trimming her glossy bangs into a sharp line above her eyes—*please, not make too short!*--seen bodies in the streets, heard the roar of bulldozers dumping them in mass graves.

Blowing hair from the chair, Carla takes the broom from Francesca and begins her automatic sweeping. Hair, always hair. The sharp trimmings get caught in her eyes, jab the skin between her breasts, even ending up stuck to the milk carton inside the fridge at home.

Carla made a strange career choice, considering she was disgusted by her father's black nylon comb sitting dead on the dresser, crusted with gray scum and threaded with greasy stray hairs. But being a beautician has turned out to be a good thing. For one thing, it's kept her alive. And not just her but her mother and daughter too—three generations of them crammed into her mother's cramped apartment on Wilton.

At first, Carla couldn't stand touching the heads, was repulsed by the smell of scalp, dandruff clogging her styling comb, the thoughts from their heads becoming tangled in her fingers. She wandered into the cosmetology school on San Fernando Road one afternoon during senior year. Her parents were so relieved their daughter found a trade that they threw a party. The collection of cousins, aunts, and uncles—relatives no one had seen in years—all with visions of free haircuts for the rest of their lives.

The touch was startling at first, but Carla's used to it now. If anyone rested their fingers on her skull, they'd feel weariness. Keeping her family fed and

cared for takes more energy than she has.

Leticia tried to set Carla up with one of her cousins, but Carla says she has no time for love, at least not the kind between a man and a woman. She had that with Eduardo, but that was a long time ago. Now he's at his sister's house in the Valley, drinking cerveza and watching TV.

Carla's done the big hair of the eighties, the dippy do's of the nineties, the hacked-off look since the millennium. She's worn them all, went from long to short and back again, from curly to straight to wavy, from raven black to blood red to streaks. And now, underneath the coats of dye, her hair is quite gray.

A shadow ripples in the doorway, and the stylists' eyes move toward it like they're deer wary of predators. But it's just shy Viktor, who's been running the salon and the appliance store next door since his sister went back to Belarus to look after their ailing mother.

Viktor pulls off the knit cap he wears to hide his balding head, holds it sheepishly over his crotch, nervously kneading the wool with fat, oil-stained fingers. They wait for him to summon the courage to raise his eyes.

When he does, Leticia makes her move. "Ola Viktor," she says garrulously. But by the time Leticia manages to extricate herself from her chair, Tami's already hooked her claws into a corner of his cap. "You need trim? I best with razor," she burbles, fighting for customers like she's back in the brothel.

Viktor pulls at his cap, but his soiled fingers are no match for Tami's claws. His frightened eyes flit desperately to Francesca. But she's staring mournfully at the floor. His disappointed eyes move on. And this time, they land on Carla.

As their eyes connect, Viktor raises his thick eyebrows tentatively. "Miss Carla? You might squeeze me in?"

Carla's not sure she wants to touch his head, share its contents, let his thoughts penetrate her being. But this fear has another dimension. He's the owner and she can't say no. And so she hardens her heart. Adding bricks one by one, slathering them with mortar, building the wall.

"But of course," she says, attempting to smile. She grabs a fresh black cape and bows. "Please, Mr. Viktor. Have a seat."

Carla takes in his scuffed work boots, tree-trunk thighs filling the legs of faded work pants, the oily fingers that make her want to scrub him clean—eyes moving upward to shoulders still muscular from years of hard labor back in Belarus, imagines an old bear lumbering through the forests of

Eastern Europe.

“Just need clean up,” he says, gesturing vaguely in the area of his head.

As their eyes bounce off each other in the mirror, Carla raises her wall a little higher. She scrutinizes the tangled nest of hair partially covering his bald spot. So much hair growing on him, shaved to a shadow along his jaw, wiry sprouts jutting from his nose, wild swirls curling from his ears, edging into the back of his shirt, where tangled curls from his back spiral up to greet it.

Viktor sits in the chair, looking embarrassed. Even before her comb touches his head, she feels the mist of anxious energy prickling around his shoulders. Feels the way he misses his sister, his urgency for a woman coming up against his prison walls of shyness.

Carla slams another brick in place. But before she can stop it, something seeps through the cracks, raining on his shoulders in a torrent. Viktor’s eyes look at her questioningly, his flood of desire meeting hers. And they are suddenly drowning in it, the pool of feeling that quenches thirst but leaves them unable to breathe.

Carla’s fingers tingle as she guides the comb through the wild curls. She’s barely aware of the flash of scissors, the trimmer’s buzz, only the feel of her fingers on his hair, the way the muscles of his shoulders push his head toward her, the pulsations of pleasure that emanate from it in an arc of dazzling light.

After it’s over, he looks at himself in the mirror, pleased, before turning toward Carla expectantly. She feels herself blushing, like the shy schoolgirl she was back when she first met Eduardo. And then Viktor blushes too. As he places two twenties on her station and puts on his cap, he can’t bear to meet her eyes.

After he leaves, her hands shake as she rearranges her combs and scissors and sweeps the trimmings into an arc.

“Did you see the way he looked at you?” Leticia gushes after Viktor leaves.

“That man in love,” Tami says, her singsong voice free of its hateful rasp.

Francesca raises her eyebrows, a sad smile crinkling her scar.

Carla feels flustered, like she’s falling apart, the bricks scattered around, surrounded by bits of exploded mortar. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says, her voice sounding cold and hard even to herself. “I just give him a haircut, that’s all.”

“Carla in love too,” Leticia chants.

“Love,” she says angrily, spitting out the word like a bitter seed. “I don’t have time for love.” She gathers up her things, surprised at the strange

combination of feelings flooding her body. "I've had enough for one day," she says finally. "See you manana."

Outside, Hollywood Boulevard is bustling. Walking with downcast eyes, Carla sees candy wrappers, trash bags, mysterious dark stains, and feet. Tennis shoes, work boots, leather sandals, dirty feet with long nails. Some days, she'll glance up and be staring into the eyes of the crazy homeless man with the headphones. Or come face to face with a young couple from Bangladesh or Nigeria, still wearing their bright native garb, illusions of America dripping from their startled eyes. Today she keeps her eyes on the ground, watching her sandaled feet with painted nails advance over the concrete.

She walks over the freeway overpass, gazing down at the thick ooze of strawberry jam brake lights. Then by the vacant lot where earth is being scooped out for a multi-use project, then past the coffee place and the butcher.

She passes the Armenian men smoking on the street corner, the Salvadoran body shop with its graffiti-scarred blue paint, the clots of dead-eyed boys with shaved heads prowling the streets like animals. Sometimes she'll see the Guatemalan man pushing his disabled boy in the chair, or the white girl walking her Akitas.

She finally arrives at her falling-down apartment house. Other landlords have painted their buildings pink or turquoise, planted flowers, sealed windows with protective bars. But the owner of Wilton Manor has done nothing. Not even a lock on the front door, only a No Trespassing sign to keep out the criminals and addicts.

The faded brown building sags tiredly into the earth, its termite-eaten beams too weak to hold up much of anything. Late at night, when the neighborhood finally grows quiet, Carla can hear the slimy creatures swallowing bits of the floor.

On this spring evening as the sky bleeds with watery pink light, she spies a boy and girl making out under a lemon tree. The tree's tangled branches, heavy with creamy purple blossoms, hold the lovers in a close embrace.

They're part of the tree, their bent arms blending with the bark, their lips opening thirstily like the purplish blooms. Poor things, nowhere to hide but an old lemon tree on a busy street. So young, so much in love. As everyone was once or is or will be one day.

Unable to help herself, Carla imagines she and Viktor standing under the tree, their arms climbing up each other like vines. She's so deep into the fantasy that when the girl turns, and it's her daughter, her heart skips a beat.

Yes, there are a lot of young mothers in the neighborhood, Carla tells Marta—goddamn, some of them look ten years old! “You’re smarter than that,” she tells her brown-eyed girl. “You finish high school. Then you kiss all the boys you want.”

The dinner of rice and enchiladas that Essie spent the afternoon making sits ignored.

“Yes, your boy is very cute with those big, innocent eyes, but what kind of man will he become? That is the question you must ask yourself. And at any rate, you’re only thirteen, way too young to be starting down that road.”

Marta sits with arms crossed over her budding breasts, her bottom lip stuck out petulantly. “How am I supposed to feel when I see my daughter with some guy?” Carla asks.

“He’s not some guy,” Marta shrieks. “His name is Salvador.”

“What is he? From El Salvador? Some political refugee?”

“Shh! The neighbors,” hisses Essie.

With that, Marta runs from the kitchen and goes to cry in the bedroom closet, her only refuge besides the lemon tree. Carla stands outside the closed door, feeling it reverberate with her daughter’s sobs. After a few minutes, she can’t take it.

“Mija?” she asks, knocking lightly. “Mija, can I get you some tissue or agua?”

“Nooo,” Marta wails. “Just. Leave. Me. Alone.”

It’s an ugly night, and Essie’s no help. She just shrugs as Carla goes on about the neighborhood, how it’s absolute chaos, how everybody is confused about what their lives used to be or are or could some day be.

“We are not here forever,” Essie reminds her. “Someday we’ll be living somewhere better. Just you wait and see.”

Yes, her mother the hopeful dreamer. On what Carla’s making at the salon, it will be a year or two more until she saves first and last to rent in a better neighborhood. And by then, Marta could be giving birth to her first baby.

After the yelling and untouched dinner, after Carla settles in on the folding couch in the living room, only then does she let Eduardo tiptoe into her head. Wonders what he’s doing. Sees the outline of his stooped shoulders, the mouth of the cerveza bottle pressing against his fleshy lips. Feels and smells him like he’s in the same room, not living in his sister’s garage in Van

Nuys.

She hears him saying her name: Caar laaa—the word dripping off his tongue like sweet nectar, imagines Viktor saying her name that same way.

Marta sees her father at Christmas and on her birthday. She stopped asking about him a long time ago. Carla has pictures of him in a scrapbook if Marta ever wants them. But so far, she doesn't.

Would this kind of thing be happening if Eduardo were still around? Carla wonders if she should let him know his daughter is growing up too fast. The sapling with twig arms and crooked teeth has grown breasts eager as little birds to leave the nest. And all that need, for a father, for a better place to live where she wouldn't be scared, hear gunshots, or get knocked up while still in junior high. Carla sighs. She doesn't need to touch her daughter's thick, wavy hair to feel the thoughts ricocheting through her head.

Carla lies down on the couch and pulls the sheet around her shoulders, wishing she had more than a sheet for comfort. She's tired, her back aching from hours of leaning over the chair, cutting, coloring, and blowing.

It's too hot and stuffy to sleep. She can hear the family in the next apartment talking, cars whizzing by on the street, a siren screaming in the distance. And below it all, the sound of termites munching on the floor, ceiling, and walls.

Carla closes her eyes, but underneath her eyelids, the kissing couple twists and twirls, dripping with innocence and a belief that love can conquer all.

Her mind wanders back to the orange grove where she and Eduardo once lingered. Rows of trees undulating over hilly ground. The fringe of leaves, dark green and shiny, laughing as the bars of sunlight drape their shoulders in gold. The warmth and weight of each other's bodies, the intoxicating smell of oranges, in the grip of feelings too powerful to fight.

The orange groves have been cut down to make room for apartments. And now it's only concrete and noise, children making out in the street like dogs.

Carla doesn't know what to do with her eyes. Each time she opens them, she's blinded by the white security light from the building next door. And each time she closes them, the boy and girl under the lemon tree kiss harder. In her mind, she tries to pull them apart, make them go to their own sides of the street, but it's like they're glued together. One creature, with hands rippling up and down each other's spines, a will joined by desire, two becoming one.

And then the small voice she's been telling to shut up for years rises above the gnawing termites. She thought she'd snapped the velvet box shut and shoved it in the back of a drawer. But here it is like it used to be, glittering like a diamond on a satin bed of promise. The feel of her hands on Viktor's head.

After everyone in the building turns off their TVs and goes to sleep, after her daughter's sobs turn to snores, after the traffic quiets to a faraway whir, then you can hear the coyotes.

The first time Carla and Marta stretched their heads out the apartment window to listen to the coyotes up in the hills, Marta was scared. "What is that?" she asked, a wide-eyed girl of seven or eight.

"They're the one thing you don't have to worry about," Carla had said. "They're far away, and you're too big for them to eat."

Tonight, the coyotes wail loudly, celebrating ripping apart the flesh of a rabbit or cat. Carla turns over on the couch. What do American coyotes know of hunger? So well-fed with pets and household trash that they look like German shepherds. Not like the yellow-eyed creatures of Jalisco, those hungry gray bags of loose skin. They floated like skinny ghosts, hovering at the edge of everything, aiming their gold eyes on whatever moved, even babies.

The childhood memories are like a hazy dream. "You were too young to remember," Essie always says. "Some things are better to forget."

Carla remembers bit and pieces from that long-ago time. Empty stomachs on the trip north, the other kind of coyotes who stole their money and left them to walk through the desert alone instead of eating them.

And then the beginning of the fairytale. The house in Pacoima her father and uncle broke their backs to buy. Where brothers and cousins and aunts had already taken the best rooms, but left the garage for Essie and her small daughter, who found the cement floor an improvement over dirt.

Up here, even the sunlight seemed brighter. Or at least that's what Essie always says, the few times she permits herself to go back. All working hard: parents and aunts and uncles; even kids as soon as they were old enough. They bought furniture and TVs and school clothes and work trucks. And more food than they could eat: the women filling the kitchen with the smell of enchiladas and tamales, the rich moles from their hometown.

And then one day, the men in uniforms took it all away. Her father's heart stopped. Her brothers scattered. Her mother got quiet, spent afternoons staring into space. But Carla survived, just like Mrs. Garabedian.

Carla was already basking in the sunshine of orange groves with Eduardo and stepped up to the altar and got married. It was as easy as slipping on a coat, the new generation replacing the old. Their first and only baby came fast. After that it was all downhill.

No wonder her mother doesn't like to remember. No wonder she watches telenovelas all day long. That's all Eduardo does too at his sister's house

now that he has lost his job, his wife, his daughter: drink cerveza and watch TV. Both of them looking for their happy endings there.

The coyotes wail in the distance. Carla can feel their hunger. The hunger Marta is just beginning to feel. This is life. Feeding the hunger. Eating more and more, expanding like the brightly colored balloons the kids have at birthday parties in place of pinatas. Always wanting, always hungry for more, to be bloated with happiness. The desire hangs in the flower blossoms, clings to bees' legs, lingers in late-afternoon sunlight. It beats in chests like something with wings.

Carla gets up from the couch and opens the window. The leaves of the lemon tree shimmer with silver under the wash of the security lights and the sweet aroma of blooming citrus rises up, penetrating her nostrils, pulling her toward it, blotting out the smell of car exhaust and trash.

She tries not to wake anyone as she opens the front door that always sticks. Walks down the crumbling steps in her nightgown and slippers. Into the night. Across the street to the tree. Holding her arms out like a sleepwalker. She reaches out, hugs the trunk, feels the rough bark under her palms, the jab of sharp thorns under her fingers. Lingers under the fringe of citrus leaves, breathing in the smell of blossoms until her heart is finally full.

Margo McCall's short stories have been featured in *Pacific Review*, *Heliotrope*, *In*tense*, *Mind in Motion*, *Sidewalks*, *Rockhurst Review*, *Sunspinner*, *Wazee Journal*, *Toasted Cheese*, and other journals. Her nonfiction has appeared in *Herizons*, *Lifeboat: A Journal of Memoir*, *Pilgrimage*, and a variety of newspapers and other publications. A former journalist, McCall is a graduate of the M.A. creative writing program at California State University Northridge. She resides in Altadena, California. For more information, visit www.margomccall.com.

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