

When Big Wally Lost Two Heads

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For the fourth round of our contest, we asked you to send us original works of fiction that contain each of these words: "plant," "button," "trick," "fly."

"What happened to Big Wally?" I said, looking through the sliding glass door into our backyard. While I'd been away, my favorite succulent, an aeonium as big as a robust toddler, had lost two of its eight purple heads.



"Deer," Glenn said, looking past me, to the sky. In the midday light it was easy to see where the gray crept in at his temples.

"Deer?" I said.

"Deer," he said.

I unpacked on our bed, making a separate pile for the Brazilian shopping bags I'd folded into neat quarters alongside my folded clothes. I'd just spent six weeks in Rio, living in a sublet and working in a colleague's lab, with little time for sightseeing. The bags were my only souvenirs.

We flew through Phoenix on the way back. "I looked for your parents in the airport," I called out to him.

He walked into the bedroom. "I blasted Big Wally by mistake. With the hose. The heads broke off."

"That was dumb," I said. "What did you do with them?"

"Put them in the yard waste." He played with the button at the neck of his shirt.

"Why didn't you replant them?"

"Kendra said that never works," he said.

Kendra lived next door. I could hear her wind chimes clinking lightly, like ice cubes in a highball glass.

The succulent had come to us three years earlier, in a box of clippings from a friend. When I planted it under the bougainvillea, along the fence that separated our house from Kendra's, it was only about eight inches long, with just one small rosette. Soon, it was doubling and tripling in size. New rosettes as big as heads kept sprouting, so I started calling it Big Wally. It was the least tended and happiest thing in the garden.

Around midnight I woke up, sweaty and disoriented, still wearing the jeans I'd worn on the plane. As I brushed my teeth at the bathroom sink and straightened the items in the medicine cabinet, I heard voices on Kendra's back patio. Kendra and Glenn. They were stifling laughter, like teenagers in the back of a sex ed class. Then Kendra let out a big howl and Glenn shushed her, laughing more. Her wind chimes kept up their tinkling. I closed the door to the medicine cabinet, rinsed my mouth, and walked outside, past broken-headed Big Wally, through the gate into Kendra's yard.

"Hey," I said. Kendra's back was to me.

"Maura!" she said, turning around quickly. "Welcome back!" There was a bottle of tequila on the wrought iron table, beside a box of cigarettes and an unopened deck of cards. Kendra and Glenn were both smoking, something I hadn't seen Glenn do for about 10 years, since the early days of our relationship.

"How was Rio?" Kendra asked.

"Good," I said.

"Did you see that Jesus statue?"

"It's pretty hard to miss."

"Glenn was just showing me how to do his crazy-eights card trick," Kendra said.

"See you in the morning," I said, relatching the gate. In the moonlight I could see the crusted stumps where Big Wally's two heads had broken off.

Glenn didn't join me, and I didn't invite him to. He would come when he was ready, or not. In the meantime, Kendra would provide all the landscaping advice he needed, and deer and card tricks the necessary cover.