

Sleepless Spring

*Written by
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The rocks arrived before the sickness. Smooth, river-washed stones in shades of ivory and slate, waiting in heaped mounds along the driveway. Andreia had planned to spend her spring arranging them, pressing her hands into the soil, feeling the warmth of the earth as she sculpted her garden into something alive. She had imagined long afternoons with dirt beneath her fingernails, the scent of crushed basil and rosemary clinging to her skin. It was the way her father, Vo Quim, had taught her—to work until the world softened. To believe that if your hands were busy enough, grief would leave you alone. She had pictured Carmo beside her, rolling their eyes as she talked about the poetry of gardening, of placing each stone with intention, of giving the earth a reason to remember them.

But life had other plans.

Now, in the first bloom of spring, she watches from a reclining chair on the lawn, her body frail but her spirit unyielding. A thick quilt drapes over her legs, even in the midday warmth, its weight both a comfort and a reminder of how much weaker she's grown. The wind is soft, carrying the scent of damp earth, fresh-cut grass, and something faintly sweet—maybe the wisteria blooming along the fence, its lavender tendrils swaying like ghosts in the breeze. The sun filters through the lemon tree's branches, dappling her skin with shifting gold.

She listens to the scrape of shovels, the quiet murmurs of her husband and their child working together—two people who have never been good at speaking the same language of love.

Carmo presses the blade of the shovel into the mound of rocks, muscles burning. The weight of the stones is satisfying, grounding. They should be studying for finals, finishing essays, going to the beach with friends. They should be living the careless life of someone on the edge of adulthood. But nothing about this spring break feels normal.

Their mother is sick.

That word—sick—feels insufficient. It doesn't capture the nights Andreia spends curled in on herself, her body shaking from exhaustion, or the hollowness that's settled beneath her sunken eyes. It doesn't capture the fear that coils in Carmo's chest when they wake up in the middle of the night and listen for the soft rise and fall of her breathing.

Juan works beside them, methodical and quiet. He has always been a man of action rather than words, the kind of father who fixes things instead of talking about them. When Carmo was younger, they used to resent this. They wanted tenderness, reassurance, and long conversations in the car. They wanted the kind of father who knew how to say *I love you* without feeling awkward. But now, as the two of them move in tandem, lifting and spreading the stones, something shifts between them. Not words, not apologies, but effort. Sweat. Shared work.

Andreia sighs from the porch, watching them. "You're making it beautiful," she calls out. Her voice is weak, but the words carry stride.

Carmo wipes a hand across their forehead, smudging dirt across their cheek. "We're trying."

The garden had always been Andreia's haven. Even now, while she cannot touch it, she watches it with reverence—the green buds of thyme creeping through the cracks, the lemon tree still stubbornly clinging to its last fruit of the season, its waxy leaves trembling in the breeze.

The small succulents she once potted with Carmo on a rainy afternoon, their ceramic containers chipped and worn with time. The lavender and rosemary bushes she planted years ago, their fragrance rising with every brush of the wind.

Juan steps back, surveys their progress. “We’re almost done for the day,” he says. “Don’t push yourself too hard, mijo.”

Carmo stiffens. It’s been years since Juan called them that. The word feels foreign and familiar all at once, like an old song they haven’t heard in a long time. They nod, swallowing the lump in their throat, and shovel another scoop of rocks.

By late afternoon, the golden light slants low across the driveway, turning the stones into a river of pale gold and soft gray. Carmo drops onto the grass beside their mother’s chair, panting. Their hands are raw, small cuts stinging from the dust and weight of the work. The scent of sweat and earth clings to their skin, and for the first time in a long while, they feel something close to peace.

Andreia reaches out, brushing a strand of hair from their forehead. Her fingers tremble, but the touch is comforting. “You remind me of Vo Quim,” she murmurs. “He always worked with his hands. Always believed that tending the earth was a way of loving it. And as your Vovo has always said, a home without flowers is a woman without jewelry.”

Carmo looks away, swallowing hard. Their throat is tight. “I just wish you could have done it yourself.”

Andreia smiles, the corners of her mouth barely lifting. “So do I. But this... this is something beautiful.”

Juan joins them, setting down a heavy rake. His face is lined with exhaustion, but there's something else too—something softer. He sits beside Carmo, closer than he usually does, and for a moment, the three of them just breathe together. "I know I don't say it enough," Juan finally says, his voice rough, like the words are foreign to him. "But I'm proud of you."

Carmo blinks. The ache in their chest deepens. "I—" They hesitate, then glance at their mother, who watches them with quiet encouragement. "I know."

Silence stretches between them, but it isn't uncomfortable.

A breeze stirs the garden, rustling the lemon tree's leaves, carrying the scent of salt from the ocean just beyond the hill. A bird calls out from a nearby branch, its song clear and bright in the fading light. The world moves forward, as it always does, but at this moment, in this quiet spring, the three of them are here. Together.

Carmo watches as the last of the rocks settle into place, their rough edges catching the light. The garden is taking shape—not exactly as Andreia envisioned, but with a beauty all its own. The stones form winding paths between clusters of herbs and flowers, leading to the lemon tree that has stood in their yard for as long as they can remember. It feels strange to see something tangible come from their hands, to mold the earth in a way that will outlast the season.

Juan stands, stretching his back with a grunt. "It's coming together," he says, almost to himself.

Andreia hums her agreement, her eyes soft. "It's more than that. It's something to be proud of."

Carmo shifts, picking at a dirt-caked fingernail. "Do you think Vo Quim would have liked it?"

Juan pauses. “He would’ve said you worked too fast. He believed good things take time.”

Carmo exhales, rough and fast. “He believed in a lot of things. I used to think he was invincible.” Andreia watches them, something like pain flickering behind her smile.

“I used to think you were too,” Carmo adds, barely a whisper.

Andreia chuckles, a low, tired sound. “He would’ve had opinions, that’s for sure.” She closes her eyes for a moment, as if conjuring the memory of her grandfather. “He’d say you placed the stones all wrong. Then he’d pull up a chair, drink his Sumol, and watch you fix them.”

Carmo smiles despite themselves. “Sounds about right.”

The wind picks up, carrying the scent of the ocean. In the distance, the tide is coming in, waves rolling against the shore in a rhythm older than any of them. For a moment, Carmo lets themselves get lost in it—the smell of salt, the sound of the garden rustling in the breeze, the feeling of damp earth beneath their hands.

Andreia’s voice pulls them back. “Thank you, meu amor.”

Carmo turns to her, brow furrowing. “For what?”

“For this.” She gestures weakly at the garden, at Juan, at the way they have all come together. “For being here. For making something with me, even if I can’t touch it.”

Carmo swallows, their throat tight. “Of course.”

Juan clears his throat, looking uncomfortable with the emotion hanging between them. “We should clean up before it gets dark.”

Carmo nods and stands, brushing the dirt from their jeans. Together, they gather the empty soil bags, the scattered tools, the last few stones left in the wheelbarrow. The work is slow, unhurried, as if none of them are quite ready to let go of this moment.

As they finish, Andreia shifts in her chair. “Help me up.”

Carmo hesitates. “Mãe, you don’t have to—”

“I want to.” Her voice is firm, leaving no room for argument.

Juan moves first, bracing her arm as she struggles to her feet. Carmo steps in on the other side, wrapping an arm around her frail shoulders. Together, they help her walk the short distance to the garden’s edge.

Andreia takes a breath, deep and slow. Then, with a trembling hand, she reaches down and presses her fingers to the earth. She lifts a small bundle wrapped in paper from her pocket— basil seeds. “I saved them,” she says softly. “Vo Quim gave them to me the year before he passed.” She drops a few into Carmo’s hand. “You plant them.”

Carmo stares at the seeds. Their hands shake. They kneel and press the seeds gently into the dirt, and when they look up, their face is streaked with tears they didn’t realize had fallen. Juan puts a hand on their back. He doesn’t say a word. Just stays.

For a long time, none of them speak.

The sun sinks lower, bathing them in gold. The wind hums through the leaves. The stones gleam, warm and smooth beneath the fading light.

Finally, Andreia smiles. “It’s beautiful,” she says, fingers brushing the dirt. “It’s home.”

Carmo nods. “We’ll keep it alive.”