

Late Bloomer

by Lisa K. Stephenson

NOEL . . .

She pondered, listening keenly to the pugnacious woman outlining the play-by-play details of the affair she could figure was nothing short of karma.

He was successful, he was exhilarating, and now, he was married. Married to a woman who had made her way onto an excursion, tagging along with her a bitter and unpleasant revelation. With the truth stabbing like a thousand knives, she could do nothing but embrace the blessing she had growing inside of her. Four weeks, six days, and eleven hours had her experiencing nausea, intense migraines, and insomnia to which Francis had yet to have taken notice. She was dozing off, her eyes fixed, misleading the woman who sat adjacent her; Alicia was her name. Latino-American standing at five-foot-nine with long, flowing, straight brunette hair strands. Although she was beautiful and her tone soft, the words that left her mouth made her presence unflattering.

The story went on and on, but there was nothing she could do, nothing she could say. Everyone gathered around confused on whether they were to console her, scold her, or rid themselves of her toxic company. The room felt dark, and with little to no resolution, the ladies decided it was time, time to intervene the only way they knew how; turning to face her, Francis said, "I think it best you leave."

Her best friend spoke as though they had now become imminent strangers. Unfamiliar to her now, the joy had been taken out of the room, and the air was now brisk as she prepared to take her leave, the women staring at her with malice she had never felt nor seen. But it was not her they wished to have removed from their presence despite her ongoing conversation; interrupting, Francis spoke with assertion, "No, married lady! You need to leave."

It was at that moment she realized, despite this low point in her life, she could count on her friends to remain by her side. The thumping in her heart meant her anxiety was beginning to flare, and without so much of a second thought as Alicia began to gather her belongings and roll her suitcase through the front door to await her driver, she heard the voice of Noel say the words she knew was going to be enough to change her life forever.

Peacefully she said, "Alicia, please tell Nathan that I am pregnant."

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Seattle was cold in the winter, colder than she could have ever imagined. Walking around outdoors had become familiar whenever her parents quarreled. A perfunctory ritual, almost subconsciously happening. Their voices would raise, and without realizing, she would begin to dress in her day's ensemble to head outside and face the brutal winds that only a city like Seattle could offer.

Her walk was slow, a young woman coming into her own, now twenty-six years of age, preparing to face the world on her own; little did she know her mother would have yet to approve. Guilt-ridden by the fact that she had now escaped the den of parental disagreement, she found herself parked at a bench just five miles up from a creek across from the elementary school she had attended. Mr. Kwon left to do her bidding, convincing his wife that the move would do her good, considering that one day they would all have to leave the nest. By all, he meant their daughter Noel-Lee, Xavier, and their youngest, Daniel, who by now had learned the

hard way that no one, absolutely no one, wins a verbal argument against Mom. But bless their father for his willingness to try.

Noel was stumped, torn almost, as she watched the birds frolic around on the grass, playing, searching for food, and looking as though they were having the time of their lives. Envious almost, she could not bring herself to admit that she had come to despise her mother. She loathed her for allowing her to grow up so sheltered all her life; she felt inexperienced, terrified of even the consideration to go out on her own, relocate, and begin fending for herself. But there was something telling her otherwise, something pulling her away from them, away from family, away from Seattle.

As the sun began to set, she took a long hard breath as she continued to warm the park bench. Despite the chilly weather, she was comfortable, her body heat aiding her in these cold, hard times.

Dear Noel, she thought to herself as she did many times, it is time to set yourself free.

Her eyes fell to the floor in devastation as she arose; it was mostly bravado, but she knew it was time to face the only person holding her back, Mrs. Kwon. Taking long strides was difficult to do as she only stood five-foot-five-inches tall and could not move as quickly as her mind wanted to, but she tried. Once home, she entered, shutting the door quietly behind her. She arrived hours later; realizing it was only half past nine, she wondered to herself how she had not yet gone mad. Half past nine on a Friday night, and the house was so quiet you could hear a pin drop; everyone had gone to bed. Standing downstairs in the foyer of their Victorian home, surrounded by five thousand square feet, much of which she still could not account for, it dawned on her; this was her only chance. Stepping lightly up the carpeted stairs after removing the chestnut-colored boots that stopped right above her calves, she realized she had to act quickly.

She entered her room, closing the door behind her; she flew the closet door open where she retrieved her suitcase, thrusting it onto her canopy-inspired bed with the pink bedspreads. She began to throw clothes inside. Ripping them from hangers, she was growing angry, her tears beginning to flow freely down her cheeks. Aggressively, she shoved her hair away from her face. Now she was getting impatient and beginning to question her sanity as she took small glimpses of the clothes she was finding herself willing to travel with; they were adolescent in nature. A tank top here, an oversized, homemade knitted sweater her grandmother had given her, jeans that were two sizes too small, and hats and gloves accompanied by overalls. She decided to halt. Taking a few steps back, she took a long look into her standing mirror, the one annexed to the back of her bedroom door. Noel felt trapped.

Placing her hands on her head, she felt bamboozled, tricked into a life she wished greatly she had avoided. Her eldest brother, Xavier, was thirty-three living down the hall from her, and all she could think about was how one day she too would be just like him. No goals, no family, no ambition, just Mom and Dad and two brothers, the Korean family way as she had always been taught. Sitting on the edge of her queen-sized bed, she stared ferociously at the stuffed animals, throw pillows, and the ornate pink comforter that her mother had purchased her. She was ashamed to have known she had gone through a portion of her adult life living like a child. Deciding to wallow no more, she decided to change her clothes. A track suit is fitting, she thought. Just then a faint knock came to her door; hesitant at first, she responded, "Who is it?"

"Daniel," the voice whispered. She loved her youngest brother; he was charming, intellectual, and welcoming—a heart of gold was what he had. Opening the door, she fell to her

knees hugging him tightly for she knew this was going to be it. The last time she would hold him for a long time.

Daniel remained clueless, and then it hit her; she needed his help. He was stealthy and could get her exactly what she needed to begin her new life.

She whispered in his ear, "Can you bring me the keys to the truck?"

Daniel was appalled. "Wherever you're going, take me with you!" he said. His eyes widened, "Take me with you, or I tell."

Daniel now peeked into the bedroom: He was no fool; he knew she was heading somewhere, anyplace but there.

Taking a long sigh, she said, "Daniel no, Mom would kill me, and I have to do this alone." Gripping his shoulders as her lips moved, her eyes knew; they knew he was not going to allow her to leave in peace.

"Fine," he snarled removing her grip. "I am going to tell mother now."

She had never felt more afraid than she did now. His tone was calm yet frightening, but she felt he was bluffing until, he was on the move. Making his way down the long corridor to the master's bedroom, he found himself face to face with the entrance to hell; at least that's what they had come to know it as.

"Please, please, please I am begging you! Do not tell Mom. Daniel, please," she whispered, her palms pinned together as she pleaded for what felt like her life.