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Why the Fig Tree Withers

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by Sydney Portilla-Diggs

May Pearl knew right away that she was in trouble. She stood in front of the mirror with the blow dryer in her hand wondering what it would feel like to plunge her hand in the toilet. How long would it take before the electrical shock killed her? How long would it hurt?

In an absentminded sort of way, the thought frightened her but she kept it a secret from her husband Tyrone. Later that night, she lay in her bed acutely aware of the fact that she was going to die. Although no nameless disease ate away at her healthy cells, she lay there thinking of dying just the same—not living, not creating, not loving, and regrettably not growing. She lay there not doing a thing but breathing and wasting time. In the dark, she listened to the steady breathing of her man lying beside her and knew he, too, was dying in his own way.

The problem was that she worried a little too much about what other people thought of her and what she was doing. She spent too much time trying to please everybody else—especially her mother. She knew that her mother wasn't going to be satisfied until she found out exactly what was going on.

She could hear Mama Renee like a tape recording in her head. “The Bible don’t say blessed are those who put on a good face during times of suffering or trial, May Pearl. And it don’t say nothing about blessing those who aren’t gonna be real. If you hide your pain away deep inside, there is no blessing and there is no comfort.” On the surface, her mother had been talking about some man she heard about on the evening news that pushed his girlfriend off of a bridge and then jumped off after her. But she knew her mother; she was always getting at something else. And May Pearl couldn’t keep a secret from Mama Renee. “Nothing is so bad that you have to kill yourself behind it, child. Suicide is like a slap in God’s face. It’s like taking the life that He gives you and telling Him that you don’t want it. Besides, black folks don’t commit suicide no how.” May Pearl didn’t know how to tell her Mama that death seemed like the only solution to this unlife she was living. She’d never tell her mother that.

Sometimes, May Pearl wondered if this was all there was. Her days were consumed by hours and minutes and seconds that seemed like years. All she could remember was the slow and

deep ache of longing and of emptiness. It was like a hunger that food couldn't satisfy—a thirst that water couldn't quench. Her longings were deep and greedy and very much alive.

It wasn't that Ty didn't love her anymore; he just treasured his selfish pride so much more. This is what their marriage had become. A few nights before, she had stood over him with an imaginary knife held high over her head. She pretended to plunge the knife in his back again and again. She wondered if he sensed her fury as he lay in bed with his back turned to her. She knew his eyes were squeezed tight while he pretended to sleep; there would be no communication between them tonight or any other night.

May Pearl wished she knew how this would play out. She was so tired of getting her feeling hurt by Ty's indifference. All she could think to do was pray. "Ain't I your daughter too, Lord? I'm afraid to talk to you right now, Lord. Because I know you're the creator and all, I know I'm not supposed to question you. But I don't understand why you let your son hurt me? Did you make me unlovable? Did you make me empty inside? Is this what you made me for? To suffer and to hurt? To want something that I am not ever going to have? Don't you care about me, Lord? Ain't I your child too?" May Pearl cried out to God. But he wasn't talking to her either. Not tonight.

A few days later, it was a surprise to her when Ty asked her what it would take to make her happy. For once, May Pearl gave an answer that didn't take anyone else's needs into consideration. All she knew was she had a yearning—she wanted to go to college and she wanted to write.

At first, Ty didn't stand in the way of May Pearl going to college. But it wasn't long before she felt his lack of support. He complained when dinner wasn't ready on time. He pouted when she stayed late at the library studying. Mama Renee says that it was the way of some black men to begrudge the education of their wives. "Ty would rather have you to stay home barefoot and pregnant, May Pearl while he is surrounded by them pretty professional women on his job. You better fix yourself up and don't let nothing stop you from getting your education." So May Pearl kept on going to school and started submitting essays for publication.

The first thing she got published was an essay called Things my Mama said. She was rightly proud of it and couldn't wait to show to her mother. But Mama Renee was ticked off when she read it because she thought it made her look bad. "I didn't say none of that mess you said." Mama Renee fumed. "Don't you write nothing about what your mother said no more."

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May Pearl laughed softly. "Mama, you can't tell me what to write. Besides I only wrote the truth. I'm sorry if you didn't like what I said. But I think it's good. I think it's uplifting."

"I am not going to argue with you, May Pearl. Just because you call yourself being mad at your husband, you ain't going to take it out on me."

In truth, how May Pearl felt had nothing and everything to do with Tyrone. It had everything to do with her inability to stand up for herself. "I am not going to argue with you, Mama. These are my feelings and they are not up for discussion."

But Mama Renee was not going to let it go. She had run May Pearl's life by intimidation for all of her life. She wasn't going to stop now. "You are so paranoid it ain't funny. You take offense at everything, girl. You cannot control the world. You are forgetting your place in life. You are forgetting what you are supposed to do. When Jesus saw that the fig tree didn't have fruit, he caused it to shrivel up and die." Mama Renee was sure that she had belittled May Pearl right back into her place—but she was mistaken.

"Maybe I can't control the world but I can control what I am going to take. The things you say hurt, Mama. Maybe you need to think about what you are saying. Your words are caustic."

May Pearl paused but her mother remained stubbornly silent. "Mama, all we have is each other. We have got to be here for each other."

"I am not going to argue with you, May Pearl." Lord, her mother was a stubborn woman.

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"Mama, I don't want to argue with you but we have got to deal with this. You are going to hear what I have to say whether it's now or in a letter."

"I am not going to waste my time reading and writing letters, May Pearl." Her threat held little potency because May Pearl knew the real reason the fig tree withered. The tree withered because it wasn't allowed to bear fruit. Nothing could grow in an environment where it was stifled. No plant could grow if it were root bound. May Pearl was tired of being root bound; it was time to grow.

"But I do, Mama...that's what I do...I write."