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Fetching the Pig

If you are serious about Christmas in South Florida you buy a pig. If you are serious about the pig you buy a live one.

The dead pig jiggled behind Mark, sliding to and fro on a piece of bloodstained cardboard. Carlos was driving the old Volvo station wagon fast along the side of a field, creating a tunnel of dust so dense he'd put the windshield wipers on. "We're in the dry season now, dear boy!" Aunt Charlotte had announced. Mark could taste the grit in his mouth but with a dead pig just behind him, preferred the windows open.

Here the land was so flat the South Florida sky seemed to tower right over the windshield. It made Mark feel, warm as he was, that in this part of the world when you really got down to it, when the gloves were off, whether you were a pig or not, nature was basically cold and implacable. He hadn't expected to watch a pig die the day before Christmas Eve. The man called Ricardo had shot it with a pistol and then dragged it over to a tub and slit its throat. Worse, he'd done it in front of the other pigs. Perched on a rail above the squealing, Carlos had been more interested in the double row of home-made benches across the yard. "Ricardo ... *fight the birds!*" He'd shaken his head and grinned: "*Cubanos!*"

Cockfighting. It was the most Carlos had said to Mark since he'd arrived. On the way home Mark wanted to ask him if Mexicans practiced cockfighting too. "Do the people in your country also," he repeated carefully, "*fight the birds?*"

Carlos, a Mexican from Texas, always put on his cowboy hat when he drove. He wore it low and straight across his forehead like a bull-fighter and was now frowning hard under the brim. Maybe, thought Mark, it's my English accent. As for Spanish, he knew if he went on trying to find out whether Mexicans indulged in the illegal sport of cockfighting, the closest he'd come would probably be: "Do your people make war with chickens?"

Carlos was, in Aunt Charlotte's words, "Orchid Empire's general dogs-body." Every morning he watered the orchids, every few days he fertilized them and once a week sprayed them with a variety of chemicals and mixes from a cluster of canisters and containers at the back of the shed. He also kept an eye on Rosita who did the potting and tidying and, since Mark had arrived, paid attention to him when required with an unselfconscious, formal courtesy that Aunt Charlotte avowed had not been seen in the average British worker since the beginning of the First World War. He called on reliable family members at show and sale times for extra help and this afternoon had been in charge of going out to Ricardo's on the edge of the Everglades and choosing the Christmas Pig. And he did all this at two dollars over minimum wage. "If anyone tries to steal Carlos away," Charlotte declared, "I will kill them."

They were on the main road now, heading towards Homestead. On either side U Pick fields open to the road were festive with winter tomatoes, sweet peppers and strawberries. Some had rows of annuals, mostly snapdragons and asters. This was the old farming belt south of South Miami, "the winter garden of the United States." Wayside stands announced: MALANGA, CALABASA, CARAMBOLA, YUCCA, GUAVA, MAMEY, COCO FRIO, PAPAYA, COCONUS 4 SEL. Many of the S's were written backwards which made Mark, fresh from teaching Remedial English in North London, feel right at home. There was Daisy's U Pick and Glad Farms and a majestic field bursting with golden sunflowers which, according to a modest sign at the front, was *Guarded by Smith and Wesson*. A little further on an acre of strawberries declared: THIS FIELD IS PROTECTED THREE NIGHTS A WEEK YOU GUESS WHICH THREE.

Aunt Charlotte had been in this part of Florida, south of South Miami, for the last twenty odd years. South Florida, she said, “would see her out.” Now, just hitting eighty and judging by her nightly intake, ninety percent pickled in gin, this seemed more than likely especially since the fall that had put her in a wheel chair and Mark in South Florida.

“Your aunt really needs you,” his mother had said, calling one morning just as he was off to North London’s Totters Green Comprehensive in a chill December rain. “She’s broken her leg at the worst possible time, apparently. It’s coming up to show season in the orchid world.”

It had been good timing for Mark. He was not only escaping the dreaded December Preliminary Assessment Grading Period Report and “We Are One World,” the Totters Green annual Christmas pageant, but was now basking in warm winter sunlight. So if only it weren’t for the Spanish, the flat and colorless South Florida landscape that looked about as exotic as Norfolk in November, the bloodstained pig, Aunt Charlotte and the whole business of orchids, everything would have been fine.

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Christmas Eve: Preparations for the Party

“Remember: If a *Cattleya* looks like it needs watering water it *tomorrow*. If a Vanda looks like it needs watering water it *today*, if a *Phalaenopsis* or a *Paphiopedilum* looks like it needs watering, you should have watered it YESTERDAY.”

Aunt Charlotte’s famous advice on watering orchids.

“**Y**ou forgot the gin!” Topped off with a baseball cap from Bill’s Bait and Tackle, the bad leg sticking straight out and aimed dead at him, Aunt Charlotte was grinding over the gravel in her high tech wheel chair. Watching her advance with a menacing whine Mark found himself thinking of those old wartime newsreels: “*Germany Mobilizes!*”

“Well, no one else drinks the stuff. Just keep my bottle on the porch. Get me refills as we go, water *and* ice. Can’t afford to get blotto too early!”

Sporting a leathery tan from so long in the hot bits of the former British Empire, Charlotte looked pretty good for eighty and all that gin. Mark had promised his mother at Heathrow he’d see Aunt Charlotte took her pills. But the labels all said *Warning: Avoid Alcohol*. Charlotte had lifted her chin and stared at him for what had seemed a very long time the first evening he got up enough courage, after a couple of beers, to point this out. Mark reminded his mother on the phone that if Charlotte had been an intimidating aunt when she was

small, she should see her now, over fifty years later with a second large gin in her hand. In fact, Charlotte was not his aunt, but his mother's, which made her a Great Aunt and when Mark met her there was no doubt in his mind that was indeed what she was.

Carlos had laid planks across the porch steps creating a makeshift ramp so Charlotte's chair could get out of the house and round the corner to the two small orchid houses unaided. Half hidden in a welter of philodendrons, bamboo, bromeliads and cycads, the porch looked like an ideal place to squirrel away a quart of gin. The broken rail had been patched with a piece of chicken wire and the rest of the bale was still there, together with a spade, two worn down maize brooms, some curly lengths of dusty driftwood and a forty pound bag of dog chow. When Charlotte died, she said the old, one-storey wooden house would be put on the market as a "Handyman Special."

"Dade County pine, wood's so hard, bends nails. Built by the first settlers. Their kids are still alive! Roads round here named after their fathers! Now, of course, going to hell in a handbasket like everywhere else. Well, it'll see me out."

Orchid Empire was tucked into two and a half acres in Redland, "last bit of green south of South Miami," still dotted with mango and avocado groves. Creepers and vines thick as monkeys' tails were taking over Charlotte's trees. Young palms, "volunteers," grew up haphazardly through their branches and some were curtained in grey Spanish moss, like an old black and white film with swamps, convicts and alligators. Mark had come across the remains of a giant mango, felled in some long distant hurricane, wreathed in vegetation and hard to distinguish, like some sunken ocean liner on the sea floor. Under the mahogany tree facing the porch hung two stag-horn ferns big as chandeliers but there were no orchids in sight.

"The last thing I want to do at the end of the day" Charlotte said, "is look at a damn orchid."

Fresh from England, Mark was amazed that no-one considered the possibility that it might rain. All the preparations for the Christmas Eve party were going on out of doors. After breakfast he was helping

Carlos set up sheets of plywood on saw horses in front of the orchid houses which were still dripping from the early watering. One of Carlos's many aunts had been up all night, holding vigil over the twenty-four hour roasting of the pig, Cuban style, in a pit behind the orchid houses. A dignified old lady in a large apron, she wore a faded black T-shirt that read RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE. A find from the Florida City Swap Meet, Mark guessed, like Charlotte's second hand Extra Large men's shirts. Two more aunts were coming along that evening with the food.

"It's something of a Christmas Eve tradition wondering what will turn up on their fronts. Over the years, judging from the T-shirts, a surprising number seem to have served in the Marines. I'm still hoping for one to beat two years ago: 'Coon Hunters for Christ!'"

Sitting on the porch with Charlotte after the trip to Ricardo's, Mark had muttered that the pig was *alive* when Carlos picked it out.

"I am reassured to hear this creature was trotting about till the very last minute, bright eyed and bushy tailed! In much of the world, my boy, blood on the stairs does *not* mean voodoo but old fashioned quality control!" Charlotte, squinting into the sun going down behind the mahogany tree, sounded wistful. Mark reflected there had to be a smart comment there somewhere: *one way of explaining a bloodstained British Empire—old-fashioned quality control!* but thought better of it.

"Now it's dismembered carcasses in the supermarket: '*USDA Fresh!*' What? United States Department of Agriculture! What? The *other* pigs? Well you ARE a namby pamby!"

It was at moments like these that Mark felt Charlotte, after just one week, was basically keeping him around because unlike Americans he knew how to make a strong cup of tea. As for him, it was only because the weather was so good and the alternative was teaching remedial English in north London in January, that he didn't pay the penalty on his British Air Super Saver three month excursion ticket and just clear off.

Mark told himself he should have known; he had grown up with stories of Aunt Charlotte. She was named after Charles Darwin, his mother said, "And everyone could see why." When small, he and his

sister had played Tigers with the narrow old cheetah skin that had been “shot outside Charlotte’s tent in Africa.” Every Christmas and birthday there would be the postcards: on one side waterfalls, coconut palms and elephants, women with long necks ringed in metal collars, half naked men in canoes holding spears, tea plantations, bunches of bananas and later on, the occasional dam and on the other, in Charlotte’s commanding hand, injunctions to work harder at school and not worry his poor mother. Charlotte had not actually seen Mark since he was about two years old and running around beating his toy drum and the cat but Mark could tell as soon as he put down his bag on the porch, that she was already considering he had not made much of the intervening twenty odd years.

Carlos was taking Christmas off and then going back to Texas for New Year so with Carlos gone Charlotte would have to rely on Mark, whether she wanted to or not. He had been out at seven thirty every morning that week to see how Carlos did the watering. “The key to everything!” Charlotte had declared. “If your watering is wrong, might as well throw your orchids away! In fact, *you will* end up throwing your orchids away! They all march to a different drummer. Remember: If a *Cattleya* looks like it needs watering, water it *tomorrow*. If a *Vanda* looks like it needs watering, water it *today*. If a *Phalaenopsis* or a *Paphiopedilum* does, you should have watered it YESTERDAY.”

Right! thought Mark. Of course, it did depend on whether you could recognize any of them in the first place. There were almost no orchids in Charlotte’s two greenhouses that looked like anything he’d seen in Marks and Spencers or one of the garden shops and there were almost no flowers. Rows of plants of varying sizes and shapes, some just green or brown clumps, crowded on to the benches. They were stuck into the wire along the side walls, hanging overhead in baskets, sprouting from coconut shells, clinging on to twigs and pieces of wood or in little wire pots with tufts of stuffing coming out. Like an aviary, thought Mark; orchids perched everywhere like dust colored sparrows and little finches on twigs and baskets, with an odd, exotic bird here and there sporting a brilliant crest or bizarre plumage and

sudden nests of tiny orchid flowers with wide open throats like the outstretched gullets of hungry fledglings.

Mark had not got off to a good start with his aunt or the orchids. On his second day, trying to be useful, he had done a little tidying up in one of the greenhouses. Charlotte, who maneuvered her wheelchair into any odd corner when it suited her, informed him with relish half an hour later that he'd just thrown away her entire collection of deciduous dendrobiums and catasetums. "These dendrobiums are the Himalayan species! They're *supposed* to 'look dead!' The only way to grow 'em in South Florida is to *ignore* them for half the year—recreate their native environment—dry period before the monsoon! Now, what's 'snail bait' in Spanish?"

Having been told not to fiddle with anything in the orchid houses and make the "basic shambles" any worse, Mark had felt free to relax. There was the watering and the daily warning from Charlotte that she did not suffer fools gladly but apart from that, he had three months 'all found" as Charlotte put it, unlimited winter sun, someone else who didn't give a hoot about housework or a balanced diet and apparently a totally unlimited budget when it came to alcohol. As Ned, his Aussie mate, was to ask plaintively in his very first email: "Why you, you undeserving bastard?"

Mark had made a diagram of the bizarre irrigation system: ("Turn on the left switch for the *other* house but make sure the valves are open on the right except the one in the middle. That's the one you need a wrench for.") And though he didn't hold out much hope for Charlotte's party, hardly the place to run across someone like the busty blonde at The Rat and Parrot, he had landed up during the South Florida winter season when Miami, Coconut Grove and South Beach were hot.

But on Christmas Eve morning, wrestling with the festive plywood table tops, Mark felt only dread. Overnight everything had changed. He and Charlotte had been enjoying one last drink on the porch as thousands of insects chirped around them in the velvety night when out of nowhere she suddenly declared: "God help us, you **HAVE** to be Orchid Empire's new orchid man! What? The Queen's sniffing blood

in the water, that's what! Carlos can't cope with her or her hangers on especially if they cart me off to hospital again. Doesn't have the English for a start. But I'm damned if my *Bonatea speciosa's* going to fall into the wrong hands! Can't just get that kind of material anymore. Not much to look at but for those who know...*Most* African orchids rather pallid, dear boy, from 'The Dark Continent!' Problem is I've made an enemy or two." Mark could well believe it. "We'll start you off at the party. Just put on that schoolboy stammer you used to have and that vacant look. Hold her off... That's it! My brilliant, dotty nephew taking inventory! Looking to inherit the whole damn thing! We'll talk it up on Christmas Eve. Be all round the region by Boxing Day!"

It was impossible to argue with Charlotte in the evening after a drink or two, or actually, thought Mark, tossing and turning later on the lumpy bed in the spare room, in the morning either. He had no idea what was going on in the orchid world of South Florida and wondered how much of this Charlotte would remember in the clear light of day but was sure it would be more than enough to make his life miserable. It was two in the morning. The spare room, cluttered as it was with books and magazines, was certainly full of relevant material for a budding orchidist. Mark had turned on the light. There were stacks of old orchid journals everywhere and trade magazines like *Greenhouse Grower* and *Ornamental Outlook*: "Floramite Gives you Three More Weeks of Improved Mite Control." IRRIGATION OPTIONS—Was Carlos using the *Misty Mist Nozzles*, the *Pin-Perfect Nozzles* or the *Nifty Nozzles*? Try translating THAT into Spanish. If he said all that to Rosita she'd probably slap his face.

Mark had pulled out an old *American Orchid Society* magazine from a stack and opened at random: *CHONDRORHYNCHA Native habitat: Mexico, Central America and Tropical South America—tribe: Maxillarieae: Subtribe: Zygopetalinae. Typical confusion leads to the very same species being sold as both Chondrorhyncha AND Cochleanthes.*

Christ. Aunt Charlotte was right. She'd been saying orchid people were nuts and here she was, the nuttiest: *You are Orchid Empire's orchid man!* She'd already warned him that orchidists would hunt you down mercilessly over the simplest mistake, a wrong label, a missing

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“varietal epithet,” whatever that was. Even the mother of all stammers couldn’t get him round this. He’d need to be deaf and dumb. But he saw the eager, friendly orchidists approaching—“So sad! Brilliant but trapped in his silent world! Here! I have a pen and paper!” He’d have to be the brilliant deaf and dumb orchidist with crippling arthritis. No, they’d show him pictures: they wouldn’t let him alone. They’d be out to get him. “If you think this is *Chondrorhyncha* not *Cochleanthes*—just nod!”

Christ. He’d been hoping the old bird would have forgotten about it all by morning. But bright and early on Christmas Eve as he made the tea Charlotte had reminded him he was now her resident orchid scholar. “Just lie low tonight and put on your stammer. Piece of cake for you! Most Yanks think even standard Brits are pretty feeble and neurotic anyway. You’ll be perfect, dear boy.”