

Citrus medica var. sarcodactylis

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She had been awake for thirty hours, the Medical Examiner's number was written on her hand, it was four degrees outside, and she needed a bag of Miracle Grow.

Even though the car was warming up, she felt chilled in that kind of impermeable way that sets in and aches, a cocktail of fatigue, uncertainty, and true cold. The night had been interminable, with a roster of patients who had been manipulative, pathetic or dying, with impossible expectations and demanding families. It had started with a department on fire during a week when it had been constantly smoldering, with angry invalids crammed into every corner. There was the family patriarch whose head was more blood than brain with children who believed firmly that persistence and prayer would do what mannitol and neurosurgery could not. They spoke to her in the same voice she imagined they used at the airline counter when JetBlue bungled their last connection: quiet, patient, and determined to get their way.

Her mind was rough with cynicism. "You're wasting your time, and our resources," she thought loudly at them, her face studiously blank, as she reassured them that surgery was not an option, no matter what WebMD said. "You have a funeral to plan and I have ten patients who need this room."

She always thought that people had a finite tolerance for magic and miracles. That everyone had a small supply of the capability to suspend logic and indulge in faith or fantasy or the defiance of the most probable outcome. Some people spent it on God, some on soul mates or nine lives. Children possessed the most abundant supply, and they disbursed it frivolously on imaginary friends and Santa Claus.

Adults were more cautious, counting their stash, dolling it out in whispered prayers and matrimonial vows. But sooner or later, they'd find that what they bought and paid for in magic beans and faerie dust turned to bitterness, loss, and disappointment like so much fool's gold. And she was the unhappy jeweler, pointing out the worthless pyrite and watching the toothless prospector cry.

And yet they refused to budge; they whispered prayers and held hands and cried, and held vigil. She watched with as the ache of pity turned to impatience that felt cold and tasted metallic; underneath it all was the dull nausea of shame at her own indifference.

A twenty-two year old, with a nasty narcotics addiction lounged in the hallway, overseeing the proceedings. On her way out the door, he accosted her.

“Did they find me rehab?”

“There aren’t any beds tonight. You can call yourself to check in the morning.”

“I can’t, I don’t have a phone.”

“There are phones at the shelter.” She looked right through him.

“I can’t go to the shelter. I can’t walk.”

“Yes you can, I saw you walk outside to smoke 5 minutes ago.”

“I can’t walk now. I need to be admitted.”

“The social worker is calling you a cab.”

“I won’t go, I can’t walk.”

She left that morning with the retained feeling that she was perpetually scrabbling her fingers against wet a concrete wall of uncertainty and frustration, struggling to hold on as she slid down and wondering what it would feel like to hit the ground.

But now, finally, she was one preposterous errand away from home and bed. It was an absurd quest, but the normalcy of the task was soothing and she was determined not to return until she had acquired the requested plant food. Snaking through the back roads towards home, the girl squinted as she concentrated on finding the nursery she swore she’d passed weeks ago. At last, the elusive establishment appeared around a bend. The place didn’t look like much- a rickety wooden building with a faded sign, perched above a dirty window announcing “Greenhouse.” The owner’s name may have at some point also been present but the sign was so weathered that it was no longer legible.

The dim interior the same: piles of terra cotta pots in various sizes were stacked in a tilted pile in one corner. Two other walls were fitted with rough wooden shelves piled with ceramic dishes, trowels, and something called “orchid spray”. Next to the shelves was a door with another crude sign that read “hot house.” The last wall boasted a sales counter and behind it, a middle-aged woman with big owlish glasses, who smiled a greeting.

“How can I help you?”

“I need um, Miracle Grow. For my husband.”

“Of course. We don’t have miracle grow but we have, in a manner of speaking, some ‘house blends.’ What does he grow?”

“He has ah, a Kaffir Lime, and a Meyer lemon tree.”

“I have something that will work. Give me a few minutes to go get it. Take a look in the greenhouses if you like.”

“That’s ok.” The woman blinked, accentuating her avian appearance.

“Take a look. We have some new citrus cuttings, some usual species,” at her client’s frown she added, “maybe for your husband’s collection.”

“Oh, ok,” the girl said, unconvinced, but she moved towards the greenhouse door anyway, uncomfortable under the other woman’s pointed gaze.

The door creaked open to reveal narrow concrete stairs. She stepped over the threshold and was immediately struck by wave of fragrant humid air that smelled of water and foliage, citrus, and something spicy. It tasted tropical and faintly sweet.

Her eyes widened. The greenhouse was a sprawling airy building lined floor to ceiling with flora; enormous trees heavy with different colored fruit brushed the high ceilings. Huge pots overflowing with lacy ferns spotted the isles, of which there were at least four, each narrow and obstructed by leaves, branches, and enormous blooms, which leaned out, gawking at the new intruder.

She so was startled at first that she turned around quickly and pushed her palm against the wooden door she had just come through, half afraid it had disappeared and stranded her in this strange jungle. It creaked and gave way, allowing a stream of damp cool air to creep in. Comforted, she turned around again and then, taking a deep breath, descended the stairs.

Each counter was crammed with flowers of every color, tiny tree cuttings, vines on stakes, and wooly bushes. A sign identified perfumed, white flowers shaped like tiny bells as “Angel’s Trumpet Marshmallow Sunset” (*Brugmansia* hybrid). Next to it was a Giant Wax Plant (*Clerodendrum thomsoniae*), each yellow blossom larger than a dinner plate and splashed red. Above her head, climbing oleander (*Strophanthus preussii*) was strung across wooden support beams; each star shaped petal crowned long red tendrils that slid across the back of her neck.

Life Saver Plant (*Huernia zebrina*) looked like a bush with three hundred eyes, each with thick maroon lids and dark recessed centers framed by crimson and yellow petals, like so many spiky lashes. There was a leafy potted bush in the corner with a sign identifying it as Miracle Fruit (*Synsepalum dulcificum*), which boasted that after consuming a single berry, everything you ate there after would taste sweet. In the next row sat Persian Shield (*Strobilanthes dyerianus*) a vibrant purple leaf with jet black stems that looked simultaneously seductive and, she decided, a little malicious. Shying away from it, she breezed past a tree sprouting balls of spiky red hyphae that looked razor soft but felt silky against her cheek.

In the middle of the building rising up and towering over the other plants was an enormous gnarled tree taller than all the rest that split into a dozen thick rough arms. Looking up, she noticed that it appeared that each of the winding branches was bearing fruits of different colors and sizes from little orange orbs the size of a golf ball to huge fleshy yellow citrus as big as her head.

Something rustled behind her and she whirled around quickly, half expecting to see an exotic bird emerge from the foliage, but instead a man stepped out from behind the trunk of the impossible tree. He wore frayed jeans, and boots covered with bits of soil and clippings.

“You look tired,” He said.

“Thanks.” She replied flatly.

“Not working today?”

“I work nights.”

“Tough night then,” he said nodded sagely. It wasn’t a question. “It’s a good day to be in a greenhouse.”

“Sure.”

“You’re not crazy.”

“What?”

“There are six different fruits growing on this one tree here. You’re not crazy.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes miss, they’ve been grafted on. Those there,” he pointed to the giant yellow fruit, “those are ponderosas. The littler ones are cumquats and sunquats, and oranges.” He clambered up into a lower notch of the tree and reached up to expertly pluck two tiny orange fruits. “Try this, it’s the Meiwa, it’s sweeter.”

She looked at him dubiously but intoxicated by the sultry air, abandoned her usual skepticism and popped the tiny fruit into her mouth. It burst with sweet, intense flavor that brought to mind remote beaches and salt heavy-air.

“This one is a Nagami. It’s a little tart, but I like it better..”

She bit into it and immediately her mouth was flooded with sour, bracing citrus. It took her a moment to realize that her new friend was four paces in front of her and had appointed himself her tour guide.

“This looks like an apple, but when you bite into it, it smells like a rose. Rose Apple. *Syzygium malaccense*.” He reached for a new tree that was about five feet tall with shiny, red fruits that rattled hollowly when he touched them. A tree cutting beside it immediately caught her eye, heavy with crumpled waxy fruits with appendages that looked like fingers. “*Citrus medica*” He told her, as she reached out to touch the wrinkled, creased fruit, half expecting the fruit to come to life and return the embrace. “Buddha’s hand. Very rare. Hearty though.”

She waded further into the maze of greenery. A aisle emanating a peppery greeting yielded cinnamon, oregano, allspice, blue rosemary, turmeric, black pepper, ginger root, thyme, four species of sage, and tiny nutmeg trees. Delicate orchids crowded in a corner looking like so many ladies preening, each painted with yellows, pinks and purples. She couldn’t help but pick up an odd flower from a remote corner with thick bulbous stems sprouting into soft, translucent creamy blooms edged with pink.

“*Adenium obesum*, the desert rose,” the man told her.

She peered down at the flower intently so that she could just see hazy pink and imagined dry hot air and sand whipping around the hearty petals. The spicy humidity was seductive, but she could tell through the glass above her that the sun was getting higher in the sky and her fatigue, which had been chased away by marvel, was creeping back up behind her eyes. Reluctantly, she made her way back towards the rickety exit.

“It’s not about seeking out wonder, but being willing to know it. Especially in small things,”

her guide called behind her. “Wonder nurtures possibility. It will not stave off sorrow, but it keeps it from consuming you. You see?” He smiled again at her.

For a moment she saw lucent white orchids draped over the incandescent lights of trauma bay, gardenias growing at the feet of a heroin addict as he lay in the hallway. A tree that grows six different fruits towers over foot of the dying man’s bed. As she turned to wave she smiled back tentatively. She handed the owlish cashier her credit card and scooped up her purchases; somehow along with the paper bag filled with earthy fertilizer and the adenium, she had also acquired the Citrus medica, and a dainty white and purple Phalaenopsis orchid the sign called “Magic Art.”

“Come back soon.” The older woman said, and the girl nodded. Then, she took one more long deep breath of the sultry, zesty air, and hiked back outside into the snow.