

## MARICELA



**I**f you're Mexican, the Cubans and Puerto Ricans hate you because they think you snuck in illegally and they didn't. Which they would have if they could have walked. If you're a teenager, the whole world hates you. If you're a pregnant teenager, people think you should be burned at the stake. I'm a Mexican, pregnant sixteen-year-old. So shoot me and get it over with.

I wouldn't actually care if you did. In a way I'm already dead. I used to be really, really hot. Because of the baby I'm as fat as a wrestler, I dropped out, I've been to exactly



zero parties, and I've been asked out exactly zero times, including by the scum who got me pregnant. My parents were mad. They wanted me to graduate. But abortion or adoption—forget it. Then they got sort of excited about it. They both love little babies. Not me. They started praying for it every night, while I was begging my body to miscarry.

Three of us from my high school got into this program for pregnant teens. They give you rides to the doctor and help with getting your G.E.D. at home. Great. Except that Penny, the woman we see, saw the community garden and got the program its own spot, to give us practice taking care of something and to let us witness "the miracle of life." And to try to keep us from eating our babies alive or dropping them into dumpsters.

It was already the middle of summer, so she had us plant radishes since they grow fast. All three of us hate radishes. As soon as the little green leaves came up a gopher or something wiped 'em out. So much for the miracle of life. I didn't tell Penny I was hoping the same thing happened to my

baby. She's so cheerful I never could. *She's* not puking or getting as big as a blimp—no wonder she's always smiling.

After the radishes came squash, then Swiss chard, which nobody knew how to eat. I was in my seventh month. I hated the bending. We all complained, but Penny just smiled. The rest of us called working there the Chain Gang. I hated the feel of dirt under my nails. One afternoon Yolanda broke two of her fancy, painted, expensive nails and cursed out loud for ten minutes. Penny couldn't shut her up. Then another woman came over and gave us this long lecture about the word "decorum." I couldn't believe my eyes—it was my old third-grade teacher, Miss Fleck. I prayed she wouldn't recognize me, but naturally she did, and asked me all the usual questions. I should have had the answers printed up on a card to hand out. The next week, when some man threw a can out his window, which landed about a foot from my head, Miss Fleck figured out what apartment he was in, walked up, and yelled at him like he was a kid. She treated the whole world like her classroom.

Different people came to our part of the garden for different reasons. This Puerto Rican kid had these pumpkin plants that kept getting into ours. Which gave him an excuse to walk right past me and talk to Dolores, who was fifteen and pretty and still didn't look pregnant. I couldn't wait for her to get huge. Sometimes this black guy ran through our garden. He couldn't take time to go around. He grew lettuce, or tried to. Most of it was dead. He'd drive up in a cab, slam on the brakes like the Pope just stepped in front of him, run through our squash, cut a bunch of lettuce, and run back with it in a bucket of water. Then he'd peel out, leaving lots of rubber. Then there were the people who came by to give us different things. Vegetables that they'd grown and thought we should eat, which we always gave away later. Advice on growing our stupid Swiss chard. Advice on giving birth and raising kids, which I tuned out as soon as they started.

One day in August it was just me and Penny. This black woman, Leona, who had a garden and talked to us, came over and gave me some flowers she'd grown. They

were yellow. She called 'em goldenrod and she said if I made 'em into tea it would help me with the delivery. She knew I didn't want to be pregnant. I could talk to her about it. That day it was almost too humid to talk. The windows around the garden were open and you could hear ten different TV's and radios. A storm was coming. The thunder was getting closer. And then it hit—*bam!* Then all the TV's and radios went off. So did the lights. It was a power failure.

It was quiet in the garden without all the noise. So quiet it was weird. I looked around. An old man near us was slowly picking cucumbers, like nothing had happened. "Whole city shuts down, but the garden just keeps going," Leona said. She talked on, how plants don't run on electricity or clock time, how none of nature did. How nature ran on sunlight and rain and the seasons, and how I was part of that system. The words sort of put me into a daze. My body was part of nature. I was related to bears, to dinosaurs, to plants, to things that were a million years old. It hit me that this system was much older and

stronger than the other. She said how it wasn't some disgrace to be part of it. She said it was an honor. I stared at the squash plants. It was a world in there. It seemed like I could actually see the leaves and flowers growing and changing. I was in that weird daze. And for just that minute I stopped wishing my baby would die.