

ON GROWING

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We're standing at the edge of an overgrown clearing. It has come along quite suddenly after a half hour's walk in the blinding light. A wild banana tree and some old mango trees list towards the sun. We file alphabetically into line and start clearing the field, east to west. This is Form 2B's first Agriculture assignment: growing corn.

Three hacks into my row, I discover a tree stump pushing aside the weeds. When we heard earlier that we would be allowed off the school compound, our class was overjoyed. But this is turning out to be hard work. The real hoeing won't begin until we've uncovered the ground itself.

I come home one afternoon to find my mother absorbed in her own gardening adventure. She's planning a fragile looking graft in front of our veranda. It has come from Zaria, in the north of Nigeria. I watch as she straightens one of the leaves.

She turns smiling, "No one in Nsukka has anything like it."

The thorns on the stem are sparse but long and sharp, curved and tapered like claws. I press my finger on the tip of one. It gives, just a little.

When I'm ready to plant, I scoop out rich little holes twelve inches apart and carefully place my kernels in them. The hard work is done, but I'm hooked. Everyday, I bring a large jug of water, and eagerly examine the warm damp earth for a sign. I am never alone. All my classmates are equally intrigued by their efforts. My plot is among the last to sprout, but it does, finally. And within a week, the straggling shoots are sturdy and a vibrant green.

The orange rose is not faring as well as my corn stalks. It's growing, but its spindly length is overwhelmed by the white rose climber beside it with its hundreds of tiny blossoms. In the corner, the frangipani tree floats an intoxicating scent across our garden, the ground below its knotted branches matted with crushed petals.

Every time the rose plant sprouts a bud, insects attack. My mother, and soon our whole family is on a watchful vigil. We take turns crushing grasshoppers and flicking off beetles and spraying medicine. And we watch, and we water, and we wait.

Our attendance finally pays off. One morning, a blossom unfolds. As promised, it is a deep wild orange, radiant amidst the white roses and the pale yellow alamanda flowers. The bloom grows huge, and almost droops with its weight. The orange is swirled with fiery red in the centre and fades to lemon on the edges of its velvet petals. Its scent is faint but we bury our faces in its rich insides and breathe deep.

One evening, another Bangladeshi family comes to visit. The sand is still warm from the afternoon sun and I am playing hopscotch, while Amma walks through the garden with Mrs. Chaudhry. Her friend notices our pride of an orange rose, and before anyone can stop her, she reaches out, and snaps off the blossom. I am balanced on a bare foot, open-mouthed.

Oblivious to my mother's suddenly still face, she turns and calls to her husband, "Look! It matches my sari perfectly. Take a photograph!"

My corn plants are higher than my head now. For a moment, I remember to be glad for the abundance, sorry for the frailty and only-ness of my mother's orange rose. I stand in the middle of our cornfield, and the forest around me disappears. I am canopied by the leaves and the sunlight and the sky.