

‘Propagation’ by Constance Allan
Third runner-up
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Propagation

Ruth leans over the bathtub. I sit on the closed toilet, watching her. She has dirty hands, and her shirt rides up revealing prominent ribs. A regretted tattoo of the moon. A smattering of moles.

‘It’s transplant time,’ she says with tenderness, more to the plants than to me. Three insignificant pots wait to be filled with stolen propagations. Ruth massages the soil like she might a crumb for a pudding or baked good.

‘He said he doesn’t want anything serious, nothing romantic,’ I say. I bounce my knee up and down.

‘But that’s good, no?’ Ruth asks. She’s completed plant one. It looks like a lonely piece of watercress.

‘Yeah, in a way.’ The bathroom window is ajar; the sill hosts smudges of dirt like poorly applied eyeshadow. It’s cooler today.

‘And what way is that?’ She asks.

‘Well, I know I wouldn’t date him.’

‘But you’ll sleep with him?’ Her voice sounds curious and light.

‘That’s different, Ruthie.’

‘I know you think so.’ Her eyes are moored to her projects.

‘Sexual chemistry and romantic connection are vastly different things,’ I say to finalise the matter.

‘So, what’s your issue then?’

‘I guess I don’t have one.’

‘That shaking leg says otherwise,’ she says.

I pause. I can see the base of her spine. ‘I think I wanted to be the one to initiate that conversation.’

Ruth laughs, loudly, kindly. ‘You wanted to reject him.’ She shakes her head, massaging more soil.

‘I didn’t want to reject him, but I don’t know, it just seemed like he was more interested in me than I was in him and he just caught me off guard is all,’ I say. I’m throwing around my words casually; they hold no weight. They are airy, gentle.

Ruth chuckles again. If she were a different type of person, she would be easy to dislike. ‘So where does this leave you both?’

‘I guess I’ll keep seeing him until I leave town.’

She pivots to face me. ‘A good outcome then?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You sound uncertain.’ Ruth paws at a leaf on plant number three.

‘I don’t know, it’s just kind of awkward.’

‘Only if you let it be.’ She is careful with me now.

‘Like everything was easy and relaxed and then he had to say it all out loud, just to clarify with me.’ I stop shaking my leg because it’s probably annoying.

‘Don’t admonish him for open communication,’ Ruth says.

I feel my face warm. ‘You’re right. If I started that chat I’d congratulate myself for my honesty.’

‘Exactly,’ she says. ‘Also, Jack wants to have people over on Sunday for the long weekend.’

‘Why does he always ask you permission and never me?’

‘Because he thinks you’ll say no.’

I take a breath. ‘As long as they clean up after themselves.’ I stand up, rolling my shoulders back, witnessing their mild click. ‘Thanks, Ruthie.’

Yesterday I went to the park with Willow. Her mum had a doctor’s appointment.

Willow and I played on the swings for a time. Eventually, she grew tired of the swings and started squirming in the seat. I unclipped it and lifted her out.

‘I can get down?’ She asked me. Willow often switches the subject and verb in a sentence. It feels like our language though.

I chased her around the park for a while, giving her a head start each time after I said go. She laughed and her short legs mushroomed beneath her, willing her to go

faster. Eventually, I tired so distracted her from our chasing game with pieces of bark from the park floor.

Willow asked me questions about the people and things around us. I answered them as well as I could, wondering what later damage I might be responsible for based on my answers. She accepted most of my responses and persisted on others where she wasn't quite satisfied.

Earlier this year, I decided I might not want children. I've had a list of baby names saved in my notes app since I was a teenager. But in January, I decided how exhausting it must be to have kids. My time would never be my own again. Some of my friends talk about not having children for the planet. That argument holds little bearing for me. I don't care as much about that, as I do about forfeiting my beach days. Or about not being able to leave my house without a bag filled with wipes and snacks and nappies and distractions. I couldn't leave my phone at home. Or have crackers and hummus for dinner.

Then I met Willow and her mum. And I decided I want children after all. And probably sooner than I thought I did.

Despite my revelations, I fear sperm and its effects. I check condoms haven't broken and ask men never to come inside me. I've never had unprotected sex even though I know it would feel better. I ask men to wipe themselves before putting on a condom so any trace of pre-come would disappear. They oblige. There haven't been many men at all. Less than a handful. If they refused, I imagine I would stand and clothe myself in front of them, forcing them to watch me disappear.

I fear pregnancy and the embarrassment of it being unplanned. And then I feel sick with shame for these thoughts.

Ruth wants to be a mother soon she says. She doesn't date even though she is beautiful. I don't ask why and I assume she will tell me when she's ready. Perhaps the moon tattoo has something to do with it.

I fear infertility too. I speak to the universe sometimes when I'm alone.

'I might condemn pregnancy now, but you know I want it someday,' I say aloud. I'm yet to hear a response.

After the park, I returned Willow to her home and her mum. She wasn't scratched or harmed. She was happy and cuddled me before running to her mountain of

stuffed toys. Willow talks to them like they can hear her. Her mum thanked me in excess and told me Willow would sleep well. She thanked me again and squeezed my hand before I left.

I lie stomach down on my bed, breathing in the smell of my doona. Like him, faintly of oranges.

him: are you up to much tonight?

me: depends ...

him: haha okay well I want to cook you dinner

I smile at my phone.

me: how romantic

He doesn't respond immediately. I place my phone face down on my bed and walk to the kitchen. I boil the kettle. He might not respond for a while. He may be at the gym, or work likely; his phone may have died. I reach to Ruth's food shelf and select a green tea with strawberry undertones. Fruity. All I have is home-brand black tea. No milk or sugar today.

I tread along the tiles in time to the kettle's siren, raising my arms above my shoulders. I hum a song that's been stuck in my head, eventually clearing my throat to sing quietly and slightly off-key.

'Do you want to watch a movie tonight? I'm making pasta.'

I spin around to see Ruth; her hands are clean. Curls hang loosely beside her eyes and the rest of her hair is contained in a tortoiseshell clip.

'I borrowed a teabag. I hope that's okay,' I say.

'Of course.'

I silence the kettle, relieving it of its duties. 'Would you like one?' I ask.

'That would be nice.' Ruth says. If she's annoyed about me offering her tea that is hers, she doesn't show it. As I pour, she reaches her fingertips to the ceiling to stretch, letting out a howl of relief.

'For you, Madam,' I say, curtsying in mock.

She giggles genuinely. I feel guilty. 'So tonight? Pasta? Movie?' she asks.

'Hugh's asked me round for dinner,' I say.

'That will be fun.' Ruth smiles at me, a sad smile.

We say nothing for a little while.

‘Can I see your plants? I want an unveiling of the finished product.’

‘Come on then.’

We clasp our teas and I follow Ruth down the hall. I find my home once more atop the closed toilet. Ruth tells me how she’ll care for them—sunlight and ice cubes, but not too much of either of those.

‘They’re beautiful Ruthie.’

She stands up and finds her way next to me. She places her hand around my shoulder, leans down, and kisses my head.

‘Be fair to him.’

I look to her for an explanation, but Ruth offers none. She walks to her room and closes the door.