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## Thomas, Who Dreams of Calla Lilies

William Kelsey

As far back as I can remember, my family has always been tied to the land. My grandfather and his grandfather before him were all florists or orchardists, more at home among blooming cherry trees and greenhouses than anywhere else. Sure, if one was to dig far enough into my ancestral bones one would find the solid marrow of midwestern dirt replaced with the salty brine of a seafaring folk, but that was long ago. Gone are the lives of shipwrights and sailors who would stare down the waves and laugh in the face of the storm. There was, of course, one black sheep of the family who could never quite shake the brine from his bones. That man was Thomas, my great-uncle, who dreamed of calla lilies. This is his tale.

They say that sailors greet the storm with open arms and a smile on their face because, it is only in moments like that—when the waves break against the fo'c'sle and it seems like the very sea itself may be swallowed by the deep—that they can ever feel truly alive. For Thomas and all my ancestors lost at sea, it was just the simple joy of struggling to live, and the relief of a hard-fought loss.

My great-grandfather would often tell me of the mania that befell Thomas in the face of the storm. When the winds swept across the midwestern plains he alone of all his brothers and sisters would dare to face them down, tying each sapling fast so they would not break in the gale and securing the great tarpaulin that always lay over the bed of his truck. Under which lay the most precious of cargo, a pile of bulbs weak to frost carried back from over the sea, from a man he had met long ago. It was these bulbs that would channel his mania and give it form. In much the same way that a sailor caught in the doldrums keeps himself sane through the steady maintenance of their ship, Thomas gave himself fully to the care of these fragile bulbs, growing what little he could in the summer and then sequestering them away with the coming of the first frost. When the snow fell too heavy or the winds threatened to blow away the family farm, soil and all, Thomas would sit by the fire and dream of another place, far to the west, shrouded in ivy, and behind a low wall, where his calla lilies could grow and thrive, unmolested by the wind and the snow.

For him this promised land of warmth came to have the name Escalon, which rolled off the tongue like pebbles dropped in a pond. An old friend of his from the army had known the place well and had described his home, a red-brick Edwardian affair with a widow's walk from which the farmers could view the seas of grain, waiting for the harvest or for their loved ones to return. He would wonder if his friend's wife still waited on that walk, if she still kept her eyes peeled for a smiling boy in army fatigues cutting through the grain like a ship in the sea, or if years of waiting had hardened her heart to miracles. For there is not much sense in keeping a mariner's home—with a widow's walk and all—in a place no boat has ever seen. Perhaps now it was overgrown with ivy clinging to the walls and breaking

through the stone. Perhaps in its garden he could plant his bulbs and watch them grow, pale green shoots breaking through the dark soil of the Great Central Valley.

The winter before his journey was a particularly harsh one, the stock market crash that began in October continued into November and then spread its fingers out across December, like a tree clawing at the sky, grasping for something it could never really have. My family lost much in that first winter, the orchard was slowly sold off or cut down for firewood and the greenhouses were abandoned—there isn't much need for flowers when one can't even afford flour. Soon there wasn't much left but the old general store on the main drag that my great-grandmother brought into the family as her dowry and, parked behind the abandoned greenhouses, a 1925 Ford Model TT with a precious cargo. In the back, tied down with ships knots and covered by tarpaulin were sacks of bulbs carefully maintained, while on the passenger seat lay a pile of letters sent to a husband long since dead, addressed from somewhere in California.

As far as I can tell, Thomas left the family farm in Pandora, Ohio on the night of August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1934. Five years of economic depression had weathered the little town, the shelves of our general store were all but empty and even the local Mennonite church had fallen into disrepair—an inevitability that my family did their best to prevent, selling off the last of their land in an attempt to keep its doors open as long as possible. So, Thomas was almost forced into selling off his beloved bulbs, which he had saved from the trenches of Saint-Mihiel and the slowly rotting hands of the only man that had ever been good to him. Bulbs sent to the dead man in a package smelling faintly of ivy and grain and addressed in a woman's hand as a reminder of what he had left behind, and of what was waiting for him on his return. Bulbs that Thomas had cared for with all of the skill of a florist and the passion of a sailor caught before the storm, so that though the first bulb may have grown in the summer and then died by the first frost, it's descendants still slept wrapped in burlap and covered by tarp, waiting to be returned. So, Thomas did the only thing he was able in a town that was slowly dying, he abandoned it. He abandoned the cramped rooms above the general store and the old house on the edge of town surrounded by dying trees and the empty spaces where greenhouses used to stand, and set off in his old Ford for Escalon out west.

We don't know how Thomas's journey went, we don't know of any of the obstacles that he suffered through in his quest, but we can suspect the best for him. That freed from the land, he was able to set sail to the west in his old Model TT, bouncing over potholes with a rhythmic motion quite familiar to my ancestors at sea. Maybe during that time he was happy, with a chart in his hand and navigating by the stars, but more often by the channels left by all the poor souls who had set off to the west before him. We can suspect that when the dust storms overtook him outside Johnson City, KS he greeted them with open arms, a smile on his face, and, as always, a sailor's laugh. The kind of laugh reserved for when one is swallowed by the sea and slowly chokes on dust.

Two years later my family followed in Thomas's footsteps and left Pandora, pushed out by the insolvency of the store and my great-grandmother's declining health. For us the trip across the country was uneventful, we kept clear of the dust storms of the great plains—with no cold sensitive cargo we had no reason to stray that far south—and arrived at our new home. Nestled in the heart of California, surrounded by an ocean of grain and protected by a low brick wall, lay a red-brick Edwardian (complete with widow's walk) from whose gardens long overgrown with weeds a few white flowers still bloomed. Until his death in 1994 my great-grandfather was said to walk the twenty-seven steps to the peak of the house and sit and wait, much as the widow waited for her husband's return from war, and as the house waited after the widow moved away. He never saw Thomas approach. He saw the town grow around him, fields becoming houses and parks, but never a Ford TT coated in dust and time. Perhaps Thomas was never meant to arrive. Like Bran in his coracle or King Herla upon his horse, to ever fully arrive at the destination is to give up, to admit defeat and crumble into dust.

Sometimes, when I would visit my aunts and uncles, I would climb the twenty-seven steps to where my great-grandfather sat before me, and I would listen. Far off at the port of Stockton massive freighters would blow their horns. Even closer still, the waves of tule fog would lap against the house, bringing a taste of salt and brine, and I would imagine a sailor lost at sea trying to get home, to a place that—for him—only ever existed in dreams.