

IMMIGRANTS

By Leviathan Joe

Like a small beehive of woven wicker, bristling with pink spines and crowned with yellow flowers, the Barrel Cactus sat in Susan's duplex, in its pot of transplanted Mexican earth, and was still.

It had caught her eye outside the hotel on last week's vacation. She'd picked it out from among a hundred other strange and beautiful plants in the decorative landscaping surrounding the hotel patio. On the last day, smacking the margarita salt from her palate and pretending to read the small plaque regarding her target (genus *ferocactus*: "fierce cactus"), she'd ensured her privacy. A second's hesitation more and she wouldn't have done it. She wouldn't have ducked under the railing, dug into the earth with a fork, excavated the cactus, dirt and all, and hurried it to her cooler. She wouldn't have endured dozens of pinprick wounds or the wrenching paranoia of going through customs with her illicit cargo.

She looked at it now; lumped with its native soil into a plastic pot by the window. Sunlight streamed through its translucent pink spines ("used by the Natives as fishhooks," she'd tell guests). She found a bag of fresh potting soil in the shed and spread some around and mixed it in with her fingers. She stood back and looked again. It seemed to cool the scorched orange colors of the walls and drapes.

It was something to show for her trip other than a peeling sunburn, a revised budget, and the half-memories of petty gratifications. It had been worth it.

She began the unpacking process by moving her luggage from the front doorway into the bedroom. Then she sprawled back in the salon, accepting home again.

It was time for the phone calls. Mother first. Her trip? Great; fascinating culture, beautiful language, great weather. The hotel? Fine. The flights? Fine. And how about that nice journalist she'd been seeing since they last spoke? It just hadn't worked out, Ma.

She called Tamara next, her closest friend, and filled her in on the booze, the beaches, the boys. She also explained how her journalist boyfriend had turned out to be an enthusiastic masochist and they shared a laugh about this.

While Tamara was prattling on about her own sexual misadventures, there was a fluttering, a tugging at Susan's peripheral vision. From the window, from the cactus.

Susan felt the patter-play of panic across her skin, a scuttling in her stomach.

She looked over fast. The young plant hunkered in the soil, slightly askew. Its spines flared pink in the sunlight like a mist of blood frozen in an array of ice needles.

Still.

She watched until her eyes rebelled. She squeezed them shut against the ache, the burnout; the post-vacation crash.

"Helloooo...?" Tamara was still on the line. Susan ducked out of the conversation; she needed to get groceries before Ardelia, the duplex's other resident, got home and Susan would be obliged to tell the same vacation stories again.

She paused at the doorway and looked back at her decoration, admiring and watching. It was still. She left.

The dirt trembled.

The female black widow spider lays about 750 eggs in the summer, which incubate in a sac about an inch in diameter for a month before hatching. Several egg sacs are often laid together.

The dirt pulsed, bulged, and then they broke through. They boiled up and spilled across the soil and dripped over pot lip. They pooled in the watering saucer, overwhelmed that ledge, then spread out across the table, scattering, dropping to the floor, scattering again; gone.