

Right Next to the Sports Center

Reggae bounces through the lush vegetation of this resort on Jamaica. The aerobic class is in full swing. The bodies are young, athletic. Too young, too energetic, I decide.

Tucked into the shade of tall palm trees, right next to the sports center I discover the plant nursery. The lock on the green wooden door is loose and open. Black netting on the sides and top protects the tender shoots from the sun and creates a more even climate to encourage growth.



I wander in, careful not to step on any of the pots lining the narrow corridor between shelves on either side. These too are crammed with pots. Some contain three or four cuttings each, others tiny seedlings. A small white plastic jar holds rooting powder.

A young man in a green uniform joins me. The brass tag on his lapel reads Fitzroy. He walks with me, identifying each plant by its Latin name. His voice is soft, his demeanor gentle.

Most of the plants are unfamiliar to me; some I recognize as exotic house plants. Fitzroy is surprised that I cannot grow them in our climate in Switzerland. He has never seen snow and cannot imagine how cold and wet our winters are. Only when we come to the common fern have we found a plant that grows in my garden also.

Some plants show serious slug damage, a problem I am familiar

with. Fitzroy pulls a leaf aside to show me where "the devils" hide. We discuss combat strategies, such as drowning them in trays of beer or using pellets. I mention my fear of hurting the hedgehogs feeding on poisoned slugs. Fitzroy does not know hedgehogs. He imagines them to be like a local fish with a row of "porcupines" along its back. I do not know the fish. He fetches a powder, six times more expensive than the pellets but much more effective, he says. As it is so fine, he mixes it with cornmeal to apply it evenly.

We weave around the pots on the ground, touching this leaf and that. We discuss architectural plants, the function of variegated leaves, the reason his orchids may be doing so poorly. There are at least 30 years between us, an entire ocean, different languages and backgrounds, but our love for plants unites us. Our *plant speak* flows easily.

We come to the end. Around the door are masses of poinsettias. We agree there is nothing worse than a poinsettia past its Christmas best, and we are at the end of January.

I tell Fitzroy about my garden, the many holes I have dug over the years, the time it takes to prune 300 roses. Fitzroy's face opens into a big smile, "I have a beautiful garden at my home." I would love to see it but Fitzroy informs me that as an employee he is not permitted to take guests to his house. I am disappointed but understand. I reach out to shake hands and thank him for having taken his time to show me around.

Abruptly, he continues.

'My mother died on December 29.'

'How old was she?'

'Only 54. She died of a heart attack.'

'That must have been so hard for you. I know. I lost my mother when she was 62.'

'She was a wonderful woman.'

'I am sure she was.'

'My brother got cut up with a machete, and it broke her heart.'
'So you lost a brother and mother at the same time?'
'No, my brother lives. His hands are cut off.'
'How old is he?'
'He is younger, he is 20.'
'What does he do?'
'He is an electrician but he cannot work.'
'Who looks after him?'
'We do.'
'How many sisters and brothers do you have?'
'We're two brothers and five sisters.'
'And they all still live at home?'
'One of my sisters lives in Germany.'
'Is she happy there?'
'No, she cannot come home every year.'
'Fitzroy, do you have your own family?'
'I have a daughter. She is four.'
'Does she live with you?'
'No, she lives with her mother.'
'I am sure you are a very good father.'
'Yes, I am.'
'What about your father?'
'He is a Rasta. He left us when we were all little. He lives in the hills somewhere.'
'So your mother brought up seven children on her own?'
'She was a wonderful woman. We just have to accept that our mother is no more. And we have to carry on.'

Tears fill his dark brown eyes. My blue eyes, too. I hug him. I turn to go. His unspoken thought follows me.
'But we don't know how.'

The sports center seems on another island now, the reggae drifting across a wide rift. The beat is strangely hard.