

Vegetation

Luce was bleeding from various wounds and crimson spots dripped onto his white Pierre Cardin shirt. He gazed back at the scene of battle and watched with cringing fascination as the rent stems twisted their way back into the tall grass like wounded eels. A fallen flower flapped against the rocks, its petals opening wider as if in a scream.

He took one step toward it, meaning to stomp it into the consistency of gravy, but was stopped when something hard clobbered him on the side of the head. The blow elicited immediate screaming in his head and he dropped to his knees, clutching his right ear.

Another blow hammered down on his back. A third came in the form of an uppercut and pounded his ribs. He twisted his body to look up at the assailant, saw a flash of brown, and then felt bright pain in his left eye. Again, fireworks in his head. White flowers of light. He began to crawl up the stone path, toward the house, rocks tearing through his slacks, slicing his knees and hands. Behind him rose the staccato sound of drumming, slightly muffled. It sounded like rocks wrapped in dish cloths raining down upon the earth.

When he reached the fallen lily, he mashed it with the side of his fist. He crawled as close to the center of the path as he could and felt grass and flowers reaching for him. Halfway to the house, he got to his feet again and spun around.

The cattails were battering the ground in apparent hysteria.

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Vegetation

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Part I
Juniper Bay

1.

The ivy came for him first. A common ivy that hung over its pot like the hair of a mythical beast. A tendril dropped onto the back of his satin robe, snaked up over his shoulders, and coiled around his ear.

The leaves tickled him. A pointed tip stabbed the tender skin just below the hairline. Startled from the hypnosis of sherry and Proust, Bertram Luce flung himself from the chair. He screamed once, short and sharp, and flung the book to the carpeted floor. He swatted at the back of his head and in doing so, knocked the wine glass to the rug. Sherry soaked into the carpet and a dark, shameful circle appeared.

Luce spun in time to see the ivy drawing away. It pulled back like a nimble but shy creature and hung swinging from the pot above.

He touched the back of his ear and looked at his fingers. Nothing. Still, he felt a chill around his shoulders. He felt the crawling uneasiness of a man who has been sneaked up on in the quiet and safety of his home. Bertram Luce felt violated.

Which was absurd. He had been touched by the stray finger of an unruly house plant. That and probably more sherry than he was accustomed to. He smirked at the idea as he bent for the fallen glass. He moved to set it back on the table, thought about the ugly ring it would leave, carried it out of the sunroom instead. He would soak a cloth with warm water and get at the carpet stain before it set.

The house was restful. Only a small lamp illuminated the sunroom and the rest of the house was equally dim. The grandfather clock ticked faithfully from the dining room, marking time.

He walked through the living room, slippers silent upon the thick carpet, and did not look behind him. Had he done so, he would have seen three ivy branches coiled in the air like snakes preparing to

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strike. Tendrils floated dreamily, probing the air and watching him go. Heart-shaped leaves trembled, like something shaken in a dog's mouth. The pot swayed a bit on its knotted rope.

The ivy was very agitated tonight.

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2.

He had grown accustomed very quickly to sleeping alone in the four poster bed. After seven years of sharing it, stretching out in all directions was a delight. He could wind himself in the blankets or hurl them off at a whim. He could stack the pillows and lie among them or scatter them strategically. Best of all, he had thrown away Diana's horrid blue quilt and replaced it with a plush red comforter for which he had happily paid twelve hundred dollars. The curtains had cost nearly as much, but what richness! The bedroom was dark and regal. It was a place for a prince.

Six weeks. Six glorious weeks he had been sleeping alone. Each night was better than the last.

He was asleep by ten, Proust set neatly on the nightstand. His place was designated by a bookmark. He didn't leave the book open and set it down that way -- to do so would crack the binding. Barbarians treated a book in such a manner. Diana had been such a barbarian, but she would crack no more bindings here. All the dog eared books were in the trash, along with the hideous quilt she had stitched herself. And good riddance to them.

He lie on his back, head propped on two pillows, arms rested on two others. His silk pajamas matched the bed spread. His mouth was slightly open, but a person would have to lean way in to hear even the faintest trace of snoring. Even his respiration was pristine.

Silver moonlight angled through the window. Had he been awake, Luce would have appreciated how it fell on the bed in a gleaming pool. But he slept the sleep of the very content and so was not aware of the shadow that crept in.

Outside the window, something that looked very much like a furry, purple microphone had stolen some of the moonlight. It wobbled back and forth a moment, like a drunk man about to fall. It swayed in the night breeze but then steadied itself. For a moment, it just hung there, casting a long, thin shadow across the bed cover. Then it leaned in and tapped twice against the glass.

Tick. Tick.

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Bertram Luce lie still. The long, thin face with its upturned nose was undisturbed. He looked like a cartoon depiction of a man comfortably asleep.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

The long, slender flower jabbed at the window like a swollen finger. It drew back and then flung itself forward, once, twice, three times. It swayed only slightly on the thin, leafy stalk. The plant was quickly mastering the art of the nighttime window tap. The long shadow it cast moved further up the bed with each new advance.

Tick, tick. Tick, tick, tick.

After several minutes, the sleeping man stirred at last. The feet kicked weakly beneath the blankets. The mouth drew down in a frown and the ski slope nose scrunched up with evident unhappiness. He smacked his lips, groaned deep within his chest, and let one arm slide off the precisely heaped pillows at his side.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

He groaned again and kicked one leg out from under the blanket. The chill that fell on his bared ankle was what roused him fully. His eyes opened and he blinked three times. He lifted his head and tucked his chin to his chest so that he could gaze down the length of his body.

The lean shadow crept up the bed covers and Luce first believed something was crawling over him. He uttered a cry that came only as a puff of air. He lifted his head further and saw the source of the apparition.

The purple flower, as if sensing the man's awareness, ceased its disciplined attack on the window. It leaned in and pressed against the glass, like a boy peeking at a toy in a store window. Luce gaped at it. The flower held its position. An outsider watching this might have chuckled to witness what appeared to be a staring contest between flora and fauna.

He dropped his head back to the pillow. "Flower," he muttered in a sleepy, barely coherent voice. Two seconds later, he was breathing the breath of sleep again. His mouth fell open. His head sank deeper into the pillows. The sleeves of his pajamas rested on the bed spread, matching divinely.

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At the window, the purple flower drew away. It swayed back and forth a moment and then descended from sight, like a window washer descending on an electric scaffold. The shadow disappeared from the covers of the bed and Luce was roused no further.

Had he awakened more fully, he might have paused to wonder about the vision at his window. He might have taken a moment to ponder how a two-foot gayfeather from the garden below had managed its way to the bedroom window on the second floor.

Then again, maybe not. Bertram Luce thought little about plants and he cared for them even less. The world of vegetation had little effect upon his life.

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3.

He nearly choked to death on the third mouthful of Eggs Monterey.

It was 6 a.m. and the newspaper was spread across the table before him. It was the sixth straight day of sunshine and a good portion of that sunlight slanted into the dining room. Every day since Diana's passing, he had eaten breakfast in absolute silence at the dining room table. No television blaring from another room. No ruffled woman in garish slippers wandering through with gossip and chatter. Just Bertram Luce, the morning sun and Monterey prepared with just the right amount of pesto.

He was scanning the art section – that horrible fantasy writer from Scotland had just published another novel about boys and witches – and sipping delicately from a cup of Jasmine tea. He winced when he read the number of the fantasy writer's books already in print. He pulled another fork full of Monterey to his mouth.

He let it sit on his tongue a moment -- he was masterful in the kitchen. Masterful! – chewed quickly and swallowed.

The obstruction in his throat first startled and then gagged him. He tried to swallow a second time but something thick and sharp was blocking the way. Luce half stood in panic, sending the chair grating across the slate tiled floor. He tried again to swallow, found that he could not, attempted to cough away the obstruction instead.

Eggs Monterey sprayed across the newspaper. Luce stood straighter, tears welling in his eyes, and discovered he could not breathe. In horror, he reached for his lips and immediately his hand fell upon something cool and gnarled. He rolled his eyes downward and saw that his fingers had wrapped around the coiled, green limb of a plant set at the center of the table.

He choked once more, nearly vomiting, and tugged at the vine snaking into his throat. He felt it moving against the back of his tongue like something alive and squirming. He tugged harder and it moved up his throat, seeming to claw all the way as if with tiny anchors. He pulled until it had cleared the tender skin at the back of his mouth. He both spit and flung the wretched vine away.

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The tendril fell across the newspaper with a wet sound, bits of food caught in its coils. For a moment, he fancied that it squirmed there, like a parasite dying in the sun. He shook the thought away and trotted to the kitchen for water. He drank a glassful and it hurt his throat. The plant, known informally as String of Bananas, had cut him with tiny half-moon barbs that lined its branches.

He marched back to the dining room, red pajamas sailing behind him. His breathing restored, the panic behind him, he was now concerned with the state of the dining room. Tea might have spilled on the pine table. The chair might have scratched the tiles. That awful plant would have to be moved or discarded. Only a crass fool like Diana would put a house plant where people eat.

He stared down at the scene of his near demise. The newspaper was in shreds. The tea was overturned and the Eggs Monterey was on the floor. Only the plant looked intact. It was coiled neatly in its pot. No stray tendrils spread across the table. No bits of food were stuck within its coils.

The String of Bananas looked undisturbed, if just a small bit unhappy.

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4.

As a rule, Luce preferred not to conduct any business from his car. Drive-thru banking, for instance, was impersonal and robotic. It did not afford the subservient teller an opportunity to dote on Bertram Luce or to adequately exhibit awe at the volume of his transactions.

Today's deposit was modest. The amount was more than the bank teller would make in two years, but still. No need to get out of the car in the hot sun for such a trivial matter. He would use the drive-up window and let the bank people admire the Mercedes, instead.

He pulled in just as a small, blue Accord with rust on its bumper was pulling away. He eased the Mercedes carefully to the window and sat primly while waiting for a teller to attend to him. He turned up the volume of the stereo just a little so that the workers inside might hear the rich operatic solo and appreciate what a cultured fellow they had before them.

An oval face appeared behind the darkened window, barely discernable. A drawer unfolded toward him with a metallic clang.

"Can I help you sir?"

"Yes," he said. "Just a small deposit. Into savings for now."

He sensed her nodding as he set the check into the drawer and secured it with a metal weight. The drawer was sucked back into the wall and the check disappeared. He turned the opera up a bit and stared out at Main Street traffic. The cars that passed were mostly late models, well maintained. Homefield was not a city in which the lower class, or even much of the middle class, could afford to live. Still, there was the occasional pickup truck with missing hubcaps, or an old sedan belching blue smoke. Workers from the mills down in Brunswick, no doubt. They passed through Homefield every day and gawked at houses they would never, ever enter.

Luce was beginning to feel extra good about his station in life when there came a piercing pain at the back of his neck. He squealed like a dog that has been kicked and brought his hand around to the source of the agony. The pain only intensified – it felt like a shot from a needle, only one without a physician's grace.

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Good lord, a bee! Maybe a hornet!

Horrified, he pulled his hand away and attempted to lunge into the passenger's seat, looking in panic over his shoulder. But no winged terror rose up.

Hip jammed into the center console, head pressed painfully against the roof, Luce saw a section of a rose bush leaning into his car like a panhandler. Round, pink roses bobbed back and forth at the window. Long thorns shot out to each side, and as he gaped in panic and confusion, he saw that one of the thorns was glistening with blood.

The shrubbery pushed deeper into the car, unsteady like a spring. Then, all at once, it paused, bounced briefly, and then pulled away. One pink rose became snagged on the door frame. It ripped free of its stem, fell into the car, and disappeared between the seat and door. The rest of the plant had retreated.

The teller drawer clunked open again and Luce flinched.

"Thank you, sir. Your receipt is in the... Oh, my. Are you okay?"

He pulled himself back into the driver's seat and straightened. He smoothed the front of his shirt and reached angrily for the receipt.

"The rose bush out here just pricked me."

A moment of silence.

"I'm sorry," said the woman behind the dark glass. "What?"

"The rose bush that you people so cleverly display for adornment. One of the thorns just stabbed the back of my neck and drew blood."

Another moment of silence, longer this time.

"I don't see how that's possible, sir. But if you'd like to talk to my supervisor..."

"Never mind!" he spat, crumbling the receipt and stuffing it into a shirt pocket. "I don't have time to contend with trifles. Just see that you have that bush trimmed. A man could lose an eye."

The baffled teller began to apologize again, but Luce drove away. He was so angry, he even considered squealing his tires to add exclamation to his dissatisfaction. Sadly, he did not know how it was done.

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5.

Halfway to the market (he needed chives, vermouth, and some sort of antiseptic for his neck) his foot slipped from the brake pedal at a traffic light and the Mercedes tore through the intersection. Horns blared and obscenities were shouted as other drivers weaved to avoid the runaway luxury car.

He made it to the other side of the intersection without crashing, but had to pull to the side of the road. His hands were sweaty and trembling. His heart thudded against his ribcage. He was an extraordinarily careful driver. He had never driven through a red light in his life.

He sat behind the wheel for several moments, calming himself, while traffic zoomed past. He had stepped gently onto the brake when the light turned yellow, he was sure of it. Only his foot had slipped as easily as if he had stepped in bacon grease. It was some kind of miracle he had come away without even a ding to the beautiful, beautiful car.

He pushed the seat back so that he could inspect his feet. The brake pedal was smeared with something pink and wet. It was on the bottom of his shoe, as well. He stretched an arm down beneath him and scraped a portion of it away with his fingers.

He recognized it immediately, but sniffed anyway. It smelled of flowers and car exhaust. Rose petals. Wet, treacherous rose petals, splattered beneath his foot.

He opened the door, stepped from the car and bent to clean the mess. He went about the cleaning like a killer wiping away evidence. He did not get back inside until all traces of the flower were scraped away from his shoe and the brake pedal. He cast the slick remains into the street.

A man with the imagination of a novelist should have begun to see a pattern in these recent misfortunes. But not Bertram Luce. All he discerned was that his neat and measured life had been disrupted by inconveniences. And he would not have it.

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6.

Though most who knew him regarded Bertram Luce as a mincing, fastidious man, there was an innate toughness about him of which few people were aware. They did not see the tenacious, resilient side of him because it was never on display. The essential steel within him was a secret thing, like an ugly but effective device to be plucked from a tool box only when absolutely necessary.

Luce was proper. But he was tough because that propriety was a hard thing to attain. His first six years were spent in poverty with an indifferent, terminally depressed mother whose husband had left her upon news of the pregnancy. For Luce, those proved to be the good years.

When he was seven, his mother married a moderately successful contractor almost as an afterthought. So sudden and inexplicable was the union, Luce learned about the upheaval in his small, quiet family the very day of the wedding.

The contractor came with two athletic, boastful children who began to pick on their puny, shy step-brother at once. They beat him up. They played cruel tricks on him. They chided his lack of athletic ability and outshined him in every way.

By then, his mother was a robotic drone who rarely changed out of her house robe unless proper attire was required of a particular wifely duty. She cleaned and cooked and generally served her new husband as he demanded. She seemed unaware of her natural child at all, so busy was she in heaping praise on the older boys and their endless achievements.

Luce spent his prepubescent years and most of his adolescence hiding from his step-brothers and waiting for his mother to snap out of her daze. By the time he was 15, he gave up on that daydream. He began concentrating more on his studies and worked on an exit strategy. He clawed his way to achievement and rose above his past in large part so he would not have to look at it anymore. When he thought about it – and he seldom did – the recollection of his childhood was like a sad and pathetic story about another boy, a stranger who was coarse and unrefined.

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He was Princeton educated. Upon graduating, he went to work as a fact checker at a magazine in Boston. By then, he was already a connoisseur of wine and a gourmet cook. He became an editor at the magazine, remained in that position for a suitable amount of time, and then moved on to a bigger publication in New York.

He continued that pattern for six years, replacing one social circle with another and never lamenting the loss of friends left behind. Friends were necessary things, like rungs on a ladder. But they were no more irreplaceable or unique than a toothbrush, or batteries in a smoke detector. Everything needed to be replaced now and then.

He wrote for the New Yorker for five years until the publication of his third novel. It was a continuation of the first two books, a story about love and betrayal during the American Revolution. He wrote not for the love of the craft or dedication to art. He wrote what he knew would make money after careful analysis of the market. He wrote well, if a bit pedantically, and the first two novels went to number one on the bestsellers lists. The second remained there for five weeks.

Bertram Luce was cultured. He was wealthy and secretly tough. He left the New Yorker with few goodbyes. He stunned friends and colleagues with indifference and a new air of superiority and simply vanished into a higher social circle.

He married a wealthy woman because it seemed socially necessary that he not remain a bachelor into his 40's. He enjoyed the elevated status that came with her and he tolerated her company.

And then, when the delicate balance of the marriage tilted away from convenience and more toward nuisance, he killed his wife in a very calm and studied manner. An analysis of the work at hand, precise execution of the plan, and a carefully crafted post-crime performance.

He killed Diana on their seventh wedding anniversary and she went down with only a feeble fight.

Diana was soft and sentimental, moved to tears by a display of even the smallest kindness. Wealth had instilled in her a great generosity and trust because her fortune had been easy to come by. She was the

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only child of a fabulously rich shipbuilder who raised her alone, doted on her and then had the good grace to die.

Luce despised his wife's softness and her generosity even more. He killed her on their seventh anniversary for no reason other than that it allowed him to lure her to the camp on a private cove at Juniper Bay.

"But it's just May," she had said. "It's still cold on the lake."

"It's our special place, Diana. And I expect we will keep each other quite warm."

She laughed and then cried. They packed their bags and started toward Juniper Bay. Halfway there, unable to restrain the anticipation, she had presented him with a wrapped gift and insisted he pull to the side of the road to open it.

"Good God," he said, the gold watch dangling from his fingertips. "It's beautiful! And a Rolex!"

Diana was a tiny creature, with long auburn hair and big brown eyes. She looked like a school girl, excited beyond control by the presentation of the gift. She leaned toward him, clapping her hands together, stretching the seatbelt to its limit.

"Look at the back! It's just a stupid watch if you don't look at the inscription on the back."

Thirty thousand dollars worth of just-a-stupid-watch, he thought. Who really gives a fig about the back?

But he flipped the watch over and gasped appropriately as he did.

"Oh, my. That's... it's beautiful, Diana."

The etching was really quite impressive. It was a single apple, with a string of leaves trailing up and around the back of the Rolex. Amid the ornately inscribed vines and leaves, the words "My Darling Bertram: the apple of my eye."

Impressive, yes. But he wanted to vomit at the sight of it. This small apple etched in gold portended a future he had no desire to see. For all of her great wealth and the comforts of their home, Diana Luce had low dreams. It was disgusting. It was coarse.

She wanted to give a chunk of money to the great causes of the day. She wanted to build a modest house in the country, with greenhouses and long gardens and the largest apple orchard in the state.

“Can you imagine it, Bertram? Surrounded by apple trees forever? Sometimes I want it so badly, I pray to the flora to make it so. Someday, darling. Someday that orchard will be our life.”

She wanted to toil in her gardens, catering to the common people who would come for perennials and annuals in summertime, apples in the fall.

“It will be a place where plants aren’t just enjoyed,” she said often, “but celebrated. I’ll work from morning until dark. You can write in a room with fresh air all around. We can buy matching overalls and greet our customers when they come. Oh, Bertram! Isn’t it a beautiful idea?”

Matching overalls! And so, clearly, his wife had to die.

He rowed her out onto the lake in the tiny boat she so adored. She sat at the front, knotting her hands together, smiling, giddy to know what grand gift required them to row into Juniper Bay in the middle of May.

“Ah,” he said, when they’d reached a mid-point between the mainland and a small island off the cove. “This is the perfect spot. Come here, Diana.”

And she came, moving unsteadily across the boat to see what fantastic anniversary present he held in his hands. And as she made her way to him, wide-eyed and beaming, Luce simply reached out, grabbed her by the shoulders and flipped her over the side.

Diana Luce could not swim, not even a little. It was a curious thing for a woman who so loved the water, and a very convenient thing for the man who tossed her into it.

There was little drama in the murder and he did not enjoy any part of it. He was not a cruel man by nature. At the same time, the killing caused him very little distress, during or after the execution of it.

Diana flopped around in the lake for perhaps a full minute, gasping and calling his name, pleading with him. The sun was high in the sky and Luce watched his wife flounder in the shadow of the boat. The white sundress floated around her. She slapped her hands at the surface of the water and kicked awkwardly beneath it. After swallowing and coughing up water, he expected his wife to go down

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for the last time. Instead, she rallied and managed an ugly form of dog paddle that brought her closer to the boat. Her hands reached up and one of them managed to hook around Luce's arm as he bent to watch her.

He stumbled in the boat, startled by her rally. He tore his arm free of her icy hands and used an oar to nudge her away. He slid the wood blade against her breast and simply pushed her away from safety. He did this three times, never uttering a word, as his wife grew more tired flailing around and trying to stay afloat.

"Bert, please! Oh God, Bert, I love you. Please help me."

It was the last thing she said. The last coherent thing, at any rate. For ten seconds after that imploration, Diana struggled in the water before going under. She surfaced, threw up water, flailed a moment longer. Her eyes were wild and they stared at him. Luce stared back but said nothing. He had no clever lines nor any use for one. Theatrics were not a part of the plan, after all. He only wanted his wife to submerge and to not come back up.

After a moment longer, she did.

Luce rowed back to the dock, climbed out of the boat and shoved it back into the lake. After a half minute, the breeze had carried it thirty feet out. After a minute more, it was sixty feet away. He watched it drift off and tried on a frantic, unhappy face. It was time to put on a performance.

He killed Diana because her low ambitions and insipid philanthropy threatened to undermine his plans for a splendid and opulent life. He wanted to sail around the world, to vacation like royalty in far flung countries. He wanted to dine with princes and amass greater wealth.

Diana had inherited a great sum of money at the passing of her father and this should have accelerated those plans. But Diana was a bleeding heart and an environmental crusader. She wanted to give a hefty portion of her inheritance – quite close to three million dollars – to various causes aimed at saving the world's natural resources.

Deforestation in the Amazon. Drilling in Alaska, strip mining. Diana would go on weeks- long, green benders with various groups to

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protest development or environmental abuses that threatened entire species of plants and animals.

Mostly plants. Diana was a tree hugger through and through. She never wanted or needed to start a family because the earth's plants and trees were her children. It was generosity bordering on madness. Three million dollars to save one patch of forest from woodsmen or one baby seal from the club?

It was not only a threat to their wealth and status, it was an embarrassment. Diana went on television talk shows to discuss the plight of the world's wildlife. She held group meetings at their home which she littered with all varieties of plants both inside and out. Luce was constantly fighting for space within the grand Colonial. Where he wanted books, wine racks and elegant busts, she assembled begonias, ferns and exotic species that were as useless as they were hideous.

Diana Carcassoni Luce was absolutely dedicated to plant kingdom. Her time was divided evenly between political causes and the maintenance of her gardens at home. The idea of moving that passion to some giant apple orchard in Northern Maine was coming closer to – and Bertram Luce did not appreciate the clever wordplay – fruition.

Had Bertram Luce been an emotional man, he might have pleaded abandonment. But he wasn't. He was a greedy man, and particular about the upkeep of his reputation.

So his wife went into Juniper Bay and he went on to private wealth.

Ostensibly, he was an inconsolable wreck for weeks after the drowning. Oh, how could she have gone off alone in the row boat, knowing she could not swim?

He was consoled and he was pitied. He was never suspected. There was absolutely no consequence from the killing. Not until the uprising of the plants. Not until the world's most formidable army came for Bertram Luce.