

# Maize

a short story



Nicki Salcedo

*first dates, worst fears, and first kisses...*



**Yellow** light blinded our eyes, and the sky refused to turn to dusk. Normally, the night and day married each other with hints of orange and purple, but that evening the brightness seemed the perfect excuse to delay. It was seven o'clock at night, but it looked like noon. The unfading sun was a warning. I was missing something, and I considered going back into the house but didn't know what it was I'd forgotten. The brightness unnerved me. Later it would be night without dusk. Without sunset.

My father Conrad circled the car three times. Every step he made was deliberate, and each time he went around he had a purpose. The first time, he checked the tires. They were deep black and near shiny. No clay or dust dirtied the rubber, but a lone piece of gravel was stuck in the tread. Conrad kicked the tire and knocked the gravel free, but he kept watchful eyes on my date Lowell. I tugged on the hem of my new skirt.

"You've had quite the happy birthday, boy," he said. "Seventeen, is it? A very happy birthday."

My date swallowed. Conrad had a way of putting people ill at ease.

"Thank you, sir," Lowell said, as though Conrad were wishing him one. He hadn't been. It wasn't Lowell's Boston way to *ma'am* or *sir*. He never uttered these words at school, but he made the exception for my father.

Conrad circled the vehicle a second time. He eyed the bumper. He tapped a finger against the fender.

My hair was pulled back into one ponytail, but I reach for the air by my ear as though my pigtails were still there. Finding nothing, I scratched my shoulder.

"It must be lucky to be born on the first day of the month." Conrad continued to watch Lowell. He spoke like this when he wanted to say something more meaningful. He turned to me with his eyes full of thought.

*What could you possibly have to look forward to in life after you get a brand new Mercedes for your seventeenth birthday?*

I shrugged. I touched the small gold earrings in my ear. They had been my mother's, and Conrad gave me them when I turned thirteen. I always wore them on special occasions.

"I've been lucky," Lowell said. Being agreeable is what Lowell did when he wanted to avoid confrontation. He'd been being agreeable since the first day he walked into Pine County High School with that Boston accent he couldn't hide.

Lowell turned to me with *I didn't ask for this ridiculous car* clearly written on his face, but he offered a tentative explanation to Conrad. "I needed a car. I just didn't expect something this nice."

"But you did expect something," Conrad said. He raised an eyebrow at me.

*Am I in trouble for having money?* Lowell's eyes said. That, I didn't know.

"Daddy," I pleaded. It was our much needed transition. The day wasn't going to turn into evening on its own. I needed to help it along.

Conrad circled the car a final time and peered through the windows to inspect the interior. Dark gray leather and chrome glistened new with strategically placed wood paneling to make the car feel like a home. I didn't know much about cars, but I knew this one cost more than the house it was parked in front of. My house.

Conrad ended his slow inspection and stood in front of the car. He placed his fists on his hips. The stillness of him reminded me of a tree, and I could see the silver reflection of the car in his pale blue eyes. Because he always wore a hat, his skin was smooth and fair despite the fact that he was fifty-one years old, and he worked outside every sunny day of his life. Conrad kept his hair short. It must have been fully blond at some point, but it started going gray while I wasn't noticing. He slapped the hood of the car with a look of approval.

"I don't need to warn you about how to drive," Conrad said. "I'll assume if you have a license, you can read the posted speed limits. I don't need to explain to you how I'd like my daughter treated. I expect you already know or else you wouldn't be standing here watching me kick and bang on your car. Your new car. I'll assume you have a plan for emergencies and enough common sense to call, if not your parents, then at least call me."

Conrad turned his attention full on me.

"It looks like it is going to be a perfect night," he said, pointing up at the yellow sky that did not look like night at all. "He," Conrad nodded toward Lowell and lowered his voice, "does not get to have a good time tonight, but you do."

Conrad stepped back and put on his hat. In place of a hug and kiss, I stepped forward and pressed a small piece of paper into his hand. It was the name and address of our destination. He nodded at the information without a word. Had he always been this distant? I wondered how many times he thought about my mother since she'd been gone. I wondered if at that moment, she was standing next to him.

Lowell opened the door for me. The only other man who'd done that for me was Conrad, and I felt the tenor of my heartbeat change. It thundered in my chest near audibly, and my hands shook when I reached for the seat belt.

The Mercedes was a nicer car than any adult I knew owned. The unused smell of it, the stark cleanliness of it, seemed like the future.

Lowell got in and watched me fumble with the seat belt. He had not betrayed any emotion while being inspected in my driveway, but in the privacy of the car his dark green eyes sparkled, and a smile touched his lips. I hadn't noticed his lips before. Embarrassed, I glanced down at his hands on the steering wheel as he pulled into the road.

"Your father doesn't like the car." Not a question.

"No," I said. Lowell maneuvered through town and drove onto the Interstate.

"Is he afraid we'll be in an accident?"

Conrad was not afraid of us being in an accident, but he was remembering one.

He had met my mother on the same stretch of highway. Her car was wrapped around a tree like a Christmas bow and my real father, my biological father, was bleeding and dying inside that car. I wondered what really happened that day.

Every time I heard the story it was the same: He saw my mother kneeling in a white dress on the side of the road. Only one time did Conrad mention the presence of my real father. He said that the man's eyes were open, and it frightened him more than the brokenness and finality of the injuries. I heard this once and remembered it better than things I heard a thousand times before. The other times I heard that story, Conrad spoke only of my mother. Her motions had been accelerated by panic, and her voice sounded like the sharpening of knives.

"I hope you never see fear on another living person," he would say. But even in her terror and despair, Conrad always said how beautiful she looked even in the rain.

If my real father's eyes were open even for a moment before he died, it meant he and Conrad saw each other. They knew each other. I knew what Conrad could say to me with his eyes. Lowell, too. I wondered what things a dying stranger might say. Possibly things he wouldn't say to his closest friends. Sometimes I wondered if Conrad loved me, not for loving and marrying my mother, but for something he promised my real father as he died.

Conrad met my mother Violet and my dying father on the first day of October. He probably thought of meeting her on this day every year. He probably thought of my real father as he looked at Lowell's new car.

*Is he afraid we'll be in an accident?*

"No," I said in answer to Lowell's question. I slid my hands palm down under my thighs to feel the soft gray leather heated by the fading October sun. The day my real father died was the day Lowell was born.

I leaned back and inhaled the newness of everything, the least of which was the car. I did not think it wise to bring up death on Lowell's birthday. I did not think it wise to bring up dying on my first date.

Up ahead, a piece of fabric flew out of the back of a truck driving in front of us. The material floated across the lines of traffic like an unwilling dancer. Then it collapsed on the side of the road like a piece of forgotten debris.

"What is the scariest thing you've ever done?" Lowell asked as we sped along the highway.

"I don't know."

*I'm scared of this. Your strange strength as you grip the steering wheel too tightly. Your confidence laden with fear. Your white skin. The blue veins that crawl so visibly along your arms.*

*I am not afraid of ghosts, Lowell. I see them everywhere. There is a ghost on the side of the road, and I don't know if it wishes us ill or well. Conrad taught me that there is no difference between dying and falling in love. Both can happen on the same day. It is the living I'm afraid of.*

*I'm scared of this. Being seventeen. My first date. Your first car. Seventy miles per hour on a highway too bright to be desolate, but still frightening all the same. The yellow moon hanging low in the still blue sky. The night that refuses to come. What scares me most of all, Lowell? You.*

**Yellow** ears of corn were not fit to eat, and the wastefulness of it troubled me. We paid a lady in a makeshift stand enough money for a hay ride, admission to the corn maze, a bonfire, two hot dogs, two Cokes, grilled corn on the cob, and two fried pumpkin pies. It was all included with the price of admission. Not a bad date considering it was the same price as two movie tickets at the Cotton Mill Mall back at home, and you didn't get food or a fried pumpkin pie at the cinema.

The pie wasn't food, it was warm gooey sweetness wrapped in a flaky hot pastry that melted in your mouth before your mind could get a hold of the texture or flavor. Conrad thought the fried pumpkin pies were disgusting. Every year I got to eat both mine and his.

The hayride was more for show than function. It took us about a hundred yards away on an easily walkable open field. We passed a man and his son piling the firewood for the bonfire later in the evening. Lowell had never been on a Halloween hayride or been lost in a corn maze.

He sat across from me in the wagon and tossed loose pieces of hay at me. I was careful not to cross the imaginary line down the center of the wagon. Conrad would not want me getting too close to Lowell. I waited until the pile was big enough for me to throw it back at him at all once. He smiled as I showered him with hay and then turned his face up to the sky.

“Someone turned on the night.”

Suddenly, I missed being with Conrad. I wondered what he was doing at home. I hadn’t thought to ask him before I left. Maybe he had gone to the Copper Lantern for dinner. Maybe he was glad to be rid of me for the night.

The yellow moon rose across the infinite blackness. There were no stars as we walked from the wagon to the entrance of the maze. It reminded me of horror movies I’d seen. One story was about a writer who went insane and died in a maze. The other was about a girl who lost her baby brother in a labyrinth. I’d probably watched too many old scary movies. Children and corn seemed like a bad idea to me.

Lowell held the map, and I carried the flashlight. I stared at the entrance to the life-sized maze remembering that while I loved the pie and hayrides and fire, I hated the actual maze. It was a ritual that Conrad and I did every year. I was a little bit afraid every year, but with my father I knew I was safe. He would never let me get lost or leave me behind.

Would it be funny for Lowell to take me deep into the maze, and then run off with the map and leave me all alone? I’d also read enough horror stories to know that pranks teenagers played, both with and without pig’s blood, could be scary or deadly.

“You’re not thinking of ditching me in there are you?” Lowell echoed my own fear. He lived inside my head without knowing it. I looked up at him in the sudden darkness wondering why he was out on a date with me.

“I wouldn’t go in there alone. It’s too creepy,” I said and took the risk of grabbing Lowell’s hand and tugging him toward the maze. He pulled back on my hand, not moving.

A firefly flew between us, and Lowell reached out and let it land on his open hand. I had taught him this four weeks ago, but we had not been alone at night or seen a firefly since.

The firefly opened and closed its wings. Winter was coming, and we shouldn’t have seen a firefly in October. Now there was another thing that would die on Lowell’s birthday. He blew on the firefly to encourage it to take flight, and with his lips still puckered he leaned down and placed them on mine. When he parted his lips there was the warmth of his tongue and the iciness of my unexpected inhale. I tried to remember all the things Miss Eloise told me about dating and kissing this morning.

*Keep your hands to your side.*

*Remember to breathe.*

*Think of Spain.*

Lowell's eyes were a deep green that longed to be brown. He'd spent his formative years at boarding school in Andover. His hair was fair but glistened auburn in the twilight. His family recently bought and was renovating the Pine County Golf Club. He was taller than most boys, and he smiled with his lips closed. He was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen. I'd only admitted this to myself as he kissed me.

I knew more ghosts than people. I had Conrad and a cat named Bullet, but I was disdained or ignored by just about everyone in my high school. Maybe not for my skin color, but more likely for my silence. Maybe they hated me because I was smart. Maybe they feared my ability to focus, even though all too often it was on the wrong thing. This meant that when the cutest, richest boy in Pine County pulled away from giving me my first kiss, instead of thinking of him, I was thinking about Barcelona.

He walked me into the maze and threaded his fingers through mine. Maybe he understood my distraction. Maybe he too felt the heat of embarrassment on my cheeks and curiosity in my breath.

Hadn't we been speaking to each other? I tried to focus. I assumed that being in a boarding school away from your parents allowed you the opportunities for wild adventures. I didn't know what I should say after my first kiss.

"What's the scariest thing you've ever done?" I asked.

"Spooky scary or afraid scary?" he asked.

I hadn't thought to make the distinction. He must have had an answer for both. I looked at his mouth. *What scares me most of all, Lowell? You.* "Either."

"Spooky then. We broke into a mortuary in Chelmsford once and took turns laying in the display coffins. That was a lot funnier in theory than it was in practice."

Lowell and I looked at the map. Ten landmarks were scattered through the maze to help us track our progress.

"Let's play twenty questions, fast answers?" he offered. "I go first. Dead person you'd like to meet?"

His fingers were long. I liked the way they pressed into the back of my hand as we walked. Broken corn stalks littered the unlit path. With each turn the night and maze grew more deserted. Our steps became unsure, but laughter and playful screams in the distance reminded me that we were not alone.

“Easy one. My mother. Last time you cried?”

“May 17. Why’d you hate me two months ago?”

“You insulted my two best friends at school. You called one fat and the other ugly.”

“I was joking,” he said.

“Not funny. They are my only friends. Why’d you ask me out? The truth.”

“You remind me of my friends back home,” he said. “They were all different.”

Did he mean different from him or different from each other?

He pointed to a spot on the map that he assumed represented us. A five-point intersection. I wanted to make a hard left. He wanted to make a soft right. Our compromise was a soft left that led us to a dead end. I was less worried about being killed in the corn maze as we walked and talked.

“Next question. Did I just give you your first kiss?”

“Possibly. What’s a nerdy thing that you like that you wouldn’t want anyone to know about you?”

“I love Star Trek. What about you?”

“I love mowing the lawn. Something about yourself that embarrasses you?” I asked. I’d never spent this much time alone with someone my own age.

“I’m skinny. I’m a six-foot-tall bean pole. And this is the beefed up version of me, because I gained ten pounds last year. What do you think?”

My thoughts immediately went to Madrid. There was a nice museum there I’d always dreamed of visiting.

“Selah?”

“Are we still playing the game? Or are we just talking? I think you look . . .” How were you supposed to compliment a boy? “I don’t know. You remind me of a superhero’s alter ego. Unassuming, but distinctive.” My voice went up an octave, almost as though I was asking a question. I wasn’t. “You smile a lot and talk to everyone at school. You’ve been here for three



months and you're already more popular than the captain of the football team. Is that enough?"

He shifted uncomfortably and looked at the map. Maybe the right answer was just a single word, fine.

"Do you wish you were different?" he asked, still looking at the map.

"No. Do you wish I was?"

"No," he answered, looking up. "First crush?"

"Taz Dixon. Yours?"

His expression turned serious. "The silent linebacker? That oversized redneck? He is the last person I would have picked for you." Before I could say anything nice about Taz, Lowell continued. "Zoë Ironside. She had dimples. Is your first date?"

For a smart boy, Lowell was not really so smart. Couldn't he see why? Did I need to spell it out for him? Who would have taken me out in Pine County? Certainly not Taz Dixon. Silent or not. Redneck or not.

We encountered another dead end. Instead of turning to face Lowell, I stood facing the corn.

"Come on," he urged.

Over my shoulder, I could see his outstretched hand. I never had a boyfriend before, and I was eager to hold that outstretched hand, but I was Conrad's daughter, too. I was eager to seem indifferent. Before I could move three girls came bounding around the corner of the maze.

The blond one stumbled into Lowell's arms. She giggled and touched her forehead on his sternum before stepping back. She probably didn't know what a sternum was.

"Sorry," she said. Her eyes found me looking over my shoulder, but my body wanting to step into the corn. "Y'all lost or want privacy?"

"Privacy," Lowell said and stepped back.

The girl kept watching me. Her dark eyes and mascara in contrast to the yellow of her hair.

"Where are you from?" she asked Lowell. All three of the girls stepped closer to him at the sound of his foreign accent. Massachusetts was foreign. I could hear him responding. I detected a hint of a smile and embarrassment in his voice. I looked back at the corn. Why was there so much magic in books, but none in my life?

He hurried the girls along, politely and with some flattery. He walked up behind me and slipped a hand around my waist.

In Spain, they ate blood sausage. With Halloween in the air and the moon blazing in the night, the thought did not seem as out of place as it should. I wondered if this is what it felt like, falling in love. But as soon as I thought it, my mind answered. Maybe not love, but it was nice to have his warm body behind me. His hand was on my stomach, and the top of my head fit under his chin.

He wore sunscreen. I could smell it on him, and the scent of sunscreen by moonlight seemed right.

I thought of the mascara girl and her giggling. I thought of the beaches in Spain where sunscreen would be needed. I wished I could giggle. I wished I could turn in Lowell's arms and touch my forehead to his sternum.

I thought of my father Conrad and remembered that each time you fell in love something had to die. I thought of the night corn and remembered that with each thing that blooms and grows, something else must catch on fire.

**Yellow** flames danced red, then blue, then yellow again. Yellow was the sun, the moon, the body of the fire. Hidden in the maze, the yellow corn, like Eden's forbidden fruit, was not to be eaten. Outside of the maze, the fire blazed dangerous and inviting.

I felt a dull ache in my head and lower back. It wasn't from walking or hunger or confusion. I excused myself as Lowell went in search of our food.

Other girls carried purses. I had a credit card and some cash shoved in my pocket. I wasn't prepared. I'd been distracted all week. I hadn't remembered the importance of the first of the month. Or the fullness of the moon.

It was ten o'clock at night, I was an hour away from home, and I was bleeding.

The lady was sitting in a chair near the entrance even though it was unlikely that anyone would be coming in at that hour. She was far away, but still sat facing the bonfire. She took in a lungful of a cigarette. Yellow and gray firelight danced across her white face. I glanced back at the fire loving the flame, and then at cigarette. I liked fire, but hated smoke.

"Need something, honey?" she asked.

"The restroom?"

She pointed to three portable bathrooms along the side of the field.

“Thank you,” I said without moving away. My brain was working over a hundred scenarios of how to proceed.

“Anything else?”

“I’m having a little problem.” I wanted to look her in the eye, but I couldn’t help but trace the path of the cigarette from her mouth to her side and back. She dropped the butt on the ground and didn’t grind it out. She stepped on it once, with the toe of her shoe, like she was killing an ant.

“Follow me.”

From a distance, I could see Lowell standing in line for the hot dogs. The three girls were back again, and they were at his side smiling up at him. He was watching the fire.

“Haven’t I seen you before with that older man? Paul Newman look-alike?” the lady asked.

Conrad didn’t look a thing like Paul Newman except maybe his eyes.

“Yes,” I told her. “He’s my father.”

She didn’t react the way other people did. They always grew a weird smile and asked if Conrad was really my father. I knew what they were thinking, and it was obvious that I was not his, but I still said yes.

The lady and I walked up the gravel path to her house. Inside it was spotlessly clean, partly due to the sheer emptiness of the house. The table had three chairs as though having a fourth would be an extravagance. The house was tidy, empty, and smelled like licorice, but not smoke.

She came back with a little package of what I needed. The sight of it brought a relief so intense to my heart, my eyes started watering.

“Go on. Everything will be all right.”

In the bathroom, I spent a few moments wiping the seat. I needed it to be clean, but I was shaking. Then I sat so long that I’d forgotten where I was until I heard her voice outside the door.

“Your boyfriend is coming this way, sweetie. You all right?”

I finished and wiped the seat again, but instead of flushing I stared at all the red. Now the bathroom smelled like licorice and blood.

I spent five minutes washing my hands like Lady Macbeth. The blood loss was a waste like the uneaten corn. Maybe if I had had a mother all that blood wouldn’t be distracting to me. Maybe

if I had a mother I would understand. Miss Eloise tried to talk to me about it every once in a while, but she had to think back two dozen years to remember her last cycle.

“You’ve got those heavy periods don’t you? It’s all right. I was like that before I had kids.”

The house looked like it only had one child. I would know. I wondered what happened to her other children out here in the corn.

“You sure you’re okay? You look like you’re going to pass out.”

“Thank you. You didn’t have to help me like this. I really appreciate it.”

“Of course, I did. What would your mother say if I hadn’t?” I shrugged, and she continued.

“Then you have your answer. I only did what she would have done or would have wanted someone to do for you.”

She gave me a quick hug and stepped back like she wasn’t the kind to give hugs. She didn’t know that I wasn’t the kind to receive hugs either, but I was grateful for her embrace.

“My mother died a long time ago,” I said. I didn’t ever tell people this. It hurt to say it even though time was supposed to have fixed the pain. When I evaded the subject, I could believe that my mother was still alive in the world and not forever gone.

The lady glanced at the spot where the fourth chair should have been and nodded like she understood. Her face came into sharp relief at that moment. I couldn’t say what she looked like before, but suddenly I could see her. She had brown and gray speckled hair, young features, but her red lipstick bled into her wrinkle-lined lips. Her brown eyes were neither kind nor unkind, but alert as though she’d seen all sorts of things in life some bad, some good.

Then she had another face and another as though my mind was trying to remember what my own mother’s face looked like. Then the lady’s face went back to being blank. The only thing left of her was the scent of licorice.

Lowell was waiting on the porch, and we walked back to the bonfire. He had a concerned look, but he didn’t say anything until we were seated facing the fire. The heat of the flame reminded me of summer.

“Don’t ever disappear on me like that again.” His words were slow and warbled, and he wouldn’t look at me. “What if something happened to you? Conrad wouldn’t even bother killing me, but he’d come out here and kill everyone in a five-mile radius.”

“She was helping me.”

“You could have told me.” He glanced at me. “Conrad trusted me with you.”

Lowell didn't say much after that, but he held my hand the rest of the night. Maybe he was afraid I'd wander off again. He tried the pumpkin pie and liked it. He ate it the way I did, at first hungry and then, with the last bite, completely satisfied. Later, he asked me to go to the Homecoming Dance with him, and I was glad Conrad made me buy a dress back in August. Homecoming would be real and public. I would have to paint my face the way they put makeup on the faces of dead people. Our classmates would look at Lowell and me and think things in their heads and say things with their eyes.

Staring at the flame, I wondered about Conrad before my mother died. Did he smile in those days? Did he ever like pumpkin pie? He would be proud that I had a date. He would get his wish, and I would be like the normal girls. But I wasn't normal. I wasn't like other girls. I spent my first kiss thinking of Spain.

Lowell brought my hand to his face and placed a quick kiss on the knuckles of my fist. I could not unclench my cold hands, but I knew if he kissed my lips now, if I opened my mouth to his, I would not think of Spain. I would inhale the beach scent of his midnight sunscreen. I would taste the sweetness of pumpkin pie. I would think about his eyes, green like October pine. I would think about the black sky of my first perfect night. I would remember the yellow moon.

I put my head on Lowell's shoulder.

"What happened on May 17?" I asked. We were back to the questions and answers. I could hear the rumbling of his words in the air and through his body as he spoke.

That night was not a real date after all. That would come later. That night was us alone in the world and lost in the middle of a maze.

*What are you afraid of most, Lowell? Me?*

THE END

By Nicki Salcedo

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## DEDICATION

To the girl I used to be. She is still with me. She still likes getting lost in a maze.

## INFORMATION AND CONTACTS

Thank you for reading this story. We hope you enjoyed it. If so, you might also like other novels, essays, and short stories by Nicki Salcedo such as her novel *All Beautiful Things* and essay collection *Intersections*.

We appreciate any reviews you may leave on bookseller websites. These reviews are helpful in many ways to authors seeking to make a living through writing. Again, thank you.

For more information on book releases, upcoming appearances, cat stories, time travel, and laundry battles:

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicki Salcedo is an Atlanta native. She is a novelist, blogger, and a working mom. She has a degree in English and Creative Writing from Stanford University. Despite her West Coast education, she considers herself Southern by sensibility, if not by birth. Southern things include talking to ghosts, saying hello to strangers, and waving to drivers with nice manners. Nicki is active in Atlanta's writing community, and her debut novel is a romantic suspense called *All Beautiful Things*. Each week she writes a weekly column called *Intersections* for the Atlanta based news site *Decaturish.com*.

She loves her four kids and husband, *Star Trek*, football, poetry, church, romance novels. She adores corn mazes and apple picking. She finds something in common with just about every person she meets. That's the untold story. That's why she writes.