

Where the Garden Ends

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One of the strongest memories of my childhood will always be spring and summer days spent in my mother's garden. She would spend all of her time out there, planting and caring for her own little utopia. As a child, I understood her love to be for the smell of damp earth, the taste of a carrot straight from the ground. The freedom to spend all day basking in the sunshine, among what seemed, to me, a million different colored flowers. Of course, it was much more than that to her, as I would come to understand when I was older, after my parents' divorce. It was something all her own, a beautiful escape from a painful marriage. Pouring all of her love and energy into something embodied her very soul.

When I was nineteen, I got into a bit of trouble. I was a good kid, but my parents were concerned that I was spending a little too much time with my dead-beat boyfriend, moving through life with no direction. I had been laid off of my "dream job" recently- the one I had forgone all college plans for. My mother was worried about me- something I was used to, as it seemed to be her constant state of being. Her heart was the one organ she had never had health problems with, but it was diseased with pure empathy. She felt every last emotion of the people around her, and worrying for her teenage daughter was proving to be too much for both of us. I had no money, and after my third or fourth recurrent breakup that winter, I did what any other teenage girl would do- I called my mom. Half an hour later we were sat at the local Denny's, our family's unofficial crisis center. Nothing solves problems like a stack of pancakes and shitty diner coffee.

"Sweetheart, I think you just need a change," she'd said quietly. "What happened to college, to making something of yourself? Your potential is so much greater than this." My mother pushed her eggs around her plate, her swollen arthritic hands struggling to maintain a firm grasp on her fork. I couldn't reply, the lump in my throat made it impossible. Instead I simply nodded, my eyes laser focused on the syrup I poured on my already saturated pancakes. She was right, of course, and had a way of speaking so that her words not only reached my ears- but also seemed to be absorbed and felt through my entire body. She knew my soul and had that strange motherly talent of understanding exactly what I needed to hear.

It was that day that my mother insisted I move in with her into my grandfather's summer home. He had given it to her when he moved in with his own new girlfriend- something I found unbelievably weird and embarrassing. It was all embarrassing- me, failing at my first real attempt at life without her. Of course, my mother knew this, and was clever enough to disguise her charity by making it into a deal- she offered to pay my way through college, if I only agreed to move in and help her out with her newfound garden. Years of chemotherapy had left her body weak,

and while she was healthy now, she simply was no longer able to physically do the work herself.

So, early that spring, once my lease in the city was up, I packed up my few belongings and moved in with my mother. The first few days were spent picking out courses at a local community college, my mother excitedly helping me to plan a future that she promised would be bright. Soon after, though, she brought up the garden.

“We will start tomorrow. You will work on one section a day, first removing the weeds, tilling the soil, and planting the seeds.” she had said to me. The teenager that I was, I balked at the idea of actually following through with my promise to help. I argued every aspect of her plan that I could:

“Have you seen that garden? It will take hours to get through the weeds alone!” I said. My grandfather had never bothered to care for the yard after my grandmother’s passing.

“That is why you will do one section a day. Everything worth while takes hard work.” Her endless supply of cheesy one-liners drove me nuts.

“Why do you want me to plant seeds? It will be ages before you even get to enjoy the flowers. Why not buy some that have been grown and replant them?” The millennial in me- accustomed to instant gratification- couldn’t understand the rationale of planting seeds.

“You will understand when you see the flowers bloom- living, beautiful flowers that you nurtured from day one. It will feel so much better knowing that you did it, all on your own.” She didn’t see me rolling my eyes as she said this.

And so, within a week of me moving in, I started on the garden. Other than playing and observing my mother as a child, I had no real gardening skills, but my mother assured me that a green thumb was hereditary. Day by day, I worked on small sections of the garden surrounding her house, planting what I learned were “annuals”- flowers that would come back year after year. The work was difficult; the ground was still quite hard from winter. At first, my mother would sit and read by the bay window overlooking the garden, smiling at me and nodding her approval. As the spring went on, however, she often spent much of the afternoon napping- her book open on her lap, glasses slightly askew.

I was about three-quarters done the garden when I decided to take a much-needed day off, to visit a friend in a neighboring town. The garden was looking much better, if not a little strange. Our neighbors had all gone the pre-potted route, so ours was the only yard disrupted by rows of black muck. I had finally come to the last section, and had just finished pulling the weeds when it began to rain. Darting inside with my packet still full of seeds, I hoped that all of my hard work would pay off, and that

soon it would be a row full of flowers to rival even the most impressive of pre-potted arrangements. I knew the joy that they would bring my mother, whose big beautiful heart had again been struggling- this time with worries of her own father's health. Promising to plant those seeds the following day, I kissed my mother and headed out for the night.

It felt good to be out. Weeks at my mother's house had helped to focus me, and I had come to realize that I was not a failure after all. I'd lacked discipline, and direction- but I knew that my life was about to change, that my mother was going to help me. My friend and I talked excitedly about our upcoming semester at college together over cheap beers and crappy Mexican food, long gone cold. Life was finally about to start for me, and I was, for once, feeling ready for it. (Anyone who has ever felt this way knows, of course, that life tends to laugh at such confidence- punishes it by throwing a reality check into the mix.)

When my phone rang the next morning- my uncle calling- I thought vainly that he was phoning to congratulate me on my acceptance into college. Mom had been bragging to anyone and anything she could all week.

Of course, that's not what the call was about.

My mother's heart had finally had enough. Her one healthy organ, it had simply stopped the previous night, in her sleep. My uncle, who had been coming over to collect something for my grandfather, had found her that morning. I already knew how he found her- in bed, looking as peaceful as can be. Her book in her lap, and her glasses slightly askew.

Time, after this, seemed to stand still while simultaneously blurring by. This is a phenomenon that seems to occur, in my experience, after great loss. I did not return to my grandfather's house that spring- instead moving in with my father as we struggled to wade through a reality that clung to us like mud. Grief was paralyzing, brambles and thorns piercing through my body, inhibiting any growth or healing. I knew that eventually I would have to face that garden- the garden that I never finished.

That day did come, of course. We needed to go through her things. Belongings that now, somehow, no longer belonged to anyone. When we drove to the house late that summer, I had prepared myself to see that sad, dead place. Rows and rows of black dirt; a place where nothing lived. Instead, I found flowers. Hundreds of different flowers, blooming in a brilliant and colorful defiance to my sorrow. One section for every day that spring. Almost every day.

It was the most beautiful and painful thing I had ever seen- something I would come to understand as a true metaphor of my relationship with my mother. She had helped me- she had shown me what to do, step by step, every day of my life. This garden, punctuated by clusters of different flowers from every day that spring- the

garden that ended, suddenly, with a patch of black soil. She had nurtured me, and now, where the garden ends is when I must begin.