

TIME IN A GARDEN

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*Life began in a garden. We spend our lives
trying to return.* Unknown

We all do battle with stony ground and unseasonable dry spells over the years. At sixty-two, I've had my share. To survive—even grow—beyond those difficult droughts of the soul, we learn to root out our share of quack grass, turn over spadefuls of spent or decimated ground and plant again. Though we may not call ourselves gardeners, it is the human experience.

And so, even as I begin my account of the past year—the strange flowering of love and friendship that changed my life beyond recognition, I am still out there on the berm alongside the interstate every Saturday morning, down on my knees in the Michigan mud. The months have

come full circle. It is Spring again, at least by the calendar—April and perfect weather for staying home hiding out under the covers, sleeping in. I choose instead to risk, to get out there and cultivate hope in the form of those ephemeral wisps of green shooting up from the ground.

It's not always easy for new life or the future to force its way through the decaying stubble of the past. In my seventh decade I have run up hard against the reality of winter—that watershed season where newly turned earth can conjure up as many images of death as life. Dead-heading daffodils sets off ominous twinges in my lower back. But then at least I am not counted among the missing-presumed-deceased in the latest high school reunion face-finder.

I wasn't thinking about either gardens or headstones when I moved back to my rural roots in Xenaphon. Like many urban transplants in Chicago, I was tired of the pace and the stacked-crate logistics of apartment living, all the more so with the ominous palette of orange and yellow terrorist warning codes flashing night after night on the news networks. Early retirement offered the possibility of a simpler life, with green and open spaces around me.

Renters had been doing their best to trash the Victorian homestead on Third Street in Xenaphon that had been in my mother's family for three generations. I decided to reclaim that inheritance—moved in, went to work part-time for the *Xenaphon Weekly Gazette* and rarely looked back. My parents were deceased and my two daughters grown and settled. Between the corporate pension, a small salary instead of pay by the column-inch, and my single lifestyle, it was enough.

When a colleague in a neighboring office twisted

my arm about the Saturday community garden project in nearby Aurelius, I didn't really resist. My expectations were simple. The garden promised to fill the blank spaces between press deadlines on Friday and the blank pages of Monday morning.

I became one of a pitifully small crew of volunteers, ranging in age from our fifties to near nineties, strung out over that barren hillside. Each of us was caught up in our separate tasks. A crude, hand-lettered sign was a manifesto—a unifier—of sorts. *Welcome to Aurelius and Xenaphon*, it read. *Michigan's Garden Spot*.

The intentions on that signboard may have seemed clear enough for any passing motorist on the highway. Up close things seemed a whole lot fuzzier. It had begun to dawn on me that our so-called community garden was not really as advertised—a *garden* or a *community*.

We volunteers really knew very little about each other. That patch we were tilling? An unpretentious 15 by 50-foot crescent of bare earth set just below the crest of a hillside of nondescript weeds and sandy clay overlooking the off-ramp of one of the state's major north-south tourist routes.

True, the *Garden Spot* itself had much older, more auspicious beginnings. But then that was a century ago. Aging has not been kind to this once thriving rural crossroads. By today's census demographics Aurelius—technically where that little berm was located—hangs on as an unincorporated collection of a half dozen houses and a lone gas station on the outskirts of the county seat, Xenaphon.

A truck was braking hard on the off-ramp behind me. I straightened—suddenly light-headed. It was time to get my focus. The ground felt warm, alive under my

hands. I breathed in the potent smell of it—the promise of rain, heavy like the thickening overcast.

As I looked around me, I expected the reassuring sight of our leader Bea Duiksmā as she positioned string and wooden stakes, laying out the future, oblivious to the shredded tire fragments and tin cans still to be cleared from the site. Instead, she was talking animatedly with what appeared to be a new recruit.

My world was changing. I had no idea how much.



Chapter One

When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

Matthew 16:2

I hadn't seen or heard it. But apparently sometime

in the last 10 minutes, a newcomer had pulled a sleek late-model SUV into line behind the unimpressive collection of vehicles belonging to the garden crew. The very fact of the stranger's presence—and maleness, was intriguing enough to prompt curious glances from my fellow gardeners and an immediate go-get-him response from our crew chief Bea Duiksmā.

Judging by the guy's shock of silver white hair and conspicuous furrows around the eyes, I would have guessed late-sixties. The net result was more time-worn than handsome. *Used*, my grandmother would have described him.

As to what had brought him here? I couldn't even pretend to speculate. To a casual passerby on the highway, none of this would qualify as very promising—either as a show garden or tourism magnet. Neither, on closer inspection, would our ragtag band of volunteer gardeners.

Last fall we had broken sod and dug in a bushel of daffs and a lesser assemblage of tulips—along with a few half-dead perennials that we had scrounged from the Xenaphon farm store. Even at the peak of the bulb season, the results looked rather forlorn: a meager dotting of reds and yellows against the muddy Rembrandt palette of the berm.

Undaunted, our fearless leader Bea had taken charge and was steering the newcomer over to my particular clump of bloomed-out daffodils. Whatever he thought of our operation, it was too late to back out gracefully now.

“I'm sure she'll be happy to show you the ropes,” Bea said. “While I figure out how to put you to work.”

So much for civilities. Bea turned and headed briskly toward her portable library, stashed on a rusty

child's coaster wagon. Picking up a taped-together roll of graph paper, she studied the latest garden plan intently. Goodness knows, it didn't take a formal blueprint to conclude we needed whatever help we could get.

His back to me, the stranger watched her go. *Half intending*, I suspected, *to make a run for it*. Instead, he turned and made eye contact. Those blue-gray eyes were steel—*wary. Nobody's fool, this one.*

“Quite a . . . project you've got going here.”

I laughed. “Cheer up. . . this'll be over before you know it,” I told him. “We never work past noon.”

“I seriously doubt that those two. . . over there—”

“Margo and Howard. . . .”

“—will make it. They look ready to pack it in and it's barely—ten o'clock. . . .”

So help me, the guy was wearing a Rolex. I fought a smile.

“Trust me. . . those two will be at it long after the rest of us call it quits. Pushing ninety and hard as nails, both of 'em.”

Our newest volunteer did not look convinced. Still, after a split-second hesitation, he thrust out a hand. *A gentleman of the old school*, I chuckled to myself—someone accustomed to waiting for the woman to initiate contact. So much for chivalry. I work without gloves—obvious to us both as his hand closed around mine in greeting. Chlorophyll stains and mud make for an interesting patina.

“Adam,” he said.

“Evie. . . well, really Eve.”

I could read his reaction. *Is she putting me on?* Adam and Eve? Tentative laughter warmed the grey morning.

“You’re kidding.”

“No. . .German. Named after my grandmother, Eva.”

“Makes sense. We *are* out here in a garden. Right?”

Just when I thought the man had little or no sense of humor, he smiled. It was one of those mega-watt flashes that signaled he got it—the bizarre incongruity of our whole situation. Maybe there was hope for the guy after all.

“So, Adam. . .you’ve gardened before?”

That was a wild guess on my part, based on nothing at all. Adam appeared to give the question more thought than it merited. After a conspicuous pause, he shrugged..

“Used to help my grandfather,” he said. “More recently? Just herbs in a window box. Not anything. . .on this. . .scale.”

“Local?”

I suspected the answer to that one before I threw it out there. Judging by the watch and the cut of those jeans, our newest volunteer was not a connoisseur of the local thrift shop.

“Cottager.”

He rattled off the name of a familiar and upscale road on one of the nearby small sand-bottomed lakes. “Saw a sign about the community garden at the General Store on Route 131. Figured here’s as good a chance as any to learn something about the local flora and fauna.”

Not much value, I thought, in starting with bloomed-out daffodils. Snip and another petal-less green flower pod falls to ground. Then on to the next. I gestured toward the stands of slender fettuccine-shaped foliage around us.

“Deadheading,” I told him, “isn’t really rocket science. Bea says we’ve got to clip off these green pods on the daffs to make sure all the nutrients go to the bulb. In a week or two, we’ll do the same to the tulips.”

He frowned. “And the leaves. . .? you don’t pull them up, twist or weave them together? I’ve seen that done—”

“It would look better, I’ll admit. But Bea says it’s best to leave the total leaf surface exposed. Eventually they’ll yellow and dry out on their own. See that feathery foliage stretching out to fill in the gaps? Astilbe. And those strange red shoots? Peonies. In a week or two you won’t even notice the old leaves are still there.”

“You seem to. . .know what you’re doing, then—”

“Bea anyway. She spent summers in her teens doing grunt work on the payroll of a bulb farm near Holland, Michigan—plus a lifetime putting together a spectacular reference collection on Midwestern plants.”

“Impressive.”

“Overkill maybe. Fortunately. . .for the rest of us, most of the tasks at hand demand more patience than skill. My claim to fame was inheriting a dog-eared copy of *Ten Thousand Garden Questions Answered* from my grandmother—and a habit of trying to rescue of half-price reject house plants from the local IGA. Mostly. . .in my case anyway, a failing proposition.”

“Well, with the two of us, this. . .deadheading business won’t take long,” Adam said.

Another quick glance at the Rolex seemed to confirm that assessment. His eyes, grey and inscrutable like the darkening cloud cover, had taken on that faraway look again—as if already plotting his escape.

Bea’s timing was perfect. From her no-nonsense

stride, she obviously was prepared to enlighten us both. The shovels she was toting our way suggested that she had revised her battle plan—radically. Under an arm, she also had tucked that new garden layout, prepared to unroll it for us to study, if need be. . .to get our bearings.

“Can’t do a lot without a tiller,” Bea said. “But at least we can get started breaking sod.” Aiming a shovel at each of us, she gestured at a patch of weeds and mud adjacent to the main bed that she had laid out with stakes the previous September, then abandoned three feet into the project when the roto-tiller gave up the ghost.

“You mean work it. . .by hand?” The look on Adam’s face was priceless.

This was not a job for Ralph Lauren. Spring was rainier than usual, and we were battling a primal ooze that once it hardens, clings like cement from the abandoned plant north of us. A casing of mud had already dulled the sheen on our new recruit’s straight-out-of-the-box work boots.

“We used a tiller to shape that first bed last fall,” Bea explained. “But it gave out before we could finish the second one. Vivian. . .that volunteer working over there with Margo and Howard, is trying to find us another one. In the meantime. . .”

In the meantime, Bea had an extra pair of hands and wasn’t about to let that opportunity slip away. *You go, girl.* Stifling a grin, I silently cheered her on as I leaned on the shovel handle watching Adam poke around skeptically at the dense sod with the tip of his spade.

“Work from your knees,” Bea suggested, “so you don’t throw out your back.”

Jaw set, Adam forced the steel edge into the ground. I heard his muffled out-rush of breath, sensed the

explosive energy that single cut had taken.

“It’s like. . .reinforced concrete down there—”

Bea nodded. “Now try a cut at right angles to that one.”

For a split-second, I thought he might deck her with the business end of the spade. Instead, he maneuvered the steel edge to take advantage of that first thrust. With a minimum of false starts, he settled into a steady rhythm of slicing out manageable squares of sod.

“We’ve got a couple of extra pairs of gloves,” Bea interrupted. “If you need ‘em.”

“Thanks. . .this is fine—”

Jaw set, Adam drove the spade into the ground yet again. I hated to admit it. Experienced or not—and whatever his pedigree, the man had a flair for sod removal. Once he had outlined a patch of weeds with strategic cuts, he would shim under the section and lift it off, roots and all. A periodic audible grimace underscored the sheer effort it took. It was my turn. Setting the tip of the spade next to the ragged edge where the tiller had stopped, I experimented with a square of my own.

Planting a booted foot on the steel edge as I bore down, I took a leaf from my co-worker’s book and did my best not to hunch. *That was great in theory.* Compared to his, my cuts were ragged and shallow. It took every bit of muscle power I could manage to drive the blade through the unruly mat of quack grass and stones into the clay mass below.

“Good grief, Bea. . .!”

Bea just smiled serenely. “You’ll get the hang of it. . .! Have fun, kids.”

With that she headed off toward the original bed again. From the look of it, our fellow-volunteers were

embroiled in some sort of dispute over whether or not to divide one of the clumps of perennials.

“Yeah, right. . .!” I grumbled.

Planting the tip of the spade in what looked like a likely spot, I attempted to imitate Adam’s technique. It wasn’t working. My mood was growing blacker by the minute. After only a dozen or so spade thrusts, I was already feeling the sting of what were promising to be blisters.

At least, I consoled myself, *I wasn’t the only one struggling*. Although his exertions displayed considerably more strength, even a kind of easy grace, a rivulet of sweat had begun to trail down Adam’s temple. He paused to catch his breath. When he picked up again, he flashed a wan smile and flexed his hands—gingerly—before tightening his grip on his spade handle.

“Rough going.”

“Don’t say it. . .,” I told him. “I’m awful at this.”

“It’s about relaxing. . .going with the flow.”

“Tough to do, when every slice half wrenches your arms out of their sockets.”

“Look, Eve. . .” He hesitated—stopped. “I’ve been. . .watching you. At the last minute you keep anticipating the resistance and lock your knees. Not a good idea—”

“Show me, then. . .!”

I heard the challenge in my voice, as surprised by it as he seemed to be. *Why did this guy make me feel perpetually like I was about to fail a quiz?* Eyes narrowed and his brows contracted into a dark, puzzled line, Adam just looked at me—as if only now seeing. . .*really seeing*, who it was working alongside him in that barren mud-hole.

“All right,” he said slowly. “I will.”

Aligning his spade parallel to mine, in slow motion he positioned the blade and bore down. I heard the muffled thud of the knife-sharp edge plunge down through the matted grasses—a clean, deep cut. Working the blade free again, Adam repeated the series of movements. He made it look as easy as slicing butter in a dish.

“Now you try it.”

Gritting my teeth, I did—but this time even more awkward and self-conscious. The results were disastrous. My foot slipped off the slick metal edge of the spade and when I tried to keep the sharp blade from slicing my ankle, the momentum inadvertently carried me down and sideways. I lurched against Adam more than fell—still, it was hard and out-of-control enough conceivably to knock us both down in the process.

“What . . .the—?”

“Oh, m’gosh. . .!”

The Times-Crossword-and-cappuccino wardrobe notwithstanding, this guy was physical. . .even athletic. Sudden as the unexpected contact was, he was quicker. Dropping his spade, Adam shifted his body weight to steady himself and with both hands, drew me tight against him to try to regain not just his but my balance.

At least I had the sense to cooperate. I clutched at the fabric of his shirt for support—connecting eventually with the taut muscles of his back. Between that and Adam’s broad shoulders braking my fall, the downward momentum stopped.

“You’re going to hack off a foot at that rate. . .!”

Breathing hard, he suppressed an oath. It was no easy matter to disentangle ourselves. First he had to coax me out of that death grip I was using.

I glared at him, verbally prepared to give him both

barrels. But after what I saw mirrored back at me in his face, my mouth didn't want to seem to move. I hadn't sensed a member of the opposite sex look at me like that in ages. . .and the very fact I noticed now, made me feel extremely uncomfortable.

For crying out loud, you're a grandmother, I told myself, *light-years beyond flirting with some stranger like a giddy schoolgirl. Get a grip!* With the few rational brain cells still functioning, I opted for distance and dropped my hands as if making contact with a hot stove. For a split-second, my head swam—more disorienting even than that near-miss with that spade.

“So much,” I said, “for. . .going with the flow—”

Adam didn't say a word.

“Are you two. . .all right over there. . .?”

From her tone, it was pretty clear Bea had caught the whole episode. Half amused, I sensed—half wondering what on earth we were doing.

“Just fine. . .,” I lied.

“You're nuts, you know. . .!” Adam muttered, “The whole bunch of you. What in the. . .name of all that's holy do you. . .do *any of you* think you're doing out here? No tools. . .for crying out loud, a decent tiller or garden tractor would make short work of this.”

I had to admit the comment wasn't patronizing. Just common sense. If Bea had in mind working the entire outline of the plot by hand, we'd be at it for a month. None of which changed my instinct to put some distance between me and my co-worker. . .in more ways than one.

“Look. . .,” I snapped. “Our budget is zip. And we are. . .*volunteers*, for better or worse. If you want to call it quits. . .nobody's stopping you. . .!”

The words were barely out of my mouth when I

knew I had no business sounding that testy. Truth was, without those lightening reflexes of his, I could have really hurt myself, or him—or the both of us.

“Point taken. . .,” he said quietly.

Whatever reaction I was expecting, it wasn’t that. The only clue to my co-worker’s emotional state was that muscle working its way along the ridge of his jaw. Retrieving his shovel, he showed no sign of going anywhere.

“Adam, I . . . shouldn’t have . . . jumped down your throat like—”

“Apology accepted.”

We dug away in silence, while I tried to figure out just what about this guy bothered me so much. Or why I even cared? The mere fact of the questions surfacing was disturbing. Outside the ingrained vicissitudes of office politics, it had been years since a man’s physical presence, starting with his motives—the “why” of him—had been high on my agenda.

It was unfair, but understandable, the source of my budding aversion. For nearly thirty years of marriage I had been coping up-close-and-personal with his brand of effortless urbanity, and more to the point, the damage it can do.

Make nice, I told myself. *If he quits, you could get stuck doing this alone.*

“Anyway. . .for what it’s worth?” I told him. “It’s great finally to have another pair of hands going at it out here.”

At that he looked up, his expression unreadable. “You actually do this every week?” he said.

“Me. . .personally? A couple of months last fall. . .and lately, whenever the rains let us get in here at all.

Bea's office at the community action agency in Xenaphon is right next door to mine. She's been beating the bushes for help. I had the time."

"Family here?"

"At one time," I said. "My grandmother lived in the old homestead in Xenaphon until she died a number of years ago. I kept it as a rental until I retired."

Way too much information, a little voice in my head told me. Adam persisted.

"Married. . .kids. . .?"

"A daughter in Tucson and one outside of Chicago. College grads, grown and married. My husband Joel died five years ago."

"I'm sorry."

I let that one pass. Widowhood was a strange quirk of fate that I still found awkward to handle. After going on three decades of marriage based on very different notions of what constitutes fidelity, enough was finally enough—even given my over-developed sense of loyalty and faith in the redemptive powers of love. Before I was forced to confront the obvious, Joel's accident intervened.

Thankfully, my daughters continue to skirt the circumstances of their father's death—including my status as a not-all-that-grief-stricken widow, with the instinctive diplomacy of a toddler steering an electric outlet. Some things are just too dangerous to touch.

But then those weren't the kind of tidbits that wound up in my weekly news-about-town column—any more than guys like Adam just pop up digging sod on a Saturday morning. Why choose blisters out here on the berm? When he obviously could be steering a very different kind of tiller on that coke-bottle-green glacial lake of his.

Without my quite knowing how, he had drawn me out quickly enough. Time, I resolved, to turn the tables.

“And you?” I heard myself ask. “Wife. . . family?”

“None of the above. I’m in town settling my dad’s estate—more complicated than I thought.”

“And so, I suppose for some hard-earned. . . R&R, you wind up out here. . .?”

Adam winced. “More a case of some very low. . . sales resistance on my part. I guess it was Bea’s crazy garden poster that sucked me in. Tough to miss it. She seems to have plastered the thing all over the county.”

Another embarrassment of sorts left me temporarily speechless. That “crazy poster” to which he was referring was—in fact—one of *my* more shameless pieces of hype. Whatever possessed me to bill the community garden as “a venture in building our own little Eden” and a “hands-on way to jump-start community revitalization”?

Given the mud and the blisters, I could think of far more accurate appeals. For starters, a good option would be, *Risk life and limb. . . with a back-breaking, desperation move to lure traffic into town to tank up at the pumps and mini-mart of Fred’s Stop ‘n Save*. Well, anyway—apparently at least in the case of this one unlikely volunteer, the darn thing worked.

“*Caveat emptor*. . . buyers beware. Aren’t computers wonderful?” I told him, trying not to sound defensive. “Truth is? That. . . *somewhat overzealous* sales pitch is my doing. So if you’re having second thoughts about what you’ve gotten yourself into, don’t blame Bea.”

He looked straight at me, chuckled. I’d surprised him, that’s for sure.

“You’re in public relations?” he said. It wasn’t really a question.

I was expecting the raised-eyebrow distaste that often goes with that revelation. Instead, what I read in Adam's tone and quirk of a smile was clearly intended as appreciation, even respect.

"Was," I told him. "Chicago. I got sick of the grind and moved back here—just over a year ago. Right now, I'm writing the community news columns part-time for the county weekly. The *weds-'n-deads*, as my boss likes to call it."

Adam laughed. "Quite a switch. You ever miss it?"

"Chicago, yes. Sometimes. The corporate rat race? Never. Not that I was high on the totem pole. . .just one of the little guys down the line. I loved copy writing, but still—"

"Still. . .there comes a time just to. . .hang it up."

Something in his reaction signaled this was getting way too personal. Only this time, it was his comfort zone that was being invaded.

"Do I detect a note of *deja vu* here, all over again?" I said.

His laughter had a brittle edge. "Got me. Thirty years in corporate sales. When the gate personnel at O'Hare and I started making a habit of greeting each other on a first-name basis, I decided it was time to take a breather."

"Leaping the turnstiles like that infamous TV commercial—?"

"Something like that."

"And now?"

He hesitated. "Clipping coupons, for the moment," he shrugged.

I was smart enough to know when I'd hit a wall. It

was time to back off.

“Well, if it’s a third age career you’re contemplating, take heart. We late bloomers seem to be in the majority.”

“So I hear.”

Straightening from the latest lunge and thrust maneuver with the spade, I couldn’t help notice the furrows that had settled in between his brows. That, and the ferocity with which he was going at a stubborn square of sod at his feet.

A low rumble of thunder spelled relief. But to everyone’s credit, nobody bailed. We all just stood there like those tentatively rooted perennials of ours, faces turned toward the roiling cauldron overhead. The brief respite from the monsoons was about to end.

“We’d better pack it in,” Bea said.

We were not going to argue with her. After all that work, Adam and I had cleared barely a side-and-a-half of the rectangle. He took my shovel and started grabbing whatever else he found lying around while I ran to help Margot and Howard haul themselves up the berm to their car.

The chill edge to the wind gave us precious little time to stash the tools in the shed before the heavy curtain of rain descended. In the confusion, I didn’t even have a chance to tell my co-worker so much as good-bye.

“See you next week,” Bea shouted as we scrambled for our separate vehicles.

At the entrance to the interstate, I noticed Adam’s SUV ahead of me blink left toward the northbound on-ramp. The rest of us queued at the stop sign, headed home to Xenaphon

