

## Offerings

Marshall's been dead for a year, but this morning I scrambled two eggs out of old habit - one for him, one for me. Lapses like that shake me up, make me wonder how long Janie and Mac will tolerate my living alone if they find out.

So Marshall's spirit and I went for a calming drive in the '82 Ford pickup that he drove for thirty years. We rumbled through nearby neighborhoods - my spotted hand rubbing the sun bleached dash and Marshall witnessing from fraying plaid seats and palm-polished shifter. Just this morning when I hoisted my arthritic hips up and onto the seat, his baritone had chided as always, *Heave ho, Alida*.

The kids want me to give the truck to my great-grandson, but I won't do it.

Heading home, we idled at a stop light on the south bridge over Meadow Creek. A collection of found objects from our neighborhood had taken shape between the cement embankment and underside of the north bridge, maybe thirty yards away. The camp was hidden by railings and greenery, except to those of us who sat higher and bothered to look.

Whoever lived there didn't call attention to himself or cause trouble. If anything, he or they hid. I supposed our quiet neighborhood, Meadow Creek itself, offered safety from crowded homeless shelters or freeway tunnels downtown.

Movement straight ahead distracted me.

A heavy-set teenager's bare knees pumped above a child's bicycle handlebars. He approached on the sidewalk, the front wheel jerking side to side until he reached a slope and coasted past me at eye level. When his shoulder brushed the wing mirror, he smirked but stared straight ahead. His hair spiked over a tanned face, shiny with grime.

He dropped into the creek bed and disappeared.

“So that’s who lives there,” I said.

Meadow Creek runs behind our house. It’s home to mosquitoes that thrive in stagnant pools, rats that eat my bird seed no matter what I do to prevent it, and raccoons that rip siding off the eaves looking for shelter in our attic. Marshall saw a scrawny coyote lope out of the creek bed one morning before dawn. We both witnessed four baby armadillos scatter from under our patio and disappear over the bank. But mostly our bend of the creek is at the mercy of quick floods that wedge neighbors’ trash in exposed roots of our willow trees. I’ve found garden hoses there, Styrofoam cups, tons of plastic bags knotted around dog turds (Marshall’s term, not mine).

Marshall wouldn’t approve of the way I’ve let it go. Poison ivy vines thicker than my wrist twine up the creek willows now. I rarely walk back there these days. Meadow Creek is a painted mural on my sliding glass doors. It backs the weathered Adirondack chair where Marshall often inhaled cigars, swearing he didn’t.

Well. One thought leads to another now, doesn’t it. What would Janie and Mac think of that?

\* \* \*

Within days I spotted the teenager on my walk. He was walking, too, no bicycle in sight. He shuffled in my direction, head down, arms churning like a washing machine. He wore boots without laces and boxy shorts that looked square, cut off at his knees. He took up the whole sidewalk.

Marshall would have swung his long arms, clearing a wide berth for his own body, challenging this kid for right of way.

I stepped aside saying, “Good morning.”

He kept walking, said nothing.

God knows why I turned around and shouted, “Are you all right?”

“What?”

“Are you all right?”

He shrugged but didn’t look all right to me. Scratches lined hairless forearms, and scabs dotted what I could see of his legs below baggy shorts.

Poison ivy!

“Me? Sure.” He smiled, straightened taller, summoning a brighter version of himself for the benefit of an old woman.

I asked, “Where do you live?”

Marshall would have asked that question. Honestly, sometimes I feel like Marshall has possessed me. Like I’m supposed to carry on his part of our team’s work.

The teenager pointed over my head, toward the bridges. “Over there.”

*Anyone* who spends time with teenagers knows that his was an odd response. Most would have told me to get lost or worse. More likely I’d have been ignored. Plus, it’s a fact that teenagers in this neighborhood never walk anywhere and certainly not alone. If, on the rare occasion they stretch their legs, ear plugs hang from their ears to avoid talking to the likes of me.

So when this scruffy kid ambled on, I studied him. Probably sixteen, my great-grandson’s age, and he wasn’t going anywhere.

Even *I* was walking toward three thousand steps.

Not a minute later I saw a tall, skinny figure across the street, so dark that his skin blended into the neck and sleeves of his black shirt. Sun in my face prevented me from distinguishing his features, but his long stride accentuated continual head swiveling - up, down, up again. I wasn’t surprised that he ignored me. Since he remained across the street, I kept quiet,

but after he passed, I spun around to see that those two paced one another. Stocky white teenager led from a block away, sauntering, arms swaying. Tall black fellow glided at a safe distance behind.

Smart. Together, they'd be noticed around here.

Inspiration struck by the time I reached home. *Give some of Marshall's clothes to those homeless boys.* I gathered three shirts and a can of bug spray into a fancy Nordstrom's shopping bag so large that my donation appeared skimpy, barely covering the bottom.

I started over.

Into the shiny bag I layered: a pair of walking shoes; four oranges; a flannel blanket (they'd need it eventually); and a box of crackers. I stashed the full bag in the coat closet, just in case Janie dropped by. I fretted for hours and by late afternoon had doubts. First of all, the bag would look out of place on the weedy slope of the north bridge. Or someone less deserving might steal it. Worse, a mechanic at Quick Lube next to the bridge or even the homeless boys themselves might see me leave the bag there, and I wanted to remain anonymous.

At dusk Marshall's pickup lurched in second gear toward Meadow Creek, giving me a shadowy view of the familiar barricade under the north bridge. Their home.

I lost my nerve and sped home.

\* \* \*

All the next day I worried until Marshall's angry voice said, *For God's sake, Alida, just load it up and drop it off!* Decisively impatient with me, as always.

That evening I pulled myself together and patted the charged cell phone in my pocket at least five times before backing out of the garage. Marshall's Astros cap rested on the bench seat

for luck. Between shifts from second to third gear my fingertips skimmed across his sweat stains commingled with my own from gardening. I planned to wear it and hide my white hair.

A sticky note waited on the kitchen counter, just in case:

*6:40 pm Tuesday  
I've gone to the north bridge over Meadow  
Creek to give the homeless boys some food  
and clothes. Call 911 if you find this! – Mom*

Marshall understood, but Janie wouldn't approve of my adventure.

Despite a dim memory of the trip, I can say that the north bridge encampment was quiet. I aimed to follow the rut where the teenager disappeared on his bike but quickly found it too steep for my old knees. So I heaved the bag into deep weeds, out of view from the traffic above.

When I pulled into my garage a few minutes later, Marshall's hat rested forgotten on the passenger seat. So much for stealth or camouflage.

Marshall and I never covered windows along the back overlooking the creek because dense foliage obscured the view from houses on the other side. However, for the first time in thirty-six years, I felt a little exposed and locked my doors and closed all blinds facing the street.

I'd been pacing with excitement, unable to sit still, when the phone rang. Janie wanted to know how I filled my day. (*Wouldn't you like to know.*) Did I eat dinner? (*Too excited.*) What did I have? I lied and said "chicken-rice casserole."

Janie expects me to fail at single life without her father.

Once her grilling subsided, I hung up and called Mac in California. He's not much of a talker, like his dad, so I told him, "The gardens are flourishing, and everything is great. I'm feeling super, thanks for asking."

The call reminded me of when three-year-old Mac hollered from his bedroom, "I'm not doing anything, Mama," after giving himself a haircut.

*Well, Mac, I wasn't doing anything.*

I thought of nothing but the homeless boys and their grim lives under the bridge. Did they find the bag? Did they see me? I began to understand why arsonists return to watch the fires they set. When I gave in and drove by their encampment the following morning, it looked unchanged, although the bag was gone.

Marshall and I often donated to Salvation Army, but this was different. I'd seen the boys who claimed my Nordstrom's bag. I knew who'd wear Marshall's clothes and eat my food.

We shared a connection, those boys and me.

\* \* \*

Naturally, I did it again. I should have been ashamed to use another Nordstrom's bag, but I wanted the boys to know that the gifts came from the same person.

Janie calls such thinking "ego."

I smoothed Marshall's clothing into the bag and added cans of beans and chili and an old can opener - just in case. It weighed a ton, the handles dug into my fingers, but I dragged it along the weedy path at twilight, this time without dilly-dallying. When I turned to leave, something scraped across concrete followed by an Indian war hoop out of a Hollywood western. Several deep voices laughed. More than two. The noises hurried me up the rutted path to Marshall's Ford, but no one followed me.

I slept poorly and woke up during a dream in which I was a breathless child running up basement stairs in the dark. I was terrified of unseen hands grabbing at my ankles. I lay in bed, gasping and contemplating my actions of the past two days. If I were thirty years younger... If Marshall were alive... If my eyesight were sharper... Then, as long as Janie doesn't find out...

\* \* \*

A breeze caught my robe when I stepped out to get the newspaper. Unfamiliar clinking over my shoulder signaled straggly wind chimes drooping from the Japanese maple. Some threads blew freely, metal pieces hung from others. A piece of paper fluttered at the end of one thread. THANK YOU was written in clotted pen.

Marshall shouted in my head, *Christ! They know where we live!*

The wind chimes dangled in the courtyard for hours while I pondered what to do. Eventually, I placed the tangled strands on our patio table in the backyard, planning to hide them away later— a memento of my adventure.

\* \* \*

The wind chimes hung by my kitchen window the next morning, and it scared me. Why is the backyard so much more intimate than the front?

By 5:00pm, my doors held new deadbolts, and I moved myself upstairs to the guestroom despite the pain of climbing them. Grasping a flashlight in the dark evoked another time of huddling alone with lights off. Last Halloween. Travis had shouted, “Hey, Mrs. Reynolds. Do you know who I am?” from behind fangs and vampire make-up. I dropped a Snickers into his jack-o-lantern, guessing names of fictitious little boys, like Marshall had done the year before. He laughed, “No! It’s Travis!” That night I waited for Travis and his dad to fade down my walk before turning off the porch lights, and I cried in the dark while our doorbell rang and rang.

Don’t get me wrong. I did not cry while hiding upstairs, although tears might have broken the tension. It crossed my mind that Mac and Janie were right about my inability to live alone.

I fell asleep, bothered that the wind chimes dangled by the kitchen window, and awoke fretting. What if Janie saw them? I should take them down. But what if the teenager looked to

find them gone? Since I didn't want to hurt his feelings, I left the gift untouched and concocted a story to tell Janie if and when she spotted them.

\* \* \*

And she did.

Janie and I were having tea when she noticed the wind chimes. She leaned over the sink for a closer look. "Mom, what's that?"

I said, "Oh. Travis, the little boy next door, gave me that." I'd also developed an elaborate story about helping Travis with a gardening project for Cub Scouts, if Janie had questions. I knew not to volunteer information unless she asked.

"It's kind of tacky," she said. "But sweet. You going to leave it there?"

"For a while," I said. "It *does* make a nice sound in the breeze." I rinsed my cup, and she stepped out the back door, saving me from changing the subject.

Janie unwound the hose and turned on the faucet before I joined her outside. She often waters my hanging baskets, and I wish she wouldn't. I didn't fuss at her, but I like watering my plants myself.

"What's all this?" she asked.

God, I hate that tone. She keeps me on guard with her questions, expecting me to slip up.

Janie pointed to the patio table, distractedly wasting water on the walkway instead of showering my flowers. My daughter had noticed a spiral of river rocks encircling a pot of begonias. Stones trailed out to form a question mark about a foot long.

Something new!

"Hmm?" I bought time.

"These rocks," she said, still pointing.



“Oh, *those* rocks. I thought that you meant the table and chairs. You’ll remember that we bought the patio furniture before your dad got sick.” You see, there’s an art to evasion. “Yes. The rocks!”

She waited for me to answer her question.

I said, “Aren’t they lovely?”

“What are you doing, Mom... making a Zen garden?” To my relief, she smiled.

“You know. It relaxes me.” An accurate statement.

She seemed to accept it and started watering the hanging baskets.

Truth to tell, I’ve collected rocks my whole life. My kids grew up with small baskets of rocks throughout our house, gathered on vacations and either hand-carted or mailed back home to myself. You can imagine what Marshall thought about that! Even now, finger shaped stones from Montana’s Flathead Valley appear to swim across my kitchen window sill like a school of pale green fish. Mica, in jagged chunks from Colorado, sparkles throughout my flowerbeds.

Did the homeless boys know that rocks make me happy? Their design suggested as much, signaling a charming invitation to play.

Call me intrigued.

I left a sealed box (sorry, rats!) of juice, cookies, peanut butter, and bread beside the stone spiral. I wrote *North Bridge – Meadow Creek* on top with permanent marker.

The boys took the box during the night, stacking four flat rocks in its place.

And so it went.

\* \* \*

The boys and I have exchanged gifts in this way for several days now. At first I shopped for them and remained content upstairs, knowing that they’d take my gifts by morning. They

never bothered me, and each morning I had the pleasure of finding smooth river rocks piled in clumps or aligned in waves across the patio. The display resembled a stream bubbling into shallow pools.

On the drive home from Safeway today, the grimy teenager was leaning against the bridge rail where I first noticed him. He had on Marshall's striped polo shirt – one with a stitched logo that Marshall found pretentious and refused to wear. I glanced at groceries on the passenger seat next to me and longed to stop, hand this teenager the food. I wanted to chat, maybe learn his name.

But we don't have that kind of relationship, so I drove past him, slowly. He pretended to ignore the Ford.

And it wasn't enough for me.

Tonight I'm watching from Marshall's recliner with a throw tucked around me for camouflage. I must have dozed off because I wake as two moonlit figures, the stocky teen and a child, trot away toward the creek. He carries the box I left for them, but they hesitate, both glancing toward my house. A long braid whips with the motion, an earring catches faint light. The smaller person is light skinned, but definitely shows the ripe shape of pregnancy.

A third figure approaches the sliding door not ten feet away from me. He pulls stones from deep pockets, kneels, and lays a trail down my patio steps. He, a stooped man I don't recognize, peers into the glass. Moonlight glints off Marshall's jacket, which this man wears with collar up. He stares above my right shoulder and flicks his wrist below Marshall's cuff. Surely he can't see me in the shadows, but he nods deferentially, and I shrink into the chair, holding my breath.

He trudges to the creek bank where the others wait. All three hop into a gnarly pit behind my crepe myrtles, sure-footed like creek critters we've watched for years.

A tinge of sunrise appears through the trees before I'll move from Marshall's chair. I'm stiff from tense waiting for light and take a moment to straighten, gain my balance.

I will not touch the rocks – I never do. I do check that the latest trail down my steps allows me to pass. Yes, it does.

The growing maze reminds me of ancient art, mysteries without answers. Marshall would hate that part, but I'm all right with not knowing.

The newspaper thumps against my front door, but I stay put, preferring to dream with eyes open than squint at fine print. Meadow Creek, a leafy shortcut between the bridges and my home, is so lovely. Dangerously alive.

Then I remember there's a girl now.

She'll need a few things.