

The Lilacs

Sue had only lived at her new house for three months when the lilacs started sprouting. She was walking to her car one morning when she spotted the heart-shaped leaves poking through the ground. She sighed – it was never very long before they appeared, and her time was limited once they did. This house, she had hoped without reason, would be different. She had found a man who leaned in to listen closer and cupped her hand in his while she spoke. She knew the lilacs were indifferent to the rhythms of her life, but the man's eyes glimmered when he spoke so that it was easy for her to feign ignorance of the future. Just this once, she thought.

Sue had already unpacked her belongings when the lilacs shot up around the house with unnatural speed. She didn't have much to unpack. Over the years, she had left things behind during frantic moves from house to house. The entire art collection she had devoted her 40s to acquiring was surely devoured by now in one of her earlier houses. She had lost her children's boxes of old toys and discarded clothing during the very first move.

She was better at moving with minimal loss now. At the first hint of a lilac bloom, she'd start boxing up everything she had remaining: a few sultry romance novels, a futon mattress and some linen, some cheap silverware, a folding table, a couple of chairs, the single photo album that she had managed to save, and two worn throw pillows. Everything else she had ever owned would be lilac fertilizer by now.

This time Sue refused to pack her belongings as the buds began to dot her yard. She bought a grill and invited her sons and their families over for a summer cook-out. They were surprised to hear from her at all, and agreed. She bought a large pair of gardening sheers and the thickest pair of gloves she could find, and dug the lilacs out by their roots. On a whim, she burned them, drove their ashes to the city dump, and went to the store to purchase toys for her grandchildren.

She did not know her grandchildren very well, as she had lost touch with them during the lilac invasions. She figured the oldest would be around 11 and the youngest around 3 years-old. She hadn't yet met the youngest. She bought a plastic horseshoe set and picnic table that was so large she had to ask her new friend for help moving it. This was the first time she had a man over since she had kicked her husband out 15 years ago. Her armpits were sticky from anxiety and exertion as they sat on the bench admiring their work.

“What a lovely house,” he said, politely ignoring how sparsely furnished it was, “and those are such beautiful flowers. What are they, lilacs?” They were of course. Sue hoped without reason for just a little more time before they chased everyone away. She went grocery shopping with her new friend; they bought enough food for a week, went back to her place, and cooked dinner together while singing along to an old Eagles album he had with him.

That night, they rolled around her futon mattress together while the crickets sang of victory outside her window.

“Help me get a new bed tomorrow?” she asked as they lie wrapped in each other.

In the morning, lilac buds lined her entire back yard. A pile of dirt under a half-bloomed lilac sat where a plastic chair had been only yesterday. Sue said goodbye to her new friend and got to work digging up each one, leaving no trace of even a root. Again, she burned the flowers and took the ashes to the dump. She was exhausted and scratched up from the stubborn lilacs, but she didn't stop moving as she prepared for her family's arrival.

“Mom!” shouted her eldest son. “It's so good to see you! Where have you been, are you okay?” She hugged him tightly and tried to catch a whiff of his little boy cologne – blackberries, mud, and bubblegum. He smelled instead of laundry detergent and starch. His wife wore lilac perfume and embraced Sue with disapproval in her eyes. Sue saw herself as her children must then – she was so tired

from a day of yard work and a lifetime of running. Her dress was torn and dirty from her battle with the lilacs. Sue sighed as the children hugged her shyly, then each went off to a different corner of the yard with their cell phones. Even the baby had a tablet.

“I love your lilac bushes, how pretty they'll be when they bloom,” said Sherry. Sue smiled and said nothing. The lilacs bushes were lining the yard again and with tiny flower buds already dotting the shrubs.

“Anyone like horseshoes?” Sue asked. The parents wrenched the electronic devices from the children and herded them back to their grandmother.

“You don't see her much. Be polite,” Sue overheard her daughter-in-law admonish the 11-year-old. The children took turns tossing the horseshoes while trading eye rolls.

The lilacs grew around them.