

LANTANA

They finally found her. I'd been sick with worry for 3 days. She didn't answer her phone. Never responded to the knocking of her friend, whom I had called to go check on her. I had visited her 3 days ago and living 5 hours away I hesitated to just jump in the car and drive 253 miles. Especially since my Chevy Volt was 8 yrs. old and had more than a few quirky problems. I finally resorted to calling the Midvale police and requested a "well check". They didn't seem enthused.

A 62 yr. old woman with almost no health problems not answering her phone or door. What if she'd gone out of town for a few days? What if her phone was lost? What if she just wanted to be left the hell alone? However, I was weepy (faking) enough so they said they would check on her.

I loved visiting her. What a beautiful place her home was. Not extravagant, but tastefully furnished with subtle colors and unique artistic décor. Her paintings were splashes of color that stood out against the sea salt grey walls. She grew up painting in every medium imaginable. Progressing to tactile arts like thread, raised paper, and even created art with street junk. Street junk she defined as any interesting item she found on her daily walks.

When she bought her house the yard was a virtual wasteland. A pool was situated in the center of the barren yard. Its plaster was peeling and the bottom was a mush of green algae and soggy plastic bags.

The house sat on a corner lot well back from the road and was ripe with fruit trees. Whenever I visit I marveled at how people – anybody, anytime, - would walk across the front yard and pick oranges or mangoes or bananas right from her trees. By the time she had been there 3 years she had had an 8 foot fence built around almost the entire property – glorious privacy. In that time she had also created a garden around the pool that would rival Fairchild Gardens in Coral Gables Florida.

I was a year older than her and had always admired her strength and fortitude. She had raised 4 children on her own and gotten 3 degrees. We had gotten closer as we aged and whenever I visited I felt drawn to the peace and quiet, drawn to the time to reminisce, drawn to the laughter we shared, and even drawn to the many outdoor nurturings of her glorious garden. Drawn to put off returning to my life and remain in the contentment of familiarity, of love.

During my visit last week I slept in late, no demands, no should be, no go, just BE. This recent past visit I woke up at 10am in the quiet of the house. I knew my sister would be where she always was, sitting outside, coffee in hand, watching the sway and flow of the garden around her. I served myself a cup of hot aromatic coffee and headed to the garden. The morning was quiet, heat beginning to build, and the breeze abating to the sun's preeminence.

While talking she pointed out a section of her fence which looked over toward the neighbor's house. In a gesture of good will she had only built the fence 4 feet high there. The neighbor was pleasantly cordial and they had even solved some minor gardening dilemmas together. Recently he had purchased an unsightly boat and placed it right next to the opening in the fence. My sister had decided that that was not a pleasant view, it didn't compliment her serene garden at all. She directed my attention to some plants she had planted on her side of the half fence. She was pulling up a plant which was abundant in her garden and stealthily planting the single stems in front of the fence. She had managed to plant 5 of them so far and last night's rain would allow her to pull up some more to plant this morning.

I asked her what the plant was- Lantana. She pointed to other areas of her garden that displayed bunches of 6 -8 feet single stalk flower clusters of brilliant red, orange, yellow, and blue florets. Lantana grows so fast that in 4 weeks the stalks would be high enough to cover the view of the unsightly boat. So we explored the area for Lantana to replant. She had already pulled the single and double stalk ones and proceeded to pull a cluster. No amount of pulling would move the plant. Hoping to get a few stalks out we dug toward the roots only to discover that the root was a cluster of 12 or more stalks. No Lantana planting today, too many other things not to do, too little time to enjoy each other's company.

I had talked to her when I got home to let her know I was home safe. She had finished watering her plants and was on her way in to shower the dirt and itchiness off. Now I couldn't reach her and was waiting not patiently to hear from the police. Seconds, minutes, hours. Finally, a call. They found her in the yard at the base of an enormous Lantana plant. Her hand was still grasping the small hatchet sunk into the base of the plant.

It took me 4 hours to drive there. She lay in the hospital bed looking small and frail. The iron trellis that was leaning against the house had fallen on her, trapping her and the lantana. With her right arm and left clavicle broken, the trellis lay across her back for 2 days. In too much pain to move she floated in and out of sleep, not knowing if she would be found.

As I stood looking down at her sleeping face, for the first time in my life, I realized that one day I would lose her or she would lose me and I was struck with a life time of realization. She was my closest connection to my childhood. To memories that only the two of us could truly understand. To common experiences with our parents that drove us crazy and still needed to be rehashed. To the sharing of secrets, and regrets in life. She knew my hopes and dreams, my failings, and regrets. We shared more than blood connection, we shared heart, mind, and soul connection. All of this welled up inside me and I realized what a gift she was and how if she left this earth my

grief would be too much to bear. Her eyes opened and we smiled at each other. And I gave her the wisest words I have ever said to her, "I am older and you are not allowed to die before me!"