

THE GARDEN

A Love Story

My favorite time of the day is right before dawn. I enjoy the peace and quiet of a new day. Anything is possible in the beginning. The sunrises, here in the Pacific Northwest, usually aren't as beautiful as sunsets but setting suns are the end...and I don't like to think too much about ends.

Steilacoom, Washington is our oldest city, incorporated in 1854 while Washington was still a territory. It's on the tiny side, by today's standards, with only about 6,600 residents, with the history of a town that's seen a few things. Nestled along the waters of the Puget Sound, Steilacoom is a lovely, quiet place to grow old. Unless the soldiers at Fort Lewis are playing war games.

Our farmhouse has been in my family for generations. Built in 1860, this house has withstood storms, earthquakes, fires, and neglect. When Jack and I moved into the old farmhouse, in 1974, my parents, an aunt, and her two children called it home. That's a lot of people for one bathroom. Now, Jack and I are the only ones left.

The 1,300 square foot house is well built but unremarkable: big for the 1850s, a perfect size for an elderly couple in their twilight years. The property is the real star of this show. All but four acres sold off, most of the land is a garden. A glorious established, old, beautiful garden.

When I'm sitting here, breathing in the garden, I feel just as beautiful. The scents from the plants follow the breeze to the porch; filling me with a calmness I feel nowhere else. When wandering through the gardens, I feel at one with the residents of the wind. We have come to love each other and the life we have made together.

The garden is separated into sections and the section closest to the house is filled with flowers to attract bees, butterflies, and birds, especially the Ruby Throated Hummingbird, my favorite. Clusters of Pacific Bleeding Heart, Red Columbine, Common Camas, Orange Trumpet Honeysuckle, and others vie for my attention.

Further away from the house are the fruits and vegetables. Various onions, wild ginger, Pacific Blackberry, strawberries, cucumbers, broccoli, radishes, lettuce, Brussel sprouts (I cherish; Jack does not), and so many more, depending on the season.

Sprinkled throughout the property are carefully planted trees and bushes. The Red Alder, Western Crabapple, Red-osier Dogwood, Oregon White Oak, Red

Flowering Currant, Evergreen Huckleberry, and Salal. Nothing too big. At least not in my lifetime.

We used to have quite a few chickens but they became too much work. So, one day we gave them to a neighbor who provides us with a dozen eggs each week. You really can't beat a fresh egg. So delicious.

I'm sitting on the back deck in my usual spot, one half of our table for two. The deck flows naturally from the house, reaching into the garden, inviting me in. My beloved garden. I could sit here all day.

Jack and I have been married for fifty years. Mostly good years, a couple of bad ones but we stick by each other. We certainly can't stop now. Jack and I are very different people, with different backgrounds. But we are also so very much alike. When you find someone who loves you, the real you, don't let them go.

I'm an early riser; Jack is not. I automatically wake up when a suggestion of daylight around the corner is in the air, ready to tackle whatever the day has in store for me. I make coffee, shower, and get dressed first thing. I don't start drinking coffee until Jack gets up so I just sit and watch the garden, thinking and making plans.

Jack wakes up when he has to pee and he can no longer ignore it. This morning, Jack comes out in his pajamas and robe, hair a spiky mess, holding a big mug of coffee for himself and a smaller one for me. He makes a perfect cup of coffee, every single time.

"Hello, my love," he says. "You look lovely today, as usual."

"Hello, beloved Jack." I do love this man so very much. I wouldn't be the woman I am today without him. "Thank you, I know you love this sweater set."

"Yes, I do." Jack kisses me on the cheek, plants my coffee in front of me, and moves to sit down. "I would love to see you in a pair of jeans before I die, though."

"That's not going to happen, Jack. I don't own any." He mentions this every few years and maybe I'll surprise him one of these days. I don't like the way they make me feel: like I'm buried up to my waist in the garden.

“I keep hoping, is all. What’s on the agenda for today, Diane?”

“Today we mulch and plant our new tree.” I say with a smile. Every fall we plant one new tree and this year it’s a spruce. I’ve been looking forward to today for a month.

“Is that today?” Jack looks at me like we haven’t talked about this already. His memory is concerning me more and more. At 74, he’s not young but I can’t think of him as old. Jack picks up his coffee and drinks deeply. He has a way of drinking coffee that is wonderful to watch. Like he’s in love and not shy about it.

“Yes, we wanted to get it in the ground before my 70th birthday party on Saturday. That way we have time to clean up the mess,” I say, looking over at him.

“Oh, right. It does make a mess sometimes.” And then he laughs and the heavens open up and shine on us. The birds respond with singsong, always willing to join in on the fun. When I die, I want to come back as a bird.

“I’m glad you can laugh about it now,” I say, almost irritated.

“Of course, it’s been thirty years, Diane. I’ve gotten a lot better at mulch. And the Bobcat digs a hole as big as I need,” he says.

“Has it been that long?” It doesn’t seem possible. Thirty years? Jesus, where does the time go?

“Yes. Just let me finish my coffee and I’ll shower and go.”

“No rush, honey. The temp agency is open until 5pm.”

“I’m not going to use the temp agency this time. I didn’t like the last guy they sent us. I think I’ll go find someone outside of the big box DIY store.” Jack replies.

“That sounds good, honey,” I say.

We sat out on the porch for a while, watching the bees and butterflies, listening to the birds, drinking our coffee, and holding hands.

Our old farm truck drives up the windy road to the house and Jack and a young man get out. The young man slouches a little and moves hesitantly around the truck to stand in front of the house. His hair is long and slicked back, by hand. His clothes are streaked with dirt. At least, I hope it's dirt. He has a slight tremor in his hands but his eyes seem clear. He's carrying a backpack, probably all he owns in the world. He smiles at me and gives me a little wave. He's perfect.

"Hello," I say with a smile, trying to exude warmth and good humor. I can do nice.

"Hello, my love. This is Alex, a young man who can help us with the garden. Alex, this is my wife, Diane."

"Hello, Alex. Nice to meet you." I don't get up. I really don't want to shake his hand. The dirt under his nails looks as old as he is.

"Hi. Same." He looks around at the house and yard. "Do you two live here alone?"

"Yes, we do. We used to have family live with us but, slowly, over the years, they've all died." I say, adding sorrow to my voice.

"Yes, we're the only ones left now," Jack says, while looking at me. He smiles and winks.

"Aren't you scared to be alone?" Alex asks us.

"No, not at all. If it's our time to go..." I say while looking up at the sky.

Alex smiles and stands a little taller. "Right? Where do you want me to start?"

"Come with me, Alex," Jack says, moving toward the side of the house. "The tree is over by the greenhouse." I finally get up and the three of us move around the house and walk over to the greenhouse. I notice Jack is walking slower than normal and he found the cane he uses around company.

The tree is next to the greenhouse, the root ball still covered in burlap and wood. It's an impressive tree, one we've been waiting for a long time. It will look gorgeous in a few years.

"Wow, that's a nice tree. What kind is that?" Alex wants to know.

“That’s a spruce tree. We’ve been talking about having our very own Christmas tree out in the yard and we’re finally doing it this year!” I say because I have been so excited to plant this one. The fun we can have at Christmastime.

“Oh, nice.” Alex says.

“We’re planting it near the greenhouse because there’s electricity there for the citrus trees,” Jack says while pointing to the few citrus trees in pots.

“Are we planting those too?” Alex asks, slumping over again.

“No, those are the lemon and lime trees I was telling you about,” Jack says. “We can’t put those in the ground in this climate. Those have to be rolled into the greenhouse every winter and kept warm.”

“Oh, okay. Sounds good. Just the one, then,” Alex states.

I step away from my husband and walk over to an Adirondack chair nestled amongst the citrus trees. I like to be close, so I can watch, but not that close. Jack takes Alex and shows him where the hole should be dug and explains how the Bobcat works. After a few minutes of practice, Alex starts digging the hole.

The Bobcat was a great investment. What used to take the men, and they are always desperate and dirty men, hours to dig with a shovel, now takes minutes. Another one of Jack’s many brilliant ideas.

Once Alex is finished, Jack has him go over to the compost bin and bring a bucket back to line the bottom of the hole. The compost bin was specially made for us, about seven feet long, three smaller bins attached together, on a mechanism that makes the heavy load easier to turn.

Alex takes the bucket of compost over to the hole. “Should I just throw it in?”

“Actually, I would love it if you could jump down into the hole and mix that in with some dirt down there,” Jack states, gently, now holding a shovel.

Alex hesitates for a moment and looks over at Jack. He sees a frail old man leaning on the shovel for support. And he decides, right then, that Jack is harmless. Alex jumps down into the hole and reaches for the bucket. He throws the compost down and turns around to grab the shovel. He pauses and turns back around reaching

down, bringing something small and white close to his face. “Hmm...this looks like a finger.”

The side of the shovel hits Alex in that sweet spot between his neck and skull. The sickening sound still makes me jump a little. Even thirty years later. Alex disappears into the hole, the earth swallowing him up. I pick up my crossbow from behind a lime tree and walk over to stand next to Jack.

“Did you hear that?” Jack asks. “Got ahold of that one.”

“Yes, you did. That was quick.” I raise the crossbow and let it fly.

“I think he’s dead, honey.” Jack admonishes.

“I just want to be sure. I can still see my father crawling out of the hole.” A tremor runs through me and I push that unpleasant memory back down. That one made me buy a crossbow.

“After we eat lunch, I’ll plant the tree and drive his phone and backpack over to the lake.” Jack says. “I’m starving.”

After dinner, Jack and I sit on the back porch, looking out over the beautiful flora, sipping a delightful pinot noir. A perfect ending to a perfect day.

“What are you thinking about, my love.” I ask Jack who’s unusually quiet.

“Life and death.” Jack reaches over and takes my hand. “Promise me you’ll take care of me, when I forget too much.”

“Can we not talk about this right now? Can’t it wait?” I plead. I don’t want him to die. What will I do without him?

“Of course, my love. Just promise me.” He says. I look over at my husband, the one person I love without reservations. My soulmate.

“I will do as you wish, my love. When you forget me, I will take care of you.”

And I do.