

## Roots

I unraveled another stick of gum. “This is just too ridiculous.”

“We didn’t go through all this crap today just to cradle our ‘nads,” he replied.

“No, Seth, really,” I said, chomping conspicuously. “I can’t. Not again.”

“That’s too bad,” Seth said, “because two men are needed tonight.” He twitched like a racehorse in the starting gate. After a guttural cleansing, he sailed a luge out the window. “And one’s right here. Let’s do this!”

He guzzled the remains of his Monster, wiped his mouth in the crook of his arm, and then darted from the red minivan. When I heard the edge of the old shovel rub against the spade, I realized Seth was serious. I skulked out from my seat, my butt sore. The captive was in the back, swaddled in a tattered light brown beach blanket. Each gripping an end, we heaved the behemoth, the weight of an average man, if the man was round and woody and spindly, spilling dirt, mulch, root, and worm onto that dark, desolate street – evidence that surely would convict us as shrubby thieves.

The ordeal with the azalea started four or five weeks ago – a month prior to bloom time. One Friday afternoon in the middle of the spring semester, Mother had summoned me home from college with an emergency. She was a fleshy woman, divorced for more years than married, with brown hair, a thin mouth, and pale, freckled skin. She usually wore a one-size-too-small cotton sweatshirt of various pastels with kittens or floral patterns or hearts. But that night of the summons she was too distressed to even dress up, surprising me in faded pink pajamas and worn

blue slippers. She peered over the top of her spotted wire glasses, cradling for comfort the crimson container of cheese doodles. “Here’s dinner,” she said hurriedly, handing me a fistful of doodles. “Now have a seat so I can tell you the problem. Seth knows already.”

At twenty-four, Seth was three years older than me. My not-really stepbrother inhabited my basement. His blind obedience seemed so simple. As a soldier, with the command from a whistle, he would be the first out of the trench, which never made sense because he really had no ambition. The basement arrangement had lasted for almost a year. I didn’t like his dad, but what did that matter? Most of the guys my mom dated were losers. When I arrived that evening, Seth tried to hug me, but I backed off and offered him some pound cake. He was the accelerator, and I was the brake. Taller than me by four inches, Seth was sturdier and darker, with shallow cheeks and a bronze exterior. In a wrestling match he would pin me, sure, but he was uncomplicated like microwave popcorn – press a button and step back. Now he rocked at the head of the dining room table.

This was the emergency: Uncle Reggie sold the estate. Now the ashes of my grandparents belonged to some crazy old lady. “I didn’t even see this coming,” my mom said.

“We’ll get it back for you, Ma,” Seth said. “Don’t worry.”

He didn’t acknowledge the kick from underneath the table. He was jittery even then, a dog waiting for a tossed Frisbee.

There was no agreement in the real estate contract to ‘extradite the azalea from the premises.’ The old woman who bought Uncle Reggie’s property was a retired nursery specialist. She even cited the azalea as a unique specimen that would “showcase God’s radiance’ come spring.

“Uncle Reggie was always a douche bag,” I said. Mom slapped my wrist. That’s one maxim that eternally abides with my family: any nasty thing about a family member is probably true, but it’s quickly denied as blasphemy if ever spoken.

The ashes of my grandmother had been held until the death of my grandfather. Aunt Betty, the wife of my mother’s oldest brother, Nathan, claimed she heard the whispered deathbed wish of my grandmother. As legend persists, my grandmother wanted her ashes mixed with her husband’s and then sprinkled on the azalea bush in her backyard. The azalea was the centerpiece of the yard, especially in the spring, and Mom-Mom, with her Irish white hair and soft skin, was personified in that plant. The azalea thrived there in that acre of paradise among the concrete wilds of Southwest Philadelphia – struggling to maintain its grace amidst rapidly approaching hell. The azalea grew ten paces from the eternal rusty-squeaking-slamming back door – the yard a testament from bygone days of backyard baseball, homemade lemonade, clotheslines, and pigeon coops. When my grandfather died, his homestead was sold, and so we dug up the azalea and planted it at Uncle Nathan’s house. There was a ceremony, private and intimate and pagan. My family doesn’t have the courage to commit to any charge of religious affiliation. And maybe it’s the reason no one can say goodbye. If there’s no heaven, at least there’s this azalea. I wrote up a eulogy where I compared the roots to the strong roots of the family. But would these roots withstand constant battering and picking of shovels?

Then five years later, Uncle Nathan died and Aunt Betty soon remarried and moved to Arizona. So the azalea was moved once again; this time to the middle son, Uncle Reggie, who felt obligated to shelter the wandering tombstone. Obligation burrows deep in my family. The spot on his estate was lovely: atop a rolling hill that wandered serenely down to a creek under

vestiges of mountain laurel, dogwood, forsythia, and wild wisteria that hung from the trees as a purple curtain. I never asked my mother why she didn't elect to plant the azalea.

"And let's just say we do get the bush," I said. "What happens then when something happens to you?"

"And you want your poor mother in her grave already?"

"Why can't you be on Ma's side for once?" Seth said.

"Technically, I'm the only one of *Ma's* side," I said. "Aren't you just a boarder?"

"I'm here everyday taking care of the place, you know."

I gazed around the cluttered room with the dust bunnies. It was always my responsibility to keep up the home, to dust the stuff, to dust around the stuff, and to manage the stuff that would never be used again. When you're nine, and the only man in the house, you become The Man of the House, but it's only the laboring part of Man. I never made any man-like decisions. Even now I was neutered. Maybe that's one reason I didn't like coming home. There was love in my house, for sure, but it was suffocating love.

"Will you be able to do this for me?" Mom asked, handing me five one hundred dollar bills.

"Sure, I'll do what I can."

"What if she wants six Benjamins?" Seth asked. "May I raise the stakes?"

"Then we're all crazy," I said. "It's a damn azalea. Not the Tree of Knowledge."

"You don't seem to understand the situation," Seth said, slowly twirling the hairs in his nose, pulling and plucking. "This damn azalea means everything to Ma."

He was right, of course, but why did it mean everything?

The azalea was planted around the back of the house in a secluded alcove surrounded in a wreath of white impatiens. But we decided on the front door. While walking nervously along the serpentine stone pathway, now cleared of crabgrass with the cracks filled, my nose tingling with grass spores, I hoped that this would really be no big deal. It may have been easy to say a polite no over the phone, but to say ‘no’ while face-to-face with two honest-to-goodness young men on the behalf of a distraught mother, well, that took nerves of granite.

Seth and I had gazed stupidly at the red door. It had been freshly painted. Someone had used cheap brushes because filaments of the brush were woven vertically into the paint. It was probably cheap Uncle Reggie.

“You knock,” Seth said.

“Why should I knock?”

“The dude with the money has the power,” Seth said. “And aren’t you in charge of this situation?”

I nodded reluctantly and rang the doorbell. Seth pushed the bell two more times.

“What the hell you doing?”

“She’s old,” Seth said, “Maybe she can’t hear it. Anyway, I love Westminster.”

“Ringing it three times won’t make it louder,” I replied.

“Let’s just take the bush now,” Seth said, walking away.

“No, we need to handle this the proper way.”

I gazed around the yard. Seth slipped off and gazed into windows. There were several cars parked around the back, back by the azalea, back across the wooden bridge that ran over a stream. There was a tan Nissan Altima with Maryland plates with a bumper sticker for the Azalea Society of America.

“They’re all around the back,” Seth called, “A whole mess of ‘em!”

I imagined a gaggle of these grayhairs clustered arm-in-arm around the azalea like some ancient ritual at Stonehenge. I was the infidel attempting to steal the cornerstone of their religion. What Mom wanted me to do seemed sacrilegious. At least I didn’t have to make the first gesture as an older woman approached cautiously, away from the gazebo where six or seven other women sipped tea from white chinaware. She wore a sky-blue frock with wide white collar with a white necklace. Her hair was short and white, with a wave up the front, about two inches stretched. With her hands folded in front, she smiled as she approached Seth. In an eerie way she reminded me of my mom-mom.

“Can I help you boys some?”

Seth pointed to me and said, “He’ll talk to you all about it.”

I apologized for interrupting her soiree – a deliberate word that denoted a gentleman.

“You’re here to steal my azalea bush!” she declared in a tone decidedly removed from my mom-mom.

Seth nodded with his tongue pressed into his cheek and muttered, “That’s right.”

I waved my hands furiously, approaching her, pleading, “No, no, not steal. No even to take. We don’t have the right to take.”

“I knew it,” she said. “I knew it.”

“Listen, my mother is quite distraught at not having the azalea.”

“Well, then she should have discussed the matter with her brother,” the lady said, her face reddening. “If she doesn’t have proper relations with her sibling, it’s no concern of mine.”

“My Uncle Reggie, is, well...”

“Your Uncle Reggie is a tool,” the woman said. “But that’s your hardware, not mine.”

“But her mother and father, my, my... Mom-mom and Pop-pop are buried...” I brought out my iTouch to show her pictures of me in a bunny outfit in front of the azalea. Another one was of grandma pushing my mother on a swing when my mother was three. The azalea’s in the background, but then the old lady declared, “Well, you can lay a wreath now and again, and say prayers, as I would think that’s right and proper, but...”

The confrontation excited Seth. He pointed to my pants. “We have money,” he said. “We’ll pay you for the bush.”

She was walking away now. She waved her hand back and forth, emphasizing the “plant was not for sale.”

Seth searched my back pocket for my wallet. Like a satire of modern dance, we Foxtrotted for control of the wallet in front of the azalea.

“We can offer five hundred dollars!” Seth shouted. “Five hundred dollars for a bush!”

“If you boys had enough tomfoolery, then you best be on your way.”

Back in the minivan, tired and embarrassed, I offered a post-op with Seth. He said it would just break ma’s heart not to have that bush. “We could threaten her,” Seth suggested.

“Indeed,” I said.

“To spite her, we could lather that bitch up with Round-Up.”

“The plant or the old lady?” I asked.

“We could come back every day and pray, and she’ll get so tired of our worshipfulness, she’ll just break down and give us the damn bush,” Seth said.

“Are you prepared to convert and drive an hour up here every day?”

“If that’s what it takes,” Seth said.

Then after about a half an hour, we decided to scour the area for a replacement azalea. Since it would've been fruitless to find a replacement in a garden center, we drove through old neighborhoods where the homes seemed at least fifty years old. We found a few viable alternatives, but the color leaf was wrong or the shape was wrong or the size was just wrong. And then of course we didn't know if the homeowner would agree to allow us to rip open a garden. After all, it could've been someone's grave as well – or the grave of some dead pet turtle. So we had lunch. My mom had packed us each a hearty sandwich of turkey and cheese on pita, and it was at Tyler State Park that we discovered a replica for our beloved azalea. Seth paid the two landscapers in the park one hundred dollars each for us to pose as landscapers and thereby effectively digging up the azalea in a remote section of the park. We placed the azalea in the back of the minivan and zipped back to Uncle Reggie's. This time the lady was in her front yard bidding her final guest goodbye.

“If you boys don't stop pestering me,” she said, “I'm gonna have to call the cops.”

“Just take a look at what we have for you,” Seth said out the window.

The lady walked toward the street where her driveway began. I opened the hatch and dirt trickled out. I pulled on the blanket, and I heard it rip. My hands and arms had turned a different ethnicity from digging, but I was proud of how much of the root ball we were able to extract.

“We can swap,” Seth said. “This one's a dead ringer.”

She inspected the leaves. “And it'll be dead soon if you don't water it! Where did you boys get this? Where did you boys *steal* this fine azalea from?”

“We paid someone two hundred dollars to take the bush,” Seth said.

“What was his name?” she asked.

“What?”

“What was his name? she asked, enunciating each syllable.

“Diego,” Seth replied.

“Diego? What? Where was the property? What road? What town?”

Seth stuttered, not able to lie fast enough. I stepped in and apologized. I promised I wouldn't bother her again. I promised to replant the bush ASAP. It would be a shame to kill one of God's green living wonders. She said she was leaving soon for a trip to visit her son in South Carolina, and she didn't want us moseying around her yard while she was gone, which was rather stupid for her to tell us, but maybe it was rather stupid for us to even consider swapping without her knowing. After all, she knew all about azaleas, as she was the founding member of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Chapter of the Azalea Society of America. She introduced us to Mrs. Simmons who had driven up from Bethesda, Maryland to help her start the chapter. I reached out to shake, but my hands were filthy, and I rubbed them on my tan shorts. As we drove off, Seth fuming at “the old bitty,” she called out to make sure we placed that “beauty of an azalea back in the earth where it belonged.”

So I drove back to Tyler State Park and parked by the concession stand. I filled my red thermos full of water and watered the azalea, soaking the plant and the blanket. Meanwhile, Seth had the idea of swapping the bushes at midnight. “That old bag wouldn't know we did anything. The two are so alike.”

“What?” I replied. “Are you that stupid? She's the authority on azaleas. She'll know we switched the bushes?”

“Even if she does,” he said, “how could she find us? And if she could, do you think she'd really press charges against someone who just switched bushes? The cops would laugh at her.”

I picked up the shovel and told him to get back inside the van. I was going to re-plant the bush. But then a cop car appeared in the parking lot, and I decided that we'd better split. What would he make of two young men watering an unearthed azalea in the parking lot in an out-of-state minivan? So after dinner at the diner and two brown ales, we drove back to Uncle Reggie's. But first we stopped at Home Depot to buy mulch. Earlier in the day Seth was smart enough to steal some mulch from around the azalea bush. Part of me thought that some of Mom-mom and Pop-pop lingered in the front pocket of Seth's jeans.

So there we were, at midnight, carrying the substitute azalea. We made sure we hurried. I tripped on the curb and lost my balance. The shrub fell on my ankle. Some of the mulch tumbled on top of me. I then smelled the mint and sneezed – a sneeze that could've tripped security alarms. Oh, those allergies. I ripped the wild mint from the bush and told Seth that it was impossible to stop the growth of wild mint. I dug into the ball of the bush and ripped out a large root with numerous tumors.

“That old lady will sure catch of whiff of that,” I said.

“We'll just have to rip it all out,” he said. “Then we'll make herbal tea.”

“You don't understand,” I said, peddling my feet back and forth, my back aching. I told Seth to drop the damn plant. I needed to rest and think. Seth rushed back to the van to fetch the shovels while I sat beside the azalea. Why was I doing this? I was no thief. I was just a serious scholar trying to keep a seriously depressed mother from stepping into the dark side. Why did I resent my mother so much? The azalea wasn't the cause of Mom's weariness. I didn't know the cause of her unhappiness. Divorcing Dad didn't make her happy. It didn't make any of us happy. Perhaps the divorce reshaped the puzzle pieces – and we were all doomed to remain

disconnected. Of course when Dad died, the puzzle would always remain incomplete. I grimaced. It was a trite analogy. I then pictured the painting that hung in my grandparents house, that now hangs in my own house, like so many artifacts from that era past, of the boy with the cowboy hat riding the red tricycle in a huge backyard, eternally waving his kerchief at us. The mischievous grin seemed to mock us all. “It’s so good to be young,” he seems to saying.

All I knew was that I couldn’t swap the poor lady’s azalea. After all, the lady loved the azalea. Perhaps she was doing us a favor. I was thinking this as Seth passed me with the shovel and rake. That’s when the alarms sounded and the lights around the house flashed and then the water sprinklers gushed. We screamed to get the hell out of there. Seth tore after the van while I frantically pulled the azalea across the driveway, leaving a trail of dirt and mulch. Before anyone showed up, we were able to get the azalea into the van. The inside of the van smelled like a flooded nursery.

“What a rush!” Seth said.

“That’s all you have to say?”

“So what do we do now?”

“We drive home and dump the damn thing in that hole you made in the backyard.”

“Do we tell her it’s not the right one?”

I just nodded my head and wiped my nose on my jacket.

Seth laughed. “Oh, you lying sack of shit.”

And that’s what we did. We got home at one in the morning. I switched on the back porch light, and we planted the azalea by the concrete planter that came from Mom-mom’s backyard. Begonias used to grow there in hearty compost. Around the planter, I would play

fickle Zeus with my magnifying glass, burning bodies of red ants, then zapping the bodies of black ants, and then scorching the grass around the killing fields of Troy. Mom-mom would kiss me on the head, would tell me to be careful with playing God, and would pour me a nectar of sparkling lemonade. What would she tell me now? Was I playing God? The outer lip of the planter was now cracked. Seth had been using it for an ashtray. Because smoking was never allowed in my house, all the men my mom dated after her divorce also used it as an ashtray. Me, I don't smoke. I'm just a two-pack-a-day gum chewer, a leftover, my mother claims, from my oral fixation stage. It seems I bit my mom hard on the nipple while nursing and my mom's sudden pain and recoil traumatized me.

Seth stopped to smoke a butt. He ran the garden hose into the hole and kept the roots wet while I piled on soil. Except for weeds tolerant of Weed-B-Gon, nothing grew in my mom's postage-stamp backyard. I don't know how many times I told her that one bag of one dollar topsoil won't grow anything. I knew enough to keep the top of the ball exposed by at least two inches. Then we mulched the azalea. Mom never heard us. At least she never came down.

"Do you feel bad lying to your own mother?"

"I don't know," I admitted, collapsing in the rusty chaise lounge.

Seth smoked another cigarette. I fumbled for another stick of spearmint. "My dad and your Ma," he said. "They haven't been getting along too well."

"I kind of thought so," I said. "But how would I know?"

"If anything happens, do you think we'd still hang out?"

"Do we hang out now?" I asked.

"You should see your mom more, you know."

"I know," I said.

“How come you don’t come around?”

Seth probably smoked another cigarette while I thought of his question. I pictured my mother in the upstairs bathroom, listening. That’s what I would do. As a boy I would lay down, my ear inches away from the kitchen corner or tucked under the lip of the locked door, and eavesdrop; I learned so much of the adult world, but I was powerless in that world; I remember the moment when she told my grandmother she was leaving my father.

“I’m still a child in this house,” I told him. “I don’t like feeling like a child.”

Seth nodded. “You chew loudly.”

“I can’t help it. Just ask Freud.”

For four weeks my mother never suspected anything. At least she never let on. Maybe she couldn’t bear to think of her own son as a liar. Life for me went back to normal; I went back to college and Seth went back to the basement. But during those four weeks, the plant wasn’t doing well. When the plant bloomed, mom compared pictures to the plant. The color of the bloom was wrong. My mother had difficulty asking me the question: “Was this the right bush?”

She knew it wasn’t right. Soon the surrogate plant died. My shame led me back to the old lady at Uncle Reggie’s. I knocked on her door.

“Where’s your brother?” she asked.

“He’s not my brother, or even my step-brother,” I said. “I don’t know what to call him.”

She nodded. “You left some tools here,” she said.

“I’m sorry about all that,” I said. “And you were right, the azalea did die.”

She had large oval glasses rimmed in light red. She wore eggshell earrings. It was the middle of the afternoon, and she looked proper and sane, a sensible aesthete.

“There are azaleas in Japan that are hundreds of years old,” she said.

“I saw a bonsai of an azalea once,” I said. “It was old. I’m not sure where.”

“Longwood Gardens,” she said.

“Yeah, my mother sang there with the choir at Christmas and my grandma was there, and it was shortly after that she died. They both had angelic voices.”

She walked around me and closed the red door. She walked down the stone path toward the azalea. I followed. The azalea was in full bloom: five petals of soft pink. I asked her the Latin name of the bush.

“*R. serpyllifolium*,” she said. She showed me a branch. “This is called the green calyx. It’s at the base. There are generally five petals, five or more stamens, and one pistil, at least on the Higasa and Kobai.”

I laughed. “My mother just likes it because it’s pretty in the spring.”

She nodded, but I knew she knew there was more to the azalea than beauty. I walked around the azalea and recalled my own memories: racing headlong around the bush until dizzy, flushing rabbits from the bush and inspecting the den, watching the bees in an orgiastic dance in the satin-like sheets of the blooms. Not a bad way to spend a day, or an eternity.

“So why did you come back?” she asked.

“To see what I could do for my mother.”

She walked into her shed and came back with a pair of garden scissors and a container filled with water. “This is what I can do for you,” she said. “I can give you a clipping that will grow roots, and soon you’ll be able to plant the clipping in acid-loving soil, and with proper care, you’ll have the plant again.”

“That would be nice,” I said.

Then she told me that she thought about us more than I realized. She didn't want the plant moved again because it may not be able to take the stress, but she said that she would bequeath the azalea in her will to us, and so we could have the azalea back. I nodded, thinking it was a generous offer, and it was more than I would've done considering the stress we gave her. I thanked her and gave her a hug and wished her the best for her Azalea Society. I took the clipping back to college. When I washed dishes, I examined the roots in the Newcastle Brown bottle. It became quite the conversation piece. I kept the secret from Mom. I don't know why. I just didn't want to rip open the wound again. Maybe I didn't want her to remain chained to the memories. If the azalea was so important, why didn't she take it? Why was she the last in line? Perhaps the azalea represented marriage in the ideal – stability, love, and eternity. It was what her parents possessed, but escaped her. Maybe she didn't feel worthy of the azalea until she realized she was the last.

It was soon after that I came back with the clipping that Mom broke up with that live-in boyfriend. Seth moved out with his dad. I didn't ask for the details. I was used to the revolving door of my mother's relationships. The head of the table was once again mine, but I never sat there again. Mom asked me why.

“The view is better from this side,” I said. “I can see out through the window.”

During the summer I went back to Tyler State Park where we had stolen the azalea. It was there I planted the clipping – love duplicated. It would be my own shrine. And as far as the azalea at Uncle Reggie's, well, I think it should remain there. The roots could use the rest.