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How My Garden Grows

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THE BRIGHT AND SUNNY DAY UPLIFTS my downtrodden spirit, especially when I glance over to the blooming lily and the lingering spirit of my recently departed, Albert. My melancholy sprouts wings and floats away, perhaps heading to Heaven. As usual, it's been a long, harsh winter. I relish the heat, the sweat pouring from my

face, the perspiration staining the armpits of my blouse. I shouldn't have worn white, not while working in the garden, but I like the pure and clean color.

I lean against the shovel and swipe at black flies. As if hibernating, the dratted beasts appear when soil is first disturbed. In retaliation, they attack whatever or whomever is in their

way. "Go away," I shriek. "I'll ignore you if you'll ignore me," but of course, they don't listen.

My greatest joy is tending the two gardens, one full of hardy hostas alongside my house, the other by the shed where the lily now flourishes.

The hulking hostas overpower the larger garden, leaving room for nothing else. I didn't think the plants would grow this season, not with the strange spring that alternated between hot and cold, interspersed with torrents of rain. Just the other day, the plants were mere shoots trying to see the sun; now they're full-fledged adults that even I couldn't kill. They'll live forever, these variegated, huge-leaved plants. Life isn't hard on them.

The other garden patch, where it's rocky and the sun doesn't shine, is shaded by the shed and a large oak tree with tumbling acorns in the fall. The shed is actually a dilapidated outhouse Albert converted into a gardening shed. How he loved that shed; how he surely enjoys it still! Although nothing ever grew there but brambles and weeds, Albert, about two years before his death, planted a lily there, off to the side where there were fewer rocks, where he thought it might survive. Survive is about all it did, but it never bloomed.

Albert had never wanted two gardens, especially not one by the shed, so I'm unsure why he planted that lily there. I had always wanted another garden, but there was nowhere else to put one except by the shed, and Albert would never let me use that area. He said it was his—his shed, his area. "When I depart from this world, you can do what you want with it," he had said.

So, within days after Albert's death, I decided to utilize the space. First, though, I had to dig up the spindly lily stalk, which had become

hidden by weeds. The bulb, a mass of brown intertwining roots, looked as dried up as my dear, sweet Albert had: grizzled and drawn, wrinkled and forlorn. But there was no way I'd part with the only plant he planted, just as I wasn't going to part with him.

I asked next-door Ned to bring over his rototiller, and he tilled a small section by the shed. After he finished, it was still full of rocks, and I wasn't about to get on my hands and knees to clear them out. The soil there isn't as fertile as by the hostas, but good fertilizer nourishes harsh soil, so I simply had to wait until I had the perfect fertilizer. Once I did, and after I had applied the fertilizer, I replanted the dried-up bulb still attached to the dead-looking stalk. Within a few short days, the stem turned a vibrant green and bloomed its magnificent flower.

In the end, Albert would have been proud of me for utilizing the patch by the shed, not to mention keeping his lily alive and flourishing. On his deathbed, he admitted his mistake in planting it there, saying there wasn't enough phosphate in the soil, but I made a promise to nurse his plant back to health. Perhaps he had given me a subtle hint.

I don't have to worry about fertilizing that garden again, nor do I have to weed or clear brambles. Except for that one lily with its large bloom, as white and virginal as my blouse used to be, nothing else grows there.

I often go to the lily patch where I'm close to Albert. I go there today because I need a break from weeding. My fingers dig into the rich soil. After a rain, I poke my toes into the dark brown mixture, and I swear I feel his fingers massaging my feet as he often did after my hard day of housecleaning.

That's how my garden grows. ❖