



Tending Zinnias

Scott Ragland

She timed plantings so that something would be in bloom year-round — daffodils and forsythia in the spring, petunias and lantana in the summer, mums and pansies in the fall, Lenten rose and camellias in the winter. “There should always be color,” she’d say.

A YOUNG COUPLE ARRIVED MID-MORNING to look at Sarah’s house, their child, a small boy, in tow. Talbert watched from the window above his kitchen sink, careful to remain hidden, standing to the side, his stooped frame concealed behind the curtain. The couple reminded Talbert of the young people he saw populating beer commercials he endured while watching Braves games, fresh-faced and beautiful, the thick-haired husband in bright green golf trousers and penny loafers, the lithe-limbed wife in a pastel skirt and sleeveless white blouse, the bronze hue of her arms seemingly deepened by the sun’s contrasting light. They looked innocuous but alien, distant as the moon.

The couple followed their real estate agent up Sarah’s flower-lined driveway, the husband holding the boy’s hand, the wife pausing to examine one of the waist-high zinnias, leaning down to smell its scent. Sarah had tended the zinnias and petunias right up to the end, watering the beds at dawn before the summer heat could sap the moisture from the earth.

Sarah had moved—or been taken, really—two months ago to a town on the Alabama coast to be near her daughter’s family.

She was living in a one-bedroom retirement village apartment. Disdainful of email’s digital distance, she’d written Talbert several letters, her crumbling cursive denouncing the heat and the mosquitoes: *One either leaks away or is eaten alive. It’s just as well I have no place to garden.*

Talbert watched the young couple follow the realtor into Sarah’s house, which, like his, was a two-story brick colonial with green Italian roof tiles and heart-of-pine floors. He’d lived next door to Sarah for almost fifty years, moving into the now prestigious “Inside the Beltline” Raleigh neighborhood long before Research Triangle Park commuter traffic spawned I-440’s existence, when newly appointed NC State textiles researchers could afford to live in such places. He and his late wife, who’d died in her sleep just three weeks after his retirement party at the university—an irony that still haunted Talbert each time he saw a European travel package advertised in *The New Yorker*—had reared two boys and a girl, who’d spent as much time next door with Sarah’s children as in their own home. He could still picture them there, lined up in Sarah’s kitchen waiting for her to hand them each a napkin-wrapped brownie



with walnuts, the rich smell of baking chocolate still wafting from the oven, or perched in the lower limbs of her magnolia tree, raining seed-pod hand grenades down on unsuspecting Nazis who passed below. But their backyard touch football games never again strayed near Sarah's garden after she'd admonished them for snapping the stalks of her cosmos with an errant pass intended for the back of the azalea-marked endzone. "Kill them and I kill you," she'd told the children, only half-joking.

Talbert imagined the young couple inside Sarah's house going from room to room, invading each space like barbarians, oblivious to the home's history, its character, interested only in what the house would mean to them, the R-value of its insulation, the capacity of its closets, the life expectancy of its roof, the ability of its wiring to accommodate cable modems and home theaters. He'd gone to Sarah's to celebrate the births of her four children, to

mourn the death of her husband. He'd gone to replace a leaking faucet gasket, to get an egg and cup of buttermilk to complete a corn bread recipe, to enjoy a mug of hot cider in her kitchen on cold February nights when they'd talk of the spring, his fading but "good-for-the-fresh-air" golf game and her garden plans. "Caladiums in the side yard this year," she'd say, "and perhaps vincas rather than impatiens around the water oak. Impatiens are so fussy." Talbert knew Sarah's soul. To the young couple she'd be no more than a disembodied name on a housing contract.

One evening just a week before moving to Alabama, Sarah showed Talbert the retirement village's marketing brochure that her daughter had mailed, photographs of tidy apartments and rec-room cribbage games, listings of "lifelong-learning classes" taught on-site by Gulf Coast Community College faculty members.

"I suppose it's inevitable," Talbert said. They were drinking sun-brewed tea in Sarah's screened-in side porch, a slight breeze making its way through the wire mesh.

"Yes, I suppose," Sarah said. "Like the decomposition of buried flesh."

She sipped her tea, her face fading in the twilight gloaming.

"You'll take care of my garden, won't you?" she asked.

"Yes, of course," Talbert said.

"You won't let it die, too, will you?"

"No, of course not."

Talbert struggled now to lift himself from bed in time to see the morning hustle-bustle of other people's lives, their commutes to work, their carpools to school, their jogs and baby-stroller treks through the neighborhood, each motion filled with purpose. Watching them made him feel like a bit of roadside litter tossed from a passing car, a hamburger wrapper emptied of its contents and no longer of use to anyone.

But before Sarah had moved away, Talbert had enjoyed rising early, welcoming the day with the assurance that he had someone to share it with, someone who knew the rhythms of his moment-to-moment existence, how he muted his television set while watching NC State basketball games and instead listened to Bach's Brandenburg Concertos on his antiquated turntable, how when telemarketers called during dinner selling home security systems or discount long-distance plans he politely fended them off by saying he was an old man who'd be lucky to live until bedtime and therefore had no need of their products.

Talbert would see Sarah tending her flowers each morning on his way to get the newspaper

from the end of his driveway, the street lamps still glowing in the faint light of the early dawn. Sarah paused just long enough to say "Good Morning," remaining on her knees among the beds, before returning to the task at hand, her pewter-gray hair bobbed behind her head so the otherwise long, rebellious strands wouldn't interfere with her vision as she worked. Later she came over to Talbert's for a cup of coffee. He always made three cups—two for himself and one for Sarah, who watched her caffeine, and diet in general, more closely than he did. They sat in his kitchen, the morning sun beginning to take hold in the window above the sink, and talked of soaring prescription costs and sinking morality and dying friends. Together they worked the crossword puzzle in the *News & Observer*, relying on him for baseball clues and her for everything else. They were two old people in need of comforts, and their comforts included each other.

After finishing her coffee, Sarah would return outside to her flowers. Talbert would watch her through the window, her canvas-gloved hands plunging a spade into the earth, plucking an invading clover from the beds, treating the foliage for black spot. Sarah had lived for her flowers. "They're all that I was once," she liked to say. She timed plantings so that something would be in bloom year-round—daffodils and forsythia in the spring, petunias and lantana in the summer, mums and pansies in the fall, Lenten rose and camellias in the winter. "There should always be color," she'd say.

Now that Sarah was gone Talbert did his best to care for her garden, following the detailed instructions she'd penned in a spiral-bound notebook, dutifully dead-heading any wilting blooms so new growth could flourish,

watering each day even when the forecast predicted rain. But being alien to gardening nuances, he worried the worst should circumstances of weather or blight force him to stray from her guidance. And what about when he was gone? Rotting away in the ground or warehoused in his own far-off retirement village cell? His children all lived in distant places—California and Illinois and Ontario—their roots sunk deeply enough into the soil to claim it as their own. It would make far more sense for him to go to one of them than for one of them to come to him. And what about before then, even, when he was simply too old for the task of caring for Sarah’s garden? Already he found the work more and more difficult, the bending down, the digging, the gripping of trowels and clippers in his time-clawed, knuckle-gnarled fingers, the loading and unloading of forty-pound bags of pine bark mulch and top soil, his ancient, weary body aching at day’s end and no longer finding relief in a hot bath because he dropped off now at any moment as if anesthetized by ether and feared falling asleep and drowning with no one there to discover his water-bloated body.

But he couldn’t abandon his pledge to Sarah. He was all her spirit had left.

The mail arrived and Talbert went to retrieve it from the box at the end of his driveway. Among the utility bills and supplemental health insurance offers was a letter from Sarah. She’d marked no return address but he recognized the scrawled handwriting that sloped down across the envelope as if the strength of her fingers waned with each stroke of the pen. He began to tear open the

letter as he walked back up the driveway but stopped when he saw the boy emerge from Sarah’s house, scamper down the steps, and run into the front yard. His parents and the real estate agent came out and lingered for a moment on the stoop, and Talbert could hear the wife saying how the house was “just lovely,” how the rooms were “just perfect for us.” The husband nodded in agreement, slipping his arm around his wife’s waist before descending the steps.

“Hello,” the wife said to Talbert as they came abreast on the two bordering driveways, the zinnia bed between them.

“Hello,” Talbert said.

“This is a lovely neighborhood.”

Her voice was pleasant but fast-clipped, as if she had much left to say in her life and was hurrying to get to it.

“We like to think so.”

“Did you know the owner?” the wife asked, nodding toward Sarah’s house.

“Yes, very well.”

She grasped a zinnia by its stem and pulled it toward her, the crimson blossom bursting from her fist as though she’d given it life. “She must have loved flowers.”

“Yes, she did, very much.”

“Who’s taking care of them?”

“I’m trying to.”

“Well, you’re certainly doing a fine job,” the wife said. “You might want to let up on the water, though—see how the leaves look like rust? It’s a fungus. It’ll kill them.”

Talbert leaned down to look. “Yes, I see. Thank you. I’ll remember that.”

The wife smiled. “You’re just being overly conscientious.”

“You must be a gardener.”

She smiled again. “I try, too.”

“Don’t let her kid you,” the husband said. “Her thumb’s green as grass.”

“My grandmother gardened,” the wife said. “She taught me a few things.”

“I suppose you could say it’s in her roots,” the husband said.

They all smiled.

The wife freed the zinnia and held out her hand. “I’m Becky Hudson.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Hudson,” Talbert said, shaking her hand.

Her grip clasped firm and sure, and in it his strength seemed all the more diminished. “I’m Talbert Blount.”

The husband introduced himself—George—and they shook hands.

“Do you like the house?” Talbert asked.

“Oh, yes,” the wife said. “Very much. It’s lovely.”

Talbert asked what had brought them to Raleigh, and the wife said they both wrote code for a Cary company that made 3-D rendering software. She said the company had “sent us South” after relocating its operations from Hartford.

Talbert had never heard of the company but nodded his head and said something about the lure of lower tax rates.

“It’s just as well,” the wife said. “The climate here is so much nicer. You must be able to garden year-round.”

“Yes, I believe you can,” Talbert said.



“We hope to be here a long time,” the wife said.

“It’s good to settle down.”

“Perhaps we’ll see you again.”

“Perhaps.”

The boy was swinging from one of the magnolia’s lower limbs. His father called him over, and they all got into the real estate agent’s car at the curb and rode away down the street. Talbert could see the three of them sitting in the back seat, the wife staring back at

Sarah’s house through the rear window. He watched until they’d disappeared around a curve before he climbed the stoop steps to his house, one hand clutching the mail, the other grasping the railing to steady himself.

Talbert sat at his kitchen table, drinking his second cup of coffee, and reading

Sarah’s letter. “Although the Alabama weather is as horrible as ever,” she wrote, “I must admit that all this humidity does wonders for the vegetation. I suppose there can be nothing green without pain. By the way, how is my garden doing?”

“Fine,” Talbert said out loud. “I believe it’s going to do fine.”

He didn’t water Sarah’s garden that day, or weed or prune, instead staying inside to watch a Braves doubleheader and nap on the couch in the den, his bones grateful for the rest. ❖