

I shook his hand. "Thank you."

"Want some more advice?" He looked me in the eyes. "Complaining and dwelling on what you and she are missing helps no one, least of all Ruth." He held his hands up, palms toward me. "I know that's easy for me to say, not having a wife in this situation. But isn't being positive more beneficial than being negative? Ruth deserves help in raising her spirits. Think about it and remember that support group I told you about."

Be positive? I was angry at his interfering and barely able to speak while going home, retrieving the chair, setting it up, lifting Ruth out of the car onto it.

When I headed for the new ramp I'd built to the front door, she grunted, shook her head, and grunted again. Somehow I knew she wanted to go into the backyard first. So I took her there, right to where I'd found her lying on the ground.

The place lay in deep shadow. Thinking how tragic everything was, I stood behind her and let her look.

She made a sound so I came around in front of her. She was crying. The first tears she'd made since the stroke. She shook her head, moved her right hand, gripped my shirtsleeve, and tried to say something.

That made me look around with her eyes. The flats of flowers she'd bought were in bad shape. We'd had some rain or else they'd have all been dead. I took the hose, watered them, and Ruth's eyes lit up.

I patted her hand. "Sorry I forgot about them. I'll put them in the ground this afternoon."

Which I did, and she was there, watching me the whole time.

The flower jobs became mine after that. I knew they pleased her. They got her outside. They put color into her life and, I'll admit it, into mine.

Four years later, Ruth's habit is to sit on the porch and watch me do lawn work. When it comes to buying and planting the flowers, she helps. I wheel her around, and she picks out what she likes. Back home with them, she manages to indicate that she wants the orange impatiens along the front of the house to match the cushions of our outdoor chairs. I wheel her out by the beds so she can watch me plant the stuff up close. Occasionally, she suggests something by pointing and nodding and making a noise, like go deeper or don't cover with so much dirt, and I do it.

Otherwise the work and the decisions are up to me, and I've grown particular. Two years ago I told her no more pansies around the big pine. Pansies don't last in hot weather. They die and then we have bare spots where they were. This year it's red impatiens on the outer ring around the pine tree. White begonias on the center ring. And nearest the trunk, tall snapdragons, which I use for bouquets on the kitchen table.

Everything freshly planted gets Miracle Grow once a week for the first month, heavy watering every second or third day. Still no chemicals on the grass.

I sold the agency to be home with Ruth all the time. She has a lot more reason for being negative than I have, but she's not.

Some evenings, we sit on the porch and watch the day's final flashing of the blooms. We hold hands. I talk, and she grunts and coos and aahs. On her good days, we eat dinner outside with the beauty surrounding us.

I know she likes to watch me out here on my knees, weeding the flowers, keeping the edges of the beds in good shape. Every now and then when she waves to me like that, I know there's nothing more important than planting flowers in our yard. ❖