

DALE WILLOUGHBY

Wrestling with Shadows

PENNY WEAVER LOWERED her head, stormed into the house and let the screen door slam. Joan, her daughter-in-law, was washing a glass at the kitchen sink. She appeared ready to protest, but no sound came out of her open mouth. Penny hurried past. In the hallway, Matthew, her oldest son, stood by his office door and frowned his grim satisfaction toward her. Kelly, the youngest, glanced at her from his chair in the living room. She watched the colour drain from his face. He had been talking to Aunt Beryl who looked up at the same time, but seemed to miss what was happening. Curtis, Penny's romantic hanger-on, half stood, but Penny stopped him with a gesture and he slumped back into the armchair. At the bottom of the stairs, she executed a military right turn and ran all the way up.

She slammed her bedroom door, collapsed into her wingback chair and cried. From start to finish, the evening had been a disaster. After a twenty-year absence, her husband Charlie joined her and the family for a barbecue and, in three short hours, managed to shatter Penny's life. Again. It was as though someone had spliced a horror ending onto a romantic comedy.

After the barbecue, the family discreetly vanished into the house, abandoning Penny and Charlie to the garden, presumably to give them a chance to talk privately. Penny pressed Charlie to explain why he hadn't come to their son's funeral. He made excuses. She pressed harder. He said he didn't believe Arthur was his son.

All at once, Penny felt as though she were drowning in her prize-winning garden. Flowers seemed to be swimming around her, swirling and swooping in a watery attempt to pull her under. She gripped the edge of the bench to regain her balance. On the far end of the bench sat Charlie. Though he was fifty-one, he looked like more like seventy-five. Worse, he looked like he had only weeks to live. Cancer, she guessed, but no one mentioned the word all evening. Even so, she regrouped, left him and his

cane alone in the garden, and fled to her bedroom. She fell asleep feeling sorry for herself because he hadn't come for her, and ashamed of her feelings because, after all, he was the one who was sick.

Hours later she woke up shivering and discovered she was lying on top of the covers in her pyjamas. She no longer felt sorrow or shame. Now she was mad. She wandered to the window, opened the curtains and raised the blind. Though her garden was still in darkness, it was more visible than it had been at midnight. A clutch of late-blooming yellow tulips looked more like unearthed slugs than flowers, and reminded her of the sound of crystal shards grinding into ceramic tile. Charlie had swept the vase off the counter and sent it flying across the kitchen. It hit the tiles and smashed to smithereens. Then he strode across the kitchen, sports bag in hand, and ground the crystal fragments into the ceramic tiles. The memory of that sound had the power to evoke every painful detail of the night he left.

By degrees, as she stared down on the dark garden and remembered, she became overwhelmed with a mammoth idea. She pulled a pair of jeans on over her pyjamas and threw on a sweatshirt. While she tiptoed into the hallway, she kept an ear cocked for sounds from Joan and Matthew's bedroom.

Touching first the wall and then the railing, she crept down the stairs and felt her way into the kitchen. Through the window, she saw light reflecting off the curved wrought-iron of the garden bench. The site of Charlie's stupid accusation. A gush of adrenalin suffused her muscles and made her body twitch. Was that what Charlie felt the night he smashed the vase? Would he have regretted his rage the moment he slammed the kitchen door, or would he have nursed it all the way to California? Was she feeling his rage in her veins?

She stole out the kitchen door and glided across the deck. Down here, it was colder and darker than she had expected. But it wouldn't be dark much longer. She rubbed her arms vigorously, and made her way along the path to the tool shed. When she yanked the door open, a scurry of animal noises made her jump. She slammed it shut and waited. It had to be mice or squirrels or birds. Surely, she could handle that. She pulled the door again, slowly this time, and hearing nothing, reached inside to feel along the wall. She knocked a hat off a peg and swore, but continued to feel around until she found a shovel. She snatched it out, and slammed the door.

At a bed of irises, she shoved the shovel into the moist soil. Bending low, she levered the handle until a large clump of earth and irises came away. She tossed the shovelful and heard it hit the lilac bush. A few lilac branches snapped, and then the clod thudded on the earth with an ooph! Too heavy.

Her second shovelful was smaller and lighter, and this time it flew beyond the lilac tree. When it came to earth, she felt the thud in her bones.

When the irises were gone, she paused to catch her breath. If she didn't slow down, she would collapse, and at sunup, they would find her spread-eagle over a rose bed, foaming at the mouth like a mad woman. She had to rein in her rage and keep up a workmanlike pace.

Roses were hardier than irises and their roots were trickier. At one point, she caught herself hacking furiously at a tangle of roots with the edge of the shovel. She paused and took stock. The roses would have to wait. She switched to a section of bedding plants, virtually rootless things, and grew methodical about how she scooped them up and where she threw the earth.

She checked the sky and guessed it would be a good hour or more before the sun's rays would come slanting over the backyard fences. She was afraid she might come to her senses before she was finished. She might even weep over the dead flowers and call the whole thing off. No, she wouldn't. She wouldn't let herself. There was no going back. As she eased the shovel into the soft soil, she muttered, "Damn you, Charlie Weaver," and was body-checked by a heightened sense of occasion. It was as though someone had knocked the wind out of her. For some minutes, she worked fast and cursed Charlie with every shovelful.

"Damn you, Charlie Weaver," she said and let fly an uprooted tangle of phlox and earth. It came down with a thud on the patio slabs. She rested on the shovel and panted. In the east, a sliver of pale light pried open the edge of the sky. First light already. She would never finish in time.

For twenty years, she had poured everything she had into this garden—her time, her money, her energy, her hopes. Every hour here, and there had been thousands, had been nothing but futile preparation for Charlie's return. Again, she felt body-checked. What an idiot. Even the lilacs were here because he said he liked them. She couldn't stand the smell. Rage took hold of her and she threw a shovelful with an extra surge of energy. It felt better than sex. It flew over the fence, thudded onto the sidewalk, and sprayed across the grassy boulevard. She felt criminal and slightly giddy, but crammed with life.

"Damn you, Charlie."



Joan lay in bed wondering about the glow in the hallway. Her clock radio said 4:30, but it looked later. Matthew breathed with a viscid quasi-snore that had been waking her up in the small hours more often lately. She

slipped out of bed, and crossed to the door. She tiptoed into the hallway and pulled the door ajar.

Something was wrong. Penny never left her door open at night. Worse, she had forgotten to close her curtains. She crept into Penny's room. The bed looked empty so she whispered Penny's name and patted down the blanket. She reached for the curtain and saw a movement in the garden. She stared for several moments, trying to make sense of the flurry of activity. Shadows seemed to be wrestling with other shadows. Then she recognized Penny. She was working in the garden, shovelling, or weeding, or something. But, of course, she couldn't be weeding this early. No. She wasn't weeding. And now she could see. Penny, dressed like an escapee from a nursing home, was digging up flowers and throwing them helter-skelter across the yard.

She took a moment to catch her breath before she rushed downstairs. In the front closet, she fumbled for a jacket and groped for a pair of boots. Without turning on any lights, she slipped out the kitchen door and onto the deck. Neighbourhood streetlights gave her a view that made her heart clench in her chest like a fist.

Penny's hair was wild. Twigs and stems clung to her clothing. Her pyjamas hung below her jeans and puckered out below the sleeves of her sweatshirt. Dirt was caked on her boots and jeans. Had Charlie done this? Last night? Penny's suffering was more profound than ... certainly deeper than... And Joan had complained last night, had been flippant about Charlie's visit. Penny grunted as she hoisted another shovelful of earth. Joan edged close.

"Penny."

Penny faltered and, for a couple of seconds, stared at Joan from hollow black eyes. Then she glanced at the eastern sky, and sent the shovelful flying across the yard. Before it settled, she stooped for the next load. A flood of compassion rushed through Joan. Penny's pain was visible in the unusual tilt of her neck. Up close, she looked like King Lear going mad in the storm. God, how she loved this woman, this outlandish earth mother, this baffling mother-in-law. She hurried to the hat shed, found a shovel and returned. She stood beside Penny and waited for an okay.

"I'm helping."

Penny nodded and paused to catch her breath.

Joan lifted a shovelful and tossed it four or five feet. It landed close by with a heavy 'phut.' Penny watched and nodded again. There was enough light now to make eye contact and Joan grinned at the warmth she found in Penny's smile. Warmth directed at Joan. Penny had not refused her help. Joan made another lacklustre toss before Penny interrupted.

“Watch me. Take it back farther, like this. You’ll get more distance.” She demonstrated with her empty shovel. “Like a swing. Back, forward. Let the shovel do the work.”

Joan practised a few times and then sent a load of earth flying against the upper prongs of the fence.

“Way ... to ... go!” Penny clapped and Joan believed she would have climbed Mount Everest for her at that moment, would have in fact gouged out Charlie’s eyes if Penny had suggested it. She wasn’t sure she was a full member of the Weaver family yet, but this was closer than she’d ever been.



Revived by Joan’s vitality, Penny started in again. When she returned to the roses she had abandoned earlier, the roots gave her the same trouble as before. She hacked at them for a few seconds and stopped. They were not going to give up without an epic struggle, and she didn’t know whether she had enough stamina to finish. She raised the shovel over her shoulder, and, out of the corner of her eye, saw that Joan was watching.

“Damn roots.” She swung hard, but the shovel bounced off. Joan came alongside and poked at them.

“Hey. I know.” She led Penny to the back of the tool shed. Matthew’s tiller was there under its plastic cover. The first year Matthew bought it, he tilled everything in sight. Since then he tilled only the beds of annuals. Penny had seen him use the machine, but had never tried it herself. She was sure Joan hadn’t either. They yanked the plastic cover away, stared at the machine, and then at each other.

“I don’t know how it works,” Penny said.

“How hard can it be? Come on. Let’s give it a try.”

Penny brushed hair out of her eyes. “What about the noise?” Planting and weeding had always soothed her, but they never provided the satisfaction she felt now. Devastation seemed to be as compelling as creation. Perhaps it was a necessary first step in the creative process. Joan jerked the tiller back and forth.

“It’s really noisy,” Penny said.

“To hell with the noise.”

Penny glanced across at Linda’s house and grinned. “Right. To hell with the noise.”

Together they manhandled the machine into the middle of the yard and studied it. Penny felt useless. She shrugged and let Joan take over. In

the dim light, Joan crouched to read the instructions printed in numbered steps beside the levers and buttons.

“One step at a time,” she said.

After several false starts, the motor caught, roared, coughed, sputtered, caught again and roared until the ground trembled. Joan shouted something Penny couldn’t make out. The tiller was deafening.

Joan went first. She wrestled the machine around in the direction she wanted it to go, pulled a lever and followed, stumbling and laughing. It chewed up an already ruined bed with ease, but whined and threw sparks when she clipped the edge of the brick path. She muscled the tiller to the right, mouthed a string of words Penny was glad she couldn’t hear, and steered toward a bed of violets. Lights came on in nearby houses. Penny ignored them.

The tiller was a wonder. It chewed through the earth like a mythic monster, spitting out twigs, flowers, stalks, leaves, and petals, lifting them up, grinding them down, and burying them without a trace of conscience. Joan finished off another bed, and set it up for a run at the marigolds. The tiller idled. Joan beckoned Penny over.

“Your turn.”

Penny nodded. If she didn’t take a turn, the entire battle might lose its meaning. She wrapped her fingers around the handles and felt the vibrations run through her arms and shoulders. Joan tapped a lever on the handle and shouted, “Squeeze this.”

Penny squeezed it and the machine lurched. She panicked and let go. The tiller jerked to a stop, but continued idling.

“That’s good. Just follow it. Squeeze and follow.”

Once more, Penny gripped the handles and squeezed. The tiller lurched, but this time she held on tight. In a couple of minutes, the marigolds were mulch. Stems, leaves and blossoms were shredded and buried and her adrenalin was up. She had found her second wind. With each new zone of devastation, her mood soared

At length she faced the same rose bushes that had defeated her earlier and manoeuvred the tiller until it faced the offending bush. She let it idle, took several deep breaths, and studied the exposed roots. She looked at Linda’s tallest tree to check the sun’s progress. No sunlight yet, but there, just as she might expect, was Linda, arms akimbo, framed in her living-room window, glaring. Penny pretended not to see her, squared her shoulders to the machine, tilted it forward, and squeezed. It churned into the tangle of roots. She kept her legs wide for balance. She was a Sherman tank. Nothing could stop her.

Then at another rose bush, the machine balked. Penny yanked it back, got it roaring, and tried again. The tiller whined, balked, and coughed, but finally chopped through. The remaining stems went down in jerky spasms of agony. Penny released the lever. The machine idled a few moments and stalled. Joan was beside her in a moment, but Penny staggered away. Her arms felt disconnected from her body. She dropped to her knees.

“Enough. That’s enough.”

Joan crouched beside her. “It’s okay, Penny. You did it.”

“We did it, both of us. And that thing.” She pointed to the tiller. “It finished the job.”

Sometime during the destruction, the garden bench had toppled. It lay on its back with clods of earth covering its slats. Its wrought iron armrests stood like empty bookends. As the sun’s rays slanted across rooftops and backyard fences, it came to Penny that her rage was gone.

“Enough,” she said.

Joan helped Penny to her feet and embraced her. “You’re one tough broad, Penny Weaver, one really tough broad.”

Penny took stock. The garden looked like a war zone. Every flower was down, chopped, beheaded, buried or partly submerged in rich dark loam. White cyclamen petals looked like broken bones poking up through the soil. Sunlight picked out dozens of shades of dead and dying petals.

“Perfect,” Joan said. “It’s perfect.”

Together they walked over the earth-covered path to the back of the yard. Penny spoke softly and without humour. “Charlie, Charlie, thin and gnarly, How does your garden grow?” She wiped her eyes. “Poor Charlie. Poor bloody Charlie. And I was fool enough to think he was coming home for me. I’m such an idiot. It had nothing to do with me. He came home to die.”

She sat in the dirt and leaned against the back fence. Joan dropped down beside her. For a few minutes, they said nothing. For the first time, Penny noticed her own clothes. Her shoes and jeans were filthy and her pyjamas protruded from her sleeves like a clown’s ruffs.

“Look at us,” she said. “They could have us committed and nobody would say a word. We must look as mad as the wind.”

Joan laughed. “Maybe we are, Penny. Maybe we are.”

A police car appeared and crawled beside the curb. A policewoman in the passenger seat scrutinized them. The screen door slammed and Matthew, dressed for a day in court, hurried to the cruiser. He lifted his feet to avoid getting dirt on his dress shoes. Matthew and the policewoman greeted each other like old friends.

“We’re not mad,” Penny said. “They are.”

“Maybe we all are,” Joan said.

In fact, Penny thought, the whole world had gone mad. You could be suffering the untold agonies of a shredded relationship, or the torture of burying one of your own children, and everybody politely turned the other way. But get them out of bed before sunrise and they call the police. When the cruiser drove away at last, Penny waved, but the officers didn't appear to notice.

Matthew turned toward the women sitting in the dirt, and without making eye contact, let his glance slide across the fence above their heads. He scraped a speck of mud off his shoe, and picked his way around the house on the public sidewalk. They had embarrassed him, and Penny knew they would pay for it in all kinds of little ways. It was the great irony of Matthew's life. The harder he tried not to be like his father, the more like his father he became.

Penny suppressed a laugh. “You're right,” she said. “We all are.”

They looked at each other for several seconds, and when they could no longer control themselves, they doubled over, rocked back and forth, and shook with quiet laughter.