

BRUCE PRATT

Gardening

EVELYN PEEKED AT HER HUSBAND squatting in the garden and rolling the remains of a mosquito between his thumb and index finger. She stared as he extracted slender, root-bound tomato plants from a flat, set them into a raised bed, thrust wooden spears naming each variety into the dark earth, and firmed the sun-warmed soil with his hands.

Evelyn slapped at a black fly on her neck and lost her hat. As she bent to retrieve it, she recalled how that morning Adam had complained that the ratty, straw boater was an old lady's hat, its pink ribbon soiled and stained, the end as ragged as a skinned knee, and that it was the only thing about her that looked old. As he'd regarded her clad in one of his faded dress shirts and her soft jeans, he'd said she might, save for the hat, be taken for thirty.

Evelyn remembered earlier springs when they gardened barefoot, he bare-chested in gym shorts, she cutoffs and a bikini top; his shoulders reddening in the sun, her sleek legs mottled with freckles and insect bites. At the end of the day they would hose off their filthy feet, and drop their dirty clothes by the back door. He would make drinks while she started the shower. When they'd dried each other off, they would lie naked on the bed sipping wine or gin-and-tonic, he dabbing witch hazel on her insect bites, she rubbing lotion into his sore muscles.

In those years, the garden sprawled to the edge of the woods; a fenced oasis with four paths, ever spreading as they broke virgin soil each spring. Their cultivations expanded with energy, but, in time, ebbed away as they abandoned those crops which demanded the most effort. Soon, there was not time for ordered beds of potatoes, hills of watermelon, or long rows of sugar beets, nor a need to preserve them for winter. Once, they froze quarts of beans, peas, and spears of asparagus, and canned sweet corn as the first cool nights of early autumn wizened the frost-rimed stalks. They'd tended soldierly lines of radishes, broccoli, and cabbage that erupted in the sunny

spaces, kale, spinach, and lettuce thriving in beds shaded by bee-singing crabapple trees. Now the vegetable garden had shrivelled to three double-dug beds, humped like slumbering whales, the old furrows yielding to woody shrubs and creeping ground covers.

Adam set the last of his plants. As he bent to pack the loose soil, Evelyn glimpsed the pale line running from the cleft of his buttocks up along his spine and envisioned all his other wounds: the hard slash through his eyebrow, the zipper-scar on his knee, the stitched welt on his shoulder where the surf had ground him into a barnacled rock, the crescent-shaped line across his slim belly where they had removed his malignant kidney, nubby pink memories she'd often traced with her fingertips. She tried to envision the scar she could not touch, burned across his heart, a wound she had inflicted but believed she had been forgiven. She understood that his shoulders, back, and balky rib ached from the digging and kneeling and bending, but knew not to mention it.

Adam rose to his feet and stood as if admiring the precision in his work. "Remember when we needed everything we grew?" he said.

Evelyn paused from her digging and said, "I do. I remember blanching beans one whole Saturday, Charlie and Amy complaining that we'd tortured them by making them pick all morning. We froze twenty quarts. They were a godsend that winter. Now we don't even run the freezer."

"It's a shame," he said. "I looked into it awhile back. Lots of mildew."

"Your parents gave us that freezer?" Evelyn said.

Adam thought a moment and said, "No, that was the refrigerator. We bought the freezer with our Sears card."

"I'd forgotten that," she said.

Evelyn freed her hair from a knot at the base of her neck, and as she gathered it back up said, "I miss the sweet corn the most."

Adam picked dirt from his nails. "You can get good corn at the farmer's market. I'm not sure why we go through this anymore."

"So you can walk here in August and marvel at all you've done," she said.

"I'm too old to marvel," he said.

A quick, dry wind stirred the loose dirt. The fledgling tomato plants bent like communicants at the rail. Evelyn put her shovel down and bent to wrest a rock from a new day lily bed. "My father used to say that the only native New England crop is rock. We've tilled this garden for thirty years, stoned it each spring, and added enough seaweed to build a ski mountain, yet these damn stones keep coming to the surface. I can't get this one without the crowbar."

"I'll get it," he said. "I need to turn the hose on anyway."

Adam went to the shed, fetched the long slender bar, then opened the spigot. The hose stiffened and uncoiled as water surged toward the nozzle.

One rock begat another. It took Evelyn most of an hour to rip out several stones the size of a man's head. As she broke the lilies apart, Adam shovelled manure and peat into each hole, then watered the dark mix. The lilies planted, they rested.

Adam massaged his side where a twice-broken rib pained him when he was tired. Evelyn winced for him. "Sometimes I wish we'd let this all go back to grass. Isn't like we'd die of starvation," he said.

"You're the one who spends half the winter with the *Johnny's Select Seeds* catalogue," she said.

"We could hire a kid to mow it," he said pulling his damp T-shirt from his chest. The sun arced toward noon.

"Know what would be nice?" she said.

"What's that?" he said.

"A new bench and crabapple trees. I miss the bench you made, and a shady tree in the middle of the garden keeps the lettuce from bolting."

Adam recalled the angry winter he'd built the old bench, hand planing the cedar planks and using the fragrant shavings to ignite the woodstove each morning, and the long shivering hours in the draughty shed cutting the pieces by hand and sanding them to an exact fit. He picked up some small stones and tossed them into the woods. "We could buy a wrought-iron bench. It would last longer, and it will take a long time for a tree to grow enough to shade the middle of all this. That's why the lightning hit the old one," he said. "It was alone here."

"Can't you buy big trees at the nursery?" she asked.

"You'd need a backhoe to plant them. It'd tear everything up," he said.

"Couldn't we do it by hand?" she asked

Adam kneaded his bad shoulder. "Look how long it took to dig the rocks out for the lilies. Jesus, Evelyn, take half a year to dig a hole as big as you'd need."

Evelyn took off her gloves. "I miss making jelly," she said.

Adam stared at the low spot where the crabapples had been. "You need two trees to get fruit. You know that? When the first tree died, that helped kill the other one."

"We could get two smaller trees and have apples in a few years," she said.

"Sounds like a lot of work."

Evelyn scratched a bite on her leg. "I miss the blossoms as much as the apples. You know it's spring when they bloom."

"More leaves to rake in the fall," he said.

A robin pulled a worm from the freshly turned soil by the lilies. A thin line of blood ran down Evelyn's leg. She licked her finger and wiped it away. She said, "You don't know about the time frame for sure. They're always coming up with new varieties. We need some mulch hay anyway. Let's go to the nursery and see what Sam says."

Adam exhaled a deep breath. "I thought the plan was to simplify," he said, "Besides, I don't trust Sam and I can't stand his gold tooth or that stupid ponytail. He'll tell you anything to sell us some trees."

"He's never lied to me," she said, "Let's at least look."

"Today? It's nuts in there on weekends."

Evelyn smiled, hands on her hips, eyes fixed on her husband. "When did you get to be such a pissy old goat?" she said. "It won't take long, and it'll make me happy. I'll get my purse, you pull the truck out."

Adam liked driving the old pickup he'd bought to haul supplies for the garden, though he disliked going out when the village and the stores were crowded, having no patience for lines or traffic lights. On weekends, he preferred to venture out in the very early morning to gather seaweed on the beach, or cast for blues when the tide was right.

Adam drove under the arched entrance to Bower's Nursery, circling the lot three times until he eased into a space vacated by a small sedan with an open trunk full of perennials. He began to roll his window up but Evelyn said, "It's too hot. Don't lock it."

The fruit trees stood near the far back of the lot, the apple beyond the peach, plum, and pear. Evelyn scrutinized the green labels zip-tied to each sapling. "Look at all these varieties, honey," she said.

"I thought you wanted crabapples," he said.

"Not necessarily. It would be nice to have something you could just reach up and eat."

Adam studied the trees. "Never heard of half of these," he said.

Evelyn adjusted her purse on her shoulder and scanned the lot. "I see Sam, he'll help us," she said. She waved to a short, tanned, wind-burnished man who slithered his way through the clogged aisles toward them.

"Hello, Mrs. Milton," Sam said, removing a pair of aviator sunglasses.

"Sam, you've met my husband, Adam?" Evelyn said.

"Sam Trueson," he said, offering Adam his hand. "What can I help you folks select today?"

Adam let Evelyn answer. He noticed she had put a band aid on her leg.

"I am trying to convince Adam that if we replace the two apple trees we lost, we can get fruit before too awfully long."

"You can," Sam said, "Size and variety make the difference."

"Can we get trees we can plant by hand?" Evelyn asked.

"Follow me," Sam said.

Evelyn and Adam trailed Sam as he snaked his way around pallets of mulch and stacks of ornamental pots toward the rear of the lot. Stepping between a brace of larger apple trees, he took one by the trunk, and dragged it into the aisle. Sunlight streamed into the empty space. Tipping the tree toward Evelyn he said, "These are Crom's, a hybrid the farmers out east of here developed years back. They don't need much sun and resist insects, though you might have to spray a little soapy water on the leaves once or twice a season. They're winter hardy, and nothing beats one of these right off the branch on an early fall day. Two, three years tops, you'll have fruit. McClure's, the other local variety, need bright sun and aren't so good near the bay."

Adam studied the tree. "Looks like a lot of work to plant," he said. Sam let the tree rock upright. "Not really. Dig down twice as deep as the root-ball. Set the tree straight, open the burlap and let the roots spread. Shovel on some peat, manure, and good soil mixed with a little sand to help with surface drainage. No need to guy it off, but I'd tape the first three feet of the trunk to keep mice from chewing the bark. I'll give you a roll of the stuff we use."

Sam stepped back from the trees as if admiring them for the first time. They stood more than six feet tall and had trunks as thick as his biceps. Walking the tree back into its space he said, "Ten minutes once the hole's prepared."

Adam turned to Evelyn. "It's up to you, but I hope we can get them out to the garden with the cart. I'd rather not have to lug them from the fence."

"I have a truck going out to the west side this afternoon," Sam said, his gold tooth catching the light. "We'll deliver. To get fruit, you need two trees twenty feet apart to ensure proper pollination. The second one is half price."

"Honey?" Evelyn asked.

"We need peat, and three bales of mulch hay, too," Adam said.



The trees arrived on a stake-body truck, its sharp alarm pulsing as it backed up the driveway. Two boys jumped from the cab, untied the trees, then lowered them with the automatic tailgate. The older one, black-haired and muscled, hoisted the trees onto the edge of a large, four-wheeled cart, as the other, moon-faced and reedy-armed with long sun-bleached hair, struggled to wrestle them into balance.

The boys pushed the trees out to the garden where Adam helped rock them into place beside the holes he and Evelyn had begun to dig. Evelyn thought he looked frail as he grappled with the large root ball, his skin still winter-pale, and noticed for the first time that his hair was thinning at the crown. When the second tree was in place, he eased himself erect, clutching his rib and back at the same time.

When the younger boy lit a cigarette and began waving it about his head, the dark-haired one grabbed his arm and said, "Don't light up without asking if it's okay."

"Sam says it drives the bugs off," the younger boy said.

"Don't believe everything you hear in the yard," the bigger boy said.

The younger boy stubbed his cigarette out on his boot and stuck the butt behind his ear. Adam sat on a rock to rest. "Thanks," he said, "I'd have had a hell of a time by myself."

Evelyn trailed the boys back to the truck and asked the dark-haired one if he might like to make some money by finishing the digging if she and Adam couldn't manage it themselves, "If not today, perhaps tomorrow," she said.

"Today works," he said. "If we don't have any more deliveries, I can be here about four-thirty."

"You're an angel," she said. "What's your name?"

"Gabe," he answered.

"And you?" she said turning to the younger boy.

"Mike," he said.

"If we're not in the garden, Gabe, please knock," Evelyn said.

Gabe mounted to the cab and started the engine. Mike pulled himself into the passenger's seat and relit his smoke.

Black exhaust diffused over the garden. The afternoon darkened. Slate-coloured clouds worried the horizon and bugs swarmed about their heads. Evelyn, digging in deserted vegetable beds where the earth was dark and moist without large stones or broken ledge, drove the shovel easily with her foot. Adam dug where the lightning-struck crabapple tree had stood. The soil yielded in loamy spadefulls until he began to strike roots and rocks creating flinty sparks. Sweat stung his eyes.

Adam took a shard of steely apple root and held it alongside the root ball, marking the depth by pushing his thumbnail into the wood. He measured and cursed. "It'll be black as a bear's ass before I get this damn hole dug," he said.

"I'll help you in a minute," Evelyn said. "I'm almost done here."

"So much for Goldilocks and his ten-minute job," he said driving his shovel into the hardpan.

"Sam said ten minutes after the hole was ready," Evelyn said.

"I'm not down a foot and the god-damned hole is all rock and root," he said.

"Let's plant this one today, the other can wait until tomorrow," Evelyn said.

The clink of metal on stone sounded in the garden as Adam stabbed with the crowbar. "If you don't mind, I'd prefer to rest tomorrow."

"Adam, I'm sorry," she said. "Would you mind helping me set this one?"

He did not answer, but dropped the crowbar, strode across the garden, grabbed the tree by the trunk, and wrestled it into the basin she'd dug for it. He steadied it while she spread the roots and mounded the soil with her hands so rain would not puddle against the trunk. Evelyn opened the nozzle on the hose while Adam returned to his hole and measured it again with the limp, twisted root. "God-damn it," he said, flinging the root aside. "Why'd I let you talk me into this?"

"Because I asked you to," Evelyn said, "But we don't have kill ourselves. This isn't life or death."

Adam straightened. The soft flesh in the web of his left hand had blistered. "The problem, Evelyn, is you believe everybody. Why do you want these damn trees? We're going to have to prune them and feed them and rake up the dead leaves. It'll never end. Everything is harder than you think it will be."

Evelyn closed the nozzle and dropped the hose. "Damn it, Adam, be fair. You could have said so. I wanted them, but you could have said no."

Adam chewed at his blister. "And watch you mope all weekend? Be serious. I tell you, though, your boyfriend Sam sees you coming every time."

The word cut her. Evelyn started to speak then snapped the back of her hand to her mouth, drawing a deep breath. "I'll finish this. It was my idea. If you have other things to do, do them."

Adam killed a deer fly against his cheek. "Christ. Not these bastards, too," he said.

Evelyn laid her tools on the ground. She could find no words to apologize. Coming up behind her husband she knitted her fingers across his belly. "Honey, take a break. I offered to pay the older boy, Gabe, to finish this if we weren't done. He seems like a good kid."

"He's smart enough to know that Mr. Ponytail doesn't always tell the truth," he said.

Memory rent open the wound she believed she had been forgiven. In his wet shirt, she smelled the sea and when she ran her hand across his navel his skin was as tacky as new paint.

Lucian had not been her boyfriend nor had he worn a ponytail, but he had kissed her wind-burned mouth on an autumn beach and teased her intimate places, and she knew she had been willing to yield more than she did. She had confessed to Adam, her words tangled like fishhooks in her throat, not to wound her mate but to cleanse her soul. He'd said nothing; retreating to the garden, the dead leaves crackling beneath his feet, his breath ghosting in the dark. She had followed barefoot on the frost begging forgiveness, and knelt with her arms around his legs, weeping, atoning, swearing eternal fidelity. Mother of his children, she was younger, his second wife, he her only husband. Though she he had known no other man since him; her sin was that she had nearly done what his first wife had done.

For days he did not speak: not when in the chilled dawn hours before the slashing squalls of an exhausted hurricane lashed the coast, swathed in blood and sand, an eye swollen shut and his frame shaking from the frigid sea, he thudded against the back door, not as she begged him not to die, her white nightdress crimson from his wounds, not in the ambulance when the paramedics asked him why he had been in the cold surf. Not until he awoke in the hospital, groggy and parched, and asked for water, did she again hear his voice.

That winter he crafted the bench in silence, fashioning it from white cedar whose only enemy is flame. Enduring the complaints of his healing muscles and knitting bones, and ignoring the bitter window-rattling gales seeping into the shed, he fitted the smooth seat planks to the back and legs with mad precision. In the howl of March came to her; in December their first was born.

"Let's go in. Gabe will be back by four-thirty," Evelyn said, her voice muffled against his back.

"I could finish by then."

Evelyn noticed that the clouds had thickened, that a low fog was building in the east over the bay. Cool air rushed landward. The breeze stirred, dispersing the bugs and turning over the leaves on the young trees, their bellies a dull pewter in the soft light. Gulls called overhead. Adam

picked at his blister. Evelyn rocked from side to side, her cheek against his spine. "Smells like rain, doesn't it?" she said. When he didn't answer she said, "After you shower, I'll bandage that blister. It's hard to do that by yourself."

"I'm not going in yet," he said. "I'll get back to this later."

Evelyn gathered the small tools into the wheelbarrow. Adam sat on a rock. She knew he would wait for the boy to come, that he was done digging for the day. She wheeled her load to the shed and returned with a pair of soft work gloves. "Use these if you're going to keep working," she said.

Adam rose from the rock. "I'm going to spread some hay and soak it so it doesn't blow around," he said. "If it doesn't rain, I'll mow the side yard so I don't have to do that tomorrow." She knew not to suggest that those things could wait.

On the screened porch, Evelyn kicked off her shoes, shimmied out of her dirty jeans, and hung the boater on a peg by the door. From the kitchen, she watched Adam strewing hay. She gulped long draughts of ice-water, and scratched her bites. The sun rent the clouds as the wind came back again off the land.



Stepping from the shower, Evelyn heard the whine of the mower outside the bedroom window. She rubbed cool palmfuls of witch hazel along her arms and legs and over her neck and shoulders. She remembered the seven springs before Amy was born when, weary from toiling in the garden, they would make love in the incipient shadows of evening, and later, sit, sore hands entwined, night deepening, sipping wine on the porch, imagining aloud what their lives would become. Wrapping her tingling flesh in a fresh towel, she began to comb the tangles from her hair.

Before Evelyn could change, Gabe knocked on the front door and she realized that Adam had not heard the boys drive in over the noise of the mower. "Just a minute," she shouted. Pulling a long-faded, denim dress over her head, she arrived to find both boys on the front steps.

"Hello, Mrs. Milton," Gabe said. "I give Mike a ride, so he's going to give me a hand."

"I'll meet you in the garden," Evelyn said.



The boys had been digging some time before Adam, who was pushing the mower to the shed, saw them. He noticed Evelyn watching them,

her dress luffing in the breeze, wet hair tangling across her eyes, as the boys rolled a large rock next to several smaller ones they had levered out, and wondered why she had not called him. As Adam approached, he heard Gabe say to Mike, "Go ask Mr. Milton where he wants these rocks."

Adam said "Leave them where they are. I'm not sure where I want them yet."

Evelyn held her hem against the rising breeze. She knew Adam had the boys leave the stones so he would have to move them later, and she worried about the strain on his back and shoulder, but said nothing.

Gripping the tree near its base, Gabe set it into place, and ordered Mike to open the hose. When Gabe finished tamping the loose soil with his boot, he said to Mike, "Give it a good soak."

"Sam says not to over water," Mike said.

"You want to walk home?" Gabe said, half tossing the shovel to the ground.

"It's what he told me," Mike said.

The boys' bickering reminded Evelyn of Charlie and Amy arguing over who'd done the most work, or had been given the hardest job, and of the times she or Adam had banished them to their rooms when they could no longer bear their carping.

Gabe turned to Adam and asked, "Anything else we can do, sir?"

"No," Adam said, "What do I owe you?"

"We're on the clock," Gabe said, "Sam doesn't allow tips."

Adam reached for his wallet. "I insist," he said.

Mike pulled the cigarette from behind his ear but did not light it. Leaning into Gabe he whispered. "Sam doesn't need to know."

"We can't," Gabe said to Adam.

Adam forced his wallet back into his rear pocket.

When the boys were gone, Adam showered. Evelyn made drinks and took them to the garden, knowing he would find her there. Admiring the new trees, she imagined them festooned with firm, crisp, red and yellow fruit on a bracing October afternoon. Her stomach gurgled, and she realizing that she'd eaten no lunch. She sipped her drink, then sucked on the wedge of lime she'd hung on the rim of her glass. As she set Adam's glass on a flat rock, the evening breeze ruffled the wet hay he'd spread in the paths between the beds.

Evelyn tried to reckon the percentage of her life that she'd spent in the garden, but the task was too great. She remembered that she'd been picking the last of the season's peas when Amy first moved in her, and planting hills of cucumbers when Charlie first kicked. The new trees, back-lit by the sunset, swayed in the wind and she recalled similar evenings when

she'd come to the garden to pull slugs from the tomatoes or to adjust the sprinkler. A weariness dropped through her as she thought of the children grown and beyond her touch. Muted visions of them, naked and tan, running in and out of the sprinkler's spray, bellies wrinkled with laughter and their soft hair plastered to their heads, made her smile then cry.

Adam came to her, smelling of soap. She linked her arm through his, her drink glass sweating in her hand. A gust swirled her dress about her waist, and she gathered it against her with her other hand. "They were a pain to plant," he said, "but they do look nice. I'll build a bench sometime this summer."

"Even if we never get any apples," she said, "It will be good to sit here and smell the blossoms."

"After all this I insist on apples," Adam said.

Evelyn leaned against him. "I forgot to take anything out for dinner," she said.

"There's leftover lasagne," he said.

"*Godfrey's* is open for the season. Go for some clams?"

"Take out all right?" he asked.

"I guess," she said.



Evelyn placed the plates and silverware into the dishwasher, and washed the wine glasses by hand. Adam stuffed greasy white boxes into the kitchen trash, knotted the bag, and carried it out to the garage. When he returned to the kitchen, she rose up on naked toes and hung her arms around his neck. "Thank you for my apple trees," she said, kissing him and running her hands across his scars.

The May evening cooled, the long curtains stirred, the delicate scent of new lilac and mown grass drifting in the bedroom window. Fog stole over the land. A cool mist dampened the garden. She shucked her dress, shivered, knelt astride him as he lay resting on his stomach, kneaded the soreness from his back and blew against his neck. He rolled over and reached for the cleft between her legs, feeling the napkin beneath her panties. "When did that happen?" he said.

"After dinner."

In her hands, his was a strong, veiny root. The bed creaked. She knew him. When he called out God's name she did not muffle the joyful noise knowing that only she heard.

He slept. A mosquito whined. June bugs banged against the screen. She knew that beyond the garden the deer and coyotes waited for the night

to darken and that in the deep woods the fly-wearied moose circled down in the wet ferns to rest. A barred owl called, *hoohoo, hoohoo, hoowaw*. Her legs twitched. She dreamed. She lay on a bench beneath the apple trees, sunlight in her eyes. White blossoms fell in a storm and she was naked. Children fell from between her crimson thighs, and Adam set them down on giant leaves that floated between the mounded rows. He handed each one an apple and they babbled and ate, and it was good.