

ROSEBUD

by Rick Marshall

With wings barely overcoming gravity, the wasp staggers from corner to corner in the rafters of the patio, it's beady body bouncing off the tin roof, back legs hanging limp. It gets caught between two wooden beams and knocks back and forth, then drops dizzily away. A puff of air scoops it high above the garage and it disappears into the sky.

This is the twelfth spring I've sat in this rickety lawn chair on my patio. One of the plastic arms is broken and, if I'm not careful, can angle up and scrape my arm. Just over the four-foot-high pink cinder-block wall, a hundred yards of asphalt parking lot separates me from the church buildings. I never expected to be here for so many springs.

The first spring, the yard was a bramble of branches and weeds and thorns, wild and unbridled, returning to a natural state like feral cats. Geraniums were creeping toward the neighbor's yard and were already halfway across the lawn, which itself had become as thick and dry as shredded wheat. The patio had been overshadowed by large trees, one of which dropped sticky flowers onto the concrete. The rotting blossoms would get tracked into the house on shoes. Two carrot-root trees and a hibiscus ran unchecked over the wall. To the back of the house was a grape arbor with stiff dead vines holding up the leaning gray frame, its bug-bored boards bending slowly into the soil. All the way around the house flower beds were overflowing with weeds; bushes gnarled in on themselves. A huge pepper tree was quietly undermining the pink wall to the back. Things had been let go and I let them go even further. I didn't plan to be here long; I was waiting for something to carry me away.

My parents came for visits. Mom fretted over the condition of the house and went about cleaning, dusting, and scrubbing the kitchen floor, trying to bring some order out of the chaos of her son's life. Dad would look at the condition of the yard and shake his head, and then silently rake leaves and pull weeds on his hands and knees. The place would get a good straightening out once a year, but it slowly went back to its natural state once the caretakers left. I always had more important things to do. After all, I was a minister, laboring in the Lord's vineyard. And being a single father, the needs of two young daughters sent me spinning after my own tail. Who had time for yard work?

One year, after prying one too many rotten blossoms out of the carpet, I stomped out to the patio in a huff and cut the offending tree down, chopped it into pieces and hauled it away. And it felt good, so good in fact, I cut down the tree next to it. I noticed my neighbor watching me from his fenced yard across the alley. After seeing me flailing away at a tree with a carpenter's saw, he offered the use of his electric chainsaw. It was loud and it chewed through the wood effortlessly. The patio looked like a construction zone with broken limbs, exposed wood and small piles of sawdust everywhere. My neighbor put his gloves on and helped drag away the wreckage. Since then, he keeps an eye on the place and helps me whenever he sees any activity in my yard. Sometimes we talk over the back wall, mostly about our cats and gardens and strange nocturnal activities in the parking lot; must be kids and drugs we say. His yard is well-trained under a watchful eye, and I think he's glad to see me cracking the whip in mine.

When I was a teenager, I watched my father working in his yard. What's the point, I thought. If you pull weeds, more will come back. Why bother to cut the lawn, it keeps growing. And if you plant all those flowers, you just have to take care of them. Working in the yard was a bore. I had more interesting things to do, like watching TV. He never insisted I help, though my mother would occasionally give me The Look: "Why don't you offer to help your father. He works hard all day and then comes home and..." Even then, I was aware that there was more going on between my dad and his yard than dull chores. I had the strange feeling he actually enjoyed it. Once in a while, without saying anything, I could see in his eyes that he wanted to tell me something important, but he knew I wouldn't understand. He would just smile and disappear around the corner into the raspberry patch.

By the second spring, I was still hopeful about single-handedly raising the church from its ashes. But nobody warned me about Martha. She was as sweet as can be with me, then would turn around and tell people how incompetent, remote, and immature I was. She believed the church was in serious trouble because they hired me as their pastor. I realized I was in trouble when I noticed the vein throbbing in her neck when she smiled at me, and I think her blood pressure made her eyes bulge a little. She could not hide her contempt for me with her smile. She appeared in my dreams straddling the church door, feet apart, hands on her hips, with a sinister smile. I would wake up at 3 a.m. in a cold sweat. Storming around the church with her bulging eyes, she unconsciously projected her own frustrations and anger about her own life onto me. I was her personal movie screen. She was a varicose vein. I wasn't sure what to do with my own

anger and frustration. Instead of throttling her, I cut down the two scrubby gray yucca plants at each corner of the house. As I hacked away at the roots with an ax, I pretended I was cutting her away from my life, tentacle by tentacle.

When Marge died, I was cut to the heart. She was more than a secretary. With a church-lady's hairdo and glasses that came to happy points at the corners, she had the little girl still in her voice. She prayed for the minister in me and cared for my soul as if I was the son she never had. Her name should have been Grace; she was the angel who wrestled with me and blessed me. She let her cancer eat all the way to her rib bones without telling a soul. I knew something was wrong, but she would smile and tell me she was all right, not to worry. It turns out that she noticed a lump, then her husband had a stroke and she let her own illness silently take its course. She died in peace shortly after her husband. That year I turned over the dirt behind the house and planted vegetables: eggplant, radishes, spinach, tomatoes, squash, even strawberries. I thought of her while my hands mixed the chunky clods with manure into a rich loam. My tears dripped onto the dust. Every third day I would stand out in the morning sun, watering the plants, watching them push themselves out of the ground. Straining upward, they lifted my mood so delicately, just like her smile.

I made a point of planting annuals; the act of planting perennials would be too much of a commitment to being here in this place. This was not my home. I would be going to where I would be happy. I never knew where that would be, but it would be somewhere else, and I would know it when I got there.

One spring, looking at my back yard, I thought a ficus tree would go well where I tore out the hibiscus. It would eventually grow large enough to block strangers from peering into my life from the parking lot. And maybe some roses...yes, roses in the back corner.

Whenever I visited my parents, the first thing I would do is survey the yard, seeing what my dad had been doing, asking questions about roses: when to plant, how far to trim, what to apply for mildew. His were so tall and lush and vivid. Roses always surprise me, growing as they do out of woody nubs and thorns.

When Paul died I sat on my patio for the longest time in my rickety chair and looked at the shiny aluminum-frame windows he had installed in the house a couple of years earlier. I made a mental note, they needed to be washed. I got up out of the chair and cut the hedges down to sticks along the driveway. Paul was the lumber of the church. He was trustee, caretaker,

janitor, plumber, supervisor all in one. He was always there. Strong and permanent, he would bear up and support this frail structure called a church. As it turned out, the hedges were healthier for the severe trimming they got. What else can you do with grief?

I often got strangers knocking at my office door, homeless men, drifters, vagabond families, all asking for money. They needed more than money, but I tried to be helpful. The first time I saw Earl come knocking, my immediate thought was to call 911. He looked like a matter for some state agency. Earl had a huge belly that stretched through a too small t-shirt; he wore bright colored pants and black polished vinyl boots. He would shave his head three inches above his ears and then let his thin blond hair grow to hang down, like some strange rooster comb. His eyes are too close together and look cross-wired. He lived hand to mouth on fast food in a motel room paid by the week, alone. He said he was a good worker and wanted to do good deeds. If Earl had a theme to his life, it was his desire to do good deeds. I paid him five dollars an hour to work around my yard and the church. Earl was a gentle soul in a lonely, confusing world and he talked about God every time he saw me--and about doing good deeds. Sometimes he cut things back too much and they died, or not enough and they remained wild. When he finished a job, a little boy's voice would come out of him as he pranced beside me, showing off his work no matter what it looked like. I marveled at his ability to survive. I visited him in the hospital once and he almost cried. He would come around again the next month and we would survey the grounds together, talking about this tree or that bush as if they were mutual friends. We've been walking around my yard and the church for many years now.

Last summer I sat in a chair on my parent's patio. Early in the morning, as the sun rose, the dew on the grass became jewels, dripping and dissolving into the air. The roses were intense velvety red and orange and white, and the hanging fuchsias and begonias looked like specimens from another more exotic world. There were wild rabbits that came sniffing for food my dad put out for them. The walnut tree had become so big, it blocked a chunk of sky in one part of the garden. A fir tree and maple and several birch trees dwarfed the house. Green moss grew on the north side of everything. The deep grass rolled like a carpet between flowers. Birds fluttering water on themselves in the bird-bath. Raspberry bushes lined two sides of the house, and blueberry bushes, and grapes covered the new arbor, and two apple trees squat low beside the filbert tree. Rhododendrons and azaleas in the spring, and poppies and peas and corn and tomatoes and cucumbers in the summer. The soil was so fine there after years of tilling and

watching. My dad wasn't always the gardener. Once, after we moved into a previous home, he cut down the raspberry canes with a lawn mower. But they came back and he picked raspberries that year on his knees. He eventually transplanted some of those canes to this his first--and last--bought home where he tended them carefully, year after year.

A couple of times I transplanted Easter lilies, but I didn't understand Easter lilies then. It seemed a shame to let them just sit there after Easter in the dark sanctuary in their dry pots, dying after the Sunday lights had been turned out, trumpeting their good news to no one. So I planted some of them in my flower bed. Then I would tear them out at the end of the year thinking they were annuals. But I recently learned that they will come back year after year. Can you believe it! A guy thinking in terms of annuals had planted perennials. I will trim them back and, who knows, maybe I'll hum Louis Armstrong when their white trumpets come up next year.

Around the back of the house, I planted three fruit trees (avocado, grapefruit and orange) in the clear spot where the large pepper tree used to be. Harlen helped by carrying the potted trees home in his pickup, then helping me dig the holes, mixing the right amounts of potting soil, fertilizer and water. He also helped me cut down the pepper tree which was cracking the pink cinder-block wall. I hacked at that tree for days carefully clinging to the ladder, reaching out to a limb. Harlen came and, without hesitation, climbed way up into the tree with a saw, dangling and cutting and letting the limbs fall exactly where he called them. He worked for the electric company for many years and is used to high places. He knows things about operating on a high wire without a net. I've noticed him and his wife Claudia around the church, cutting and watering the plants. It's close to their son's birthday, the son they loved and buried three years ago this spring. After watering their own plants with a thousand tears, they have enough for the church, and Harlen helps me water mine too.

Harlen and I talk over the wall, about the fruit trees and the stumps that he arranged to have ground out, and speculate about things growing and dying. I tell him about my daughter's nose ring and tattoo and about how I worry for her. He understands, having climbed trees and worked with high voltage wires and with sons and grandsons all his life, all the time without a net. I don't know why, but it made me feel better when I told him about my youngest daughter learning to back the car out of the driveway and backing it right into the hedges, which broke the mirror, which cracked the windshield and scraped the paint off one side of the car, which cost \$1,600 to make the car look new again. Just backing out of the driveway! He laughed. I told him

she comes to visit me less and less. Boys. What else can you do with the love? We admired the fruit trees in silence.

One of my college philosophy teachers spent a whole hour staring at an apple, wondering out loud to the class how it is transformed into thoughts by eating it. He would look at the apple, then look inward, and be amazed that there is any connection at all between eating the apple and his thoughts about the apple. He was telling his young students something important but the exercise just made us hungry. After staring at it so intently, he suddenly picked it up and took a big bite out of it. We all laughed. Now I spend my afternoons sitting on my patio wondering how anger, grief and love get turned into flowers and fruit trees.

Good news! Just the other day my tattooed daughter noticed the marigolds and petunias I had planted along the garage and said they looked beautiful. Why did it make me so happy to hear her say that? I wanted to tell her something important, but just smiled and went out to water my tomatoes. I wanted to tell her what a wonderful world.

I've been sitting out here on the patio more and more lately, talking to my cat, Buster, reading, writing, staring at the roses, watching the Easter lilies turn brown. I watch less TV now. Just yesterday I bought two comfortable lawn chairs and a small table for my patio. There's room for four now. Three of them are usually empty, but friends stop by and I tell them about the lemon tree I just planted in the same spot where, years ago, the offending flowering tree once stood. I hope my daughters will one day sit with me here on my patio. I can tell them about the roses and why the fichus is where it is and why the Easter lilies look like white trumpets and how pink cinder-block walls really can't keep the world out.

Over the years the traffic has gone both ways over the asphalt parking lot. Many people have come across the parking lot to my back door. Strangers looking for help. Friends stopping by on Christmas Eve, leaving gifts at the door, or dropping off food when I'm sick, or just wanting to talk about flowers and cats and kids. So many people appearing with tears or smiles, knocking, seeking. Sometimes, leaning over the wall we talk and laugh and shake our heads in amazement that anything good happens at all.

A hundred yards of asphalt separates me from the church, and I've lived here long enough to watch the roots grow deep, even under asphalt. Once I thought I could save this church. Now I wonder who saves whom.

Whenever a child is born to someone in the church, a single rosebud in a slender vase is placed on the communion table for worship service. What words could possibly say thank you any better than a rosebud? I recently officiated at a funeral where the family scattered the ashes of their loved one, mixed with tears, in the rose garden at the cemetery. What is it about roses? I understand how bodies are changed into ashes, but how are ashes turned into roses?

Today my Dad and I are sitting in my new chairs on the patio, this my twelfth spring. I'm telling him about the tomatoes I've just planted, and the vegetable seeds coming up. The oranges are sure going to taste good when they finally begin bearing fruit. And the roses are doing pretty well, but the mildew... He looks at me and smiles.

The wasps return every year, bumping into everything along the way, to tend to their upside-down paper nests, working as they do against gravity without a net. I wonder how they make paper and how they find their way back to this spot.

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“Rosebud” was written in 1998 and is dedicated to my father, Marion Marshall, who, at the age of 81, laid down in his garden and died on a warm, sunny morning, July 9, 2008. My mother, Ethel, found him in a sleeping position with his hands together, palm to palm, under his head. She died five weeks later, on August 14, 2008, in the family living room. They were married for 58 years and are buried together in a spot that overlooks the wooded hill where my father thought would make a perfect place for a house overlooking a particularly beautiful part of the Willamette Valley near Salem, Oregon.