



THE GARDENER SOWS

THEY KNEELED IN TANDEM. IT WAS UNFAMILIAR, but reassuring. Her hand was gloved as she picked up a fistful of earth and let it fall through her fingers.

“Anyone can garden, stick a bunch of seeds in the ground, water it, weed it, and watch it grow. Amazing.”

Her daughter seemed to be listening intently, so she continued.

“Some things will grow no matter what you do — or don’t do — to them, like carrots or garlic. Others need a lot of attention, maintenance, fussing, and even then they can flop. But if you want amazing produce, that you know won’t flake out, there’s plenty to know.”

Still her daughter listened.

“Here in New York is Zone Six, which refers to the climate and the hardiness of the soil. If you don’t want to know the details, just how it applies to you, then Google ‘Zone Six planting,’ and it’ll tell you what you can grow, when to start, when to transplant, when to harvest everything.”

“What zone is Chicago?”

Right, she didn’t live here anymore. Karen shrugged, a little unnerved.

“I don’t know, I’ll look it up for you when we’re done.” She looked over at Riva. There didn’t seem to be the judgment she expected to find present in her face. “We’ll be planting eggplant and celery now, it’s their planting season...” she trailed off and started demonstrating, picking up the spade, digging several holes, dropping in the seeds, covering them with soil, patting down, and sprinkling with water.

“You work so quick, do you even pay attention anymore?” Riva asked.

Karen pulled back into a kneel. “Not really, not anymore.”

“How do you know how much to dig out, or how far to space them?” Riva seemed to be in awe of her mother.

Karen laughed, picked up the open packet of seeds, and tapped it. “Everything’s written on the back.”

“But you didn’t read the back.”

“I read the back years ago, and I’ve planted eggplant so many times I don’t have to think about it anymore.”

“It’s a motor memory,” said Riva.

“Exactly.”

“Show me again,” Riva said. “This time I’ll follow you.”

Together they dug a few holes, filled, covered, patted, sprinkled, and moved on to the next. A comfortable silence reigned, and then Karen felt someone watching her. Looking up, she saw her next-door neighbor, Miriam Steiff, Mrs. Cultured Super Grandma. Karen looked ahead and saw a middle-aged man walking briskly across the street toward a black Lincoln.

“Was that your son from LA?” Karen called.

Miriam nodded. Karen tapped Riva, who looked up and smiled at Miriam, who just nodded again.

“She wanted me to teach her my gardening tricks, so we’re planting a few things here.” Karen felt a need to tell Miriam, show her, show everyone that Riva was home, choosing to spend time with her mother.

Miriam smiled vaguely again. Karen glanced back at Riva and blessed her for dressing appropriately. Their neighbor went back inside and Karen exhaled.

“You never liked her, Ma,” Riva commented.

“I don’t know about not liking, definitely not comfortable.”

“Why?”

How could Karen tell her daughter that she never felt secure as a mother, and as her next-door neighbor, Miriam Steiff bore witness to her failure? Karen shrugged vaguely. Riva changed subjects.

“I really appreciate you taking the time to teach me,” she said. Karen pursed her lips as heat flushed her face. What could she tell Riva? *At least I can do this for you. I’m sorry for your life. I wish I had done more. Please come inside and see Daddy even though he’ll probably grump at you.*

“You’re welcome,” Karen answered. Both were quiet for a moment, and Riva cleared her throat.

“You know I’m graduating in one month.”

“No! Really?”

Riva beamed. “Yup.”

Karen pulled back, speechless. *She did it without me*, she thought. *She doesn’t even need me at all.* But at the same time she glowed in her baby’s accomplishment.

“Summa cum laude,” Riva added.

“Oh, Riva,” Karen broke. She wanted to hug her daughter but didn’t know if Riva would want her to.

“I’m valedictorian, Ma.”

“What?” Karen whispered. With every accolade, the mixture of pride and rejection built.

“Can you come?”

“Of course,” Karen said quickly, and now she reached out and squeezed Riva’s open hand. Riva squeezed back. A mother-daughter moment, Karen couldn’t remember the last.

Only after Riva left to the airport, heading back to Chicago, did

Karen's anxiety set in. What would Saul say? Who would take care of him while she went? Would he even let her go?

"She's not taking care of me." Though his words were slurred, sounding like he had a mouthful of food just before a swallow, his message was clear. He wasn't going to budge. Still she tried, not for herself who knew there was nothing to fight for, but for her daughter — she at least deserved a shot.

"It's Rachel, it's your daughter. It's not like it's a stranger. Anyway, once I'm gone, who do you think is going to take care of you?"

He would have shifted in his seat to sit up straighter, summon his dignity, but he couldn't.

"All hypothetical, I'm dying before you. I'm male, I'm older, and I have MS."

"It's not hypothetical if I'm asking." She ignored his death talk, she'd heard it before.

"No, I'm her father, she shouldn't see me like this if she doesn't have to. And I don't want her to see me like this."

"She's seen you plenty."

He tried to wave his right hand dismissively, but it froze mid-gesture. He brought his hand down and covered it with his left hand.

"Seeing and taking care of are two different things. She doesn't know what it entails. All she sees is me sitting on a chair. I will not have my daughter help me to the bathroom."

"So what about Alex?"

"He comes once a day for two hours, how is that going to help me? Do everything I need to in two hours, spend the rest of the day in bed?!"

"Maybe we can ask him to stay the night, we'd pay him."

Saul pulled a face.

"What, why not? It's not a bad idea, and I thought you liked Alex."

"Like is a generous word. I tolerate him, he's not like the last one, Jose. He talked too much. And he smelled, and was too rough."

Karen didn't shake her head. Jose had been wonderful, he was upbeat, possibly smelled like too much Drakkar Noir, but he was strong. Saul hadn't liked how easily Jose could maneuver him and his chicken legs from chair to bed to bathroom in his muscled arms. It made him feel small and weak. Alex, the new home-care worker, struggled mightily with the physicality of the job, had a pinched demeanor — and that made Saul glow. He was not alone in his misery, he was not the only man not strong enough for the world.

“It would just be a night.”

“Too expensive.”

Karen was quiet. That was probably true.

“We'll talk about this later, I'm going to make supper.”

“We're not talking about this — conversation's over. And don't make anything with zucchinis from your garden.”

“What's wrong with my zucchinis?”

“Not your zucchinis, any zucchini. I don't like them. If I'm dying I might as well eat food that I like. Pick some fresh radishes, do you have any more ready? Those taste better than any I've ever bought.”

Karen glowed.

“Make sure you cut them into small enough pieces, so I don't almost choke on them like last time. Sometimes I think you want to remind me my swallowing is going too.”

Karen turned away to the garden, eyes burning.

Outside she knelt on the mat over the radish bush and fingered the dirty red orbs. She didn't want to give them to him, not after his comment. The zucchinis would soon be overripe, the radishes still had some time, she decided, and selected five zucchinis — two for a soup, two for a bread, and one for a puree. Passive-aggressive, that's what Saul always called her. Maybe he was right; he usually was right when it came to evaluating character. So what if she was passive-aggressive, he was sick and this was the only way she could complain.

The phone was ringing when she reentered the house. It was

Rachel, her oldest. Karen turned the ringer off, she had energy for no one. The soup was put up quickly, but when Karen started gathering ingredients for the bread, there was only a half teaspoon of vanilla extract left and the recipe called for one. *It'll be fine without it*, she told herself. *You can put in vanilla sugar*, she rationalized. But a stubborn part of her brain was relentless: *You will do something right*, it said. Karen listened and got her purse.

The corner grocery was quiet and Karen found a small bottle of pure vanilla extract. The imitation was much cheaper and came with much more, but she was doing this right, all the way. She got on line to pay. There was one person ahead of her, or was it two? No, it was one, a grandmother-granddaughter duo. The grandmother had one of those walker seats, and the granddaughter stood close, but not too close as to infantilize her. They were cute.

"Mammeleh, I feel like the Queen of Sheba, the way you stand next to me. I should've gotten old earlier," the grandmother said, and the two of them laughed. They paid for their groceries, and shuffled their way out, the granddaughter leading, yet still following her grandmother. They took forever.

Karen watched them. It was rude, she knew, but she couldn't look away. Besides, their backs were turned. Would her grandchild ever do that willingly for Saul? Would Saul ever laugh at his deficiencies? Could there be happiness in limitations?

"You ready, ma'am?" the cashier interrupted. Karen placed the small bottle on the conveyor belt, paid for it, and accepted the bag without looking away. Quickly, she outpaced the grandmother-granddaughter duo who had just exited the store. She gave them a backward glance, and saw a smile still lingered around their eyes. Karen felt a pinch in hers, and a surge of heat, of jealousy and hatred toward this duo. How come their challenges didn't seem to define them, even enhanced them?

Karen slammed the grocery bag on the counter when she got home. The bottle inside it cracked.