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Gardening the Desert

The Owyhee river runs through Oregon desert in the Treasure Valley near the Idaho border. Water from the river runs into ditches, reflects bright sunshine, and spreads out across farmland. Sagebrush, sand, jackrabbits and rattlesnakes populate the desert beyond the end of the big ditch. Wind blows. A few Juniper trees grow. Cottonwood trees, willow bush, and abundant weeds grow along streams and irrigation ditches.

The house sat a ways off a graveled county road in farmland, just above where irrigation water gave up and the land became sagebrush desert. I replaced broken windows in cold spring sunshine, crawled under the house and replaced pipes broken by some winter's hard freeze. Diana painted the living room.

Michael crawled in and out of the house and around the yard. I kept my dog and cat in the house the first few days we were there, until I was sure they identified the place as home.

Three large cottonwood trees in the front yard uncurled new, green leaves for early spring. One tree spread limbs above the house. A dozen more cottonwood trees greened in spring sunshine across the driveway from the house, above the swale that drained irrigation water from the field north and east of the house and took the water back to the river. Beyond the swale, a cow shed and a milking barn, long unused, deteriorated. I built a garden that spring on the gentle south slope in front of the shed and milking barn.

I dug in manure, raked, and planted seeds. I found piper eggs down in new spring grass below the garden. I left a big piece of

ground uncultivated around the nest. Diana raked seedbed. Michael played in the dirt. They didn't last long. She said, "Look at my arms. I'm sunburned already. And windburned. I can't stand this wind blowing all the time. We're going in."

I cut two-by-four and one-by-twelve Douglas fir with a hand saw and nailed ditch boxes together, traded work for rent. Oregon desert wind stung me with sand as I drove nails.

Diana called from the house. "Lunch. Come and get some lunch."

Diana, Michael, and I ate lunch. Diana said, "You're almost as brown as Michael already. I can't stand the sun the way you do. I don't tan. I just burn."

I said, "If you build up to it gradually, a few minutes more each time you go out, you'll tan."

I drove wheel-tractor for the owner of the farm, down the field and back. Dust blew up to the blue sky as the implement scratched a dozen shallow ditches in cultivated ground behind me. I fastened my harmonica into a holder around my neck and blew wild music of my own design as I drove and tried to hold the steering wheel straight down a quarter of a mile of dirt field. I looked back up the field as I turned the tractor at the end of the filed and saw the ditches I'd just pulled wobbled like a lonesome drunk.

"Hell with it." My leg hurt from operating the tractor-stiff clutch at the end of every run the length of the field. I drove the tractor into the yard, as close as I could get to the door. Michael crawled naked across the yard and got behind a cottonwood tree from the tractor, taking no chances. Diana, pale as winter, beautifully formed, stood in the doorway, sunlight red in her black hair. Dust smells, the smell of sage, trees, river water and diesel fumes from the engine I just shut off blew across the yard between us.

I said, “Hand me up my walking cane, if you would, please.”

She brought my cane. I still had to lean on her to get into the house.

I lay on a cushion on the floor by the big south window and sweat in hot sunshine. Every time I moved, I cried out from pain. I said, “Hey beautiful. I’m not trying to share this pain with you. I just can’t keep from hollering when I move my leg. I’m okay, and I’m going to be better yet, so don’t take it as anything but a song I’m singing, goes, ‘ow, oh, phew, that hurts too much, ow and wow.’”

“I’m going to take you to a doctor.”

“No. I’m staying here. I can’t run to the doctor every time it hurts. They don’t know what to do anyway. ‘Don’t shift tractors,’ they’ll say, ‘Neither repeatedly nor intensely,’ and they’ll give me a pain pill I can’t take for fear of reactions. Ow. ow. I’m trying to get control over it. Don’t listen to it if you can help it.”

“Maybe you have broken your leg again.”

“No. Ow. It didn’t hurt when I pushed the clutch. Just after I did it a lot, it started hurting. I don’t think any of the bone moved. Go to town if it gets to you too much. Look around. Bring back dinner later.”

I slept where hot sunshine poured in the south window. I turned my leg in my sleep, and I woke yelling. Diana and Michael had taken the car and gone to town, so I screamed in pain, and then I was done with it. I didn’t need to yell anymore. I crawled around the house that evening and the next day. “Hey, look at this Michael kid. He thinks I’m the first really sensible adult he’s met.”

In the dark bedroom, stars shone their light into our windows. Diana and I held each other. Pain fled away from me into the brightly-starred sky above the house and the cottonwood trees in

the small valley on the Oregon-Idaho border. The world moved away from us. We intertwined and sensed only each other. For a while, the earth. the sky, the stars, everything in the universe softly supported us.

All week, I used my cane everywhere I walked. We drove back roads, out into sagebrush hills above the valley every day. I said, “You drive. I’m not operating any clutch pedal yet.” We walked unpopulated country, getting ready to hang my cane on the wall again.

I worked the farm parts of some days, kept ahead of the rent.

Even if we went somewhere every day, the desert wore on Diana. She said, “I like this country, but not for very long. I miss the trees. We don’t see very many people. I’m tired of the wind blowing all the time.”

I irrigated fields for the landlord, put siphon tubes over the raised banks of ditches and delivered water into the corrugations I pulled into the dirt the week before with the tractor. I held different-size tubes, two-inch diameter aluminum siphon tubes down to half-inch, black plastic tubes, to my mouth, pursed my lips and blew coarse music through them down the field and out into the universe. I danced wild dances that favored my left leg there beside the ditch.

Water soaked into the cultivated earth and slowly ran down the small ditches and approached the bottom of the field.

Lettuce sprouted in our garden. Radish plants broke the surface of the soil and grew into sunshine, and kohlrabi, cabbage, and tomatoes.

Wendell, 14, thin, light-haired, narrow-faced, and his brother, Howard, 11, thicker, darker, and shorter, walked into the yard when we stood outside in morning sunshine. Wendell said, “We’re your

closest neighbors, so we thought we'd come over and meet ya. Cross that field we just come through, cross that gravel road; that white house, other side of the road a ways. You can see it from here."

The white house where the car sometimes roars from the driveway, gravel flying, slides sideways around the turn at the bottom of the hill, roars toward town just ahead of a cloud of dust.

We visited a while with Wendell and Howard, and they headed back for home.

Piper egg shells below the garden. The pipers, precocious birds, hatched and ran away into growing grass. A barn owl roosted on the joists up in the cow shed through bright daytimes. The owl watched me garden, closed its eyes and slept, opened it's eyes to see the world.

Sun rose higher toward the northern sky. Days heated up. We ate radishes, lettuce, peas, kale, tiny carrots, and onions.

The well ran dry in fifteen minutes through the hose when I watered the garden. It took more than two hours for the well to fill up again. My garden needed more water than the well could supply, so I started digging a ditch from the cornfield's main ditch into my garden, about a hundred yards, some of it through high ground. It was slow work. I dug as much every day as I could.

Wendell walked across the field through corn growing two-feet high to where I dug. He said, "You could dig that with a trencher and a tractor in five minutes."

"I don't have a trencher or a tractor."

"Mr. Rudy does, the farmer down across that road. He has a D-6 and a trencher. That Caterpillar has the power of five-hundred men. It could climb those mountains over there. I know him. I used to

work for him. I could get him to come and dig it. You're never going to get it done with a shovel, are you?"

"Eventually."

"Why don't you let me go get him? Your garden's going to die before you get water to it."

"Okay. See if you can do it."

Wendell came back, riding slowly on his bicycle, and right behind him, Mr. Rudy drove a roaring, clanking D-6 tracklayer that pulled a v-trencher. Mr. Rudy dug the whole ditch in less than five minutes.

I turned water into the ditch. By late afternoon, a small, muddy stream trickled into the garden. I turned the water into the melons.

"Hey Diana. Come and see the water."

Michael came with her, walking on his own. Some of the heat went out of the late-day sunshine. We spaded and raked together. I said, "This is it. What ground we get ready today gets planted, and that's all."

"I've heard that before."

"I know. But there's a short growing season here. No point in planting anything past midsummer."

Muddy ditch water soaked melon plants. I turned the water into the squash. "It would take a week to do this much with the hose."

Diana tried to teach Michael where he could walk and where he shouldn't go. I said, "Let him be. He won't hurt anything."

"He's walking in the carrot bed."

"Carrot seeds like little kids' feet. They'll sprout densest in his footprints. Don't fill the garden with 'no' and 'Michael, look out.'"

I tipped the wheelbarrow down on its handles and sat in it.

"This is what I want. I feel really good here."

"I know."

“But you don’t.”

“I like it. I just miss seeing people. The wind blows all the time. I get tired of the wind. It gets really boring here.”

“Get outside more. Walk. Work in the garden. Take the bird book and see how many kinds of birds you can see. There’s lots of different kinds of birds around here. You could watch a raven all day and learn a lot. I could live here forever, but it won’t go that way. When I’m stronger on my feet, I’ll have to do something else. Let’s walk down and visit the Rudys. Maybe they’ll be friends, somebody to talk with sometimes.”

We walked down the road, just at dark. Mr. Rudy opened the door when I knocked. He invited us in. He said, “Sit down. Here, sit on the couch here” We sat down. Mrs. Rudy brought tea and cookies.

I said, “I wanted to thank you again for pulling the ditch for me. I got the water down, and I’ve already watered half the garden.”

“Well, you’re welcome, but it’s pretty hard to get away to do something like that. We’re pretty busy this time of year.”

“I know. I wouldn’t have asked, but Wendell wanted to. He got worried about me trying to dig that whole ditch with a shovel.”

“Well, Wendell might be all right, but we don’t want him around here. He worked for me for a while, but I had to let him go. He wouldn’t leave my little girl alone. He was always teasing her.”

Their two children sat quietly on chairs across the room from us. Diana held Michael. Michael watched all the people.

I said, “I thought it might be nice to visit neighbors.”

“Well, yes, visiting is nice. But you know, we aren’t very sociable people. Farmers are pretty busy. We don’t visit much, and we don’t have visitors much. We do most of our socializing at lodge

meetings."

I couldn't think of anything to say. I stood up and held my hand out to Diana, and she stood up beside me.

He said, "I don't mean you should rush to leave. You should relax and finish your tea."

"Oh, well, thank you. We drank most of it. Those are good cookies."

We walked out of the house, and I pulled the door shut behind me.

We walked in the dark. Michael rested his head on Diana's shoulder and slept. I took him from her and carried him. Stars shone above us. A thin moon rose above the hills in front of us. Cottonwood trees, huge beside the road, cast densely-black shadows from thin moonlight. Gravel crunched under our feet. Air around us smelled like night, like dust, like gravel, like water, like plants growing.

Diana said, "Well, Michael is obviously half Indian, and we're obviously no part Indian. They probably know we're not married."

"Yeah. I don't know what their reasons are. I'll take it just like he said; they don't socialize much. I don't want to try to think it out beyond there. I have a good ditch into the garden. We could try Wendell's folks."

"They aren't there much. Wendell says they fight all the time when they are home. I don't want to get in on that."

Joe quit sending support money for Michael. My insurance money ran out. I wasn't eligible for disability because I was self-employed before the wreck, with no insurance.

Summer brought long days of hot sunshine. Pete and Mike came by some hot afternoons and evenings. Mexican-Americans. Farm

workers when there was work. On welfare when there wasn't, like us. We sat in the yard in shade from cottonwood trees and drank a few beers.

Summer days passed. I weeded the garden, mulched, fertilized, and irrigated. Diana worked with me sometimes, but mostly, she didn't want to work in the garden in wind and sunshine.

I walked into the house from the afternoon sunshine.

Diana lay on her stomach across the large beanbag cushion on the living room floor. I lay down on her. She said, "I was just thinking it's been a long time since you laid down on me just to be close."

"I know. I've been thinking about the world and survival and the future too much. I get uptight and miss some of what's going on around me."

Michael walked in, climbed up, and lay full length on my back. Diana said, "You two guys together are too heavy for me. You're about to squash me."

We grew more vegetables than we could use. Especially tomatoes. We canned tomatoes and gave tomatoes away. We met a few people. Most of them lived in town, ten miles away.

Restlessness ate at Diana. She decided to leave, but she lingered. She knew Michael did really well there. She was reluctant to leave me totally on my own.

She said, "Go with me."

"I can't leave here, yet. I know I can make it here, and I don't know if I can make it in California. I still need to heal and build strength, and this place is good for it. What's down there? Asphalt, concrete, traffic, too many people. Noisy places confuse me since my hearing got messed up. No place to walk. No place lined up to

live. It costs a lot to live down there."

I told her about Earl's dog. "A car hit him and broke his hip. He became fearful and antagonistic. He liked it best if he was curled into a place where he could be approached only from directly in front. Even then, if you weren't slow and careful, he might bite you. Earl took him to the vet and had him euthanized, because the injury was causing growth deformation."

"What does that mean to you?"

"I don't know. Don't be in a rush. I'll be ready to go when I'm stronger."

She said, "I love you. I want to be with you, but I can't live here anymore."

She packed, took Michael with her, and left.

Something inside me got messed up in the wreck or from reactions to drugs they gave me in the hospital. Sometimes, pain takes over my abdomen and chest, my shoulders and neck. It's hard to breathe. I pant shallow breaths against muscles rigid with pain. It's hard to move, to do anything at all. Maybe I'm dying. In times of worst pain, I wish I would.

At dusk, pain began. I walked out into the corn rows. Sometimes I could walk it out, going easy and breathing deeply and steadily. Hard wind blew from the east, bowed the corn down and turned the desert dark with blowing sand and dust. Sand stung me. I leaned into the wind all the way back to the house. Wind fought me for the door. I wrestled it shut, stepped back, coughed, and tried to catch my breath.

Rain blew in the wind. Rain poured down for two days and two nights. I liked the steady sound of hard rain drumming against the house. Water dripped from the ceiling in the bedroom. I moved my

bed, a cotton pad on the floor, into the living room. The sound of the wind and rain against the house were the only sounds in the universe.

All across the valley, fierce wind blew down cornfields, blew hay flat against the ground. Rain softened the ground, and wind blew trees down.

Pain eased, as if the rain washed it away. The smell of washed earth and clean air permeated the house. I woke and looked out the big south window at light from the waxing moon penetrating clouds and rain. I watched dawn light up the sky.

Rain stopped. Clouds cleared. The sun shone hot.

The corn in the field by the house stood through the storm. My garden stood through high winds. Earth serenades me with rain, wind, bird song, dresses my basic garden art with a hundred colors. Pipers run through the carrot beds; quail hide in the cabbages. I eat most of my meals in my garden.

Wendell walked through the field around the house, through corn taller than he was, and walked to where I stood, leaning on my shovel and watching ditch water run into my garden.

He asked me, “How come you work so hard in this garden? There’s more growing here than you could eat in ten years.”

“Why do you think, Wendell?”

“I don’t know why. Cause you’re crazy?”

“I think I’ll leave it for you to figure out.”

“How could I figure that out?”

“It’ll become clear to you in the years ahead.” He looked at me as if I might have the answer to that question and other questions written on my face. I said, “I’ll give you a pocket knife if you pull weeds and help me mulch the rest of the garden this afternoon.”

“Let me see the knife. Hey, that’s a good knife. Sure. I’ll trade. Just show me what to do.”

Wendell walked home for dinner and walked back to my place when dusk filled the valley. I’d just uncased my guitar when he knocked on the door. I said, “Come in.” He came in and shut the door behind him. I pointed at a chair, and he sat down.

I played my guitar. Exercises. Then I played and sang. Wendell stayed real quiet, so I just kept going. We watched stars brighten beyond the cottonwood trees in front of the house. Tones from my big Gibson and my voice resonated through the corn field around the house.

Gary, my landlord, teaches at Wendell’s school. When the corn was nearly ready to harvest, Gary came out and looked it over and revised some of the ditches for the last irrigation. We stood on the ditch bank at the head of the field in hot sunshine. He jabbed his sharp shovel just under the surface of the soil and cut off weeds as we talked. “Wendell is a hood,” he said, “No good and up to no good. He always has been, and he always will be.”

A teacher at the school caught Wendell carving on the restroom wall. They took his knife away and expelled him from school.

I sat on the back step and played my guitar. Wendell walked out of the tall corn, carrying his fishing pole, walked down the dirt driveway that curved past the house to the milking barn and stopped in front of me. He asked me, “Do you know a good place to dig worms? I want to go fishing.”

I put my guitar away. I found electrical wire and two metal rods. I hooked the wire to the outside-light wiring and to the rods. I pushed the rods into damp soil at the edge of the swale and flipped the switch. Worms wriggled to the surface.

Wendell said, “Hey, I never saw such a thing. Where in hell did you learn about that?”

“Don’t touch them. You’ll get jolted. Wait'll I shut the power off.”

I shut it off. Wendell picked up the biggest worms. He bent down, picked up a worm, stood up too close in front of me, did it again, too close, and he knew he was too close.

We went inside, and he picked up the knife I’d used to peel wire, feinted at my gut with it turned around, handle coming at me first. I reminded myself he was very young. I said, “Wendell, if you did that with some people, you’d be stretched out on the floor.”

“I know it. You’re the first man I’ve been around that didn’t start hitting. You know what old Price caught me carving on the wall?”

“No.”

“Love. Isn’t that something? Kick me out for love?”

“Wendell, they didn’t kick you out for love. They kicked you out for cutting where you weren’t supposed to cut.”

“Don’t you think the word had something to do with it?”

“No.”

“I do. They asked me where I got the knife, but I wouldn’t say. I told them somebody give it to me, but I wouldn’t say who.”

By the terms of Wendell’s expulsion, he was supposed to stay home, but his parents worked in town all day, so he did what he wanted to do. He took his can of worms and walked across a field of sugar beets below the gravel road, toward the river.

In sunshine of fall days, contractors brought their machines and harvested the field of corn around the house. I disced top and bottom of the field with Gary’s wheel tractor so the contractors could get their machinery to the corn.

Pete and Mike came by just before dark. We sat in the front

room and drank beer and smoked. I left the lights off as day's light faded from the valley. Mike said, "That guitar you got. Maybe I can play that guitar a little bit?"

"Sure." I opened the case, took out the guitar, and handed it to Mike. "You got a belt buckle?"

"Yes, but I got it way over on this side, never scratch this pretty thing."

He played, fumbled with the strings, cacophony. Once in a while, a recognizable part of a tune among undisciplined strings. He stopped and held the guitar in his lap, "What you think, pretty good?"

I said, "I don't know Mike. Okay, I guess. Maybe if you practice more."

"Yeah, I don't know. Maybe you give me one more chance? It's dark now, maybe I can do it better."

"Sure, go ahead."

He started again, soft, mellifluous progression of chords with a melody of notes floating above, smooth, louder and then softer, parts of "Bolero," parts of classical works I knew but couldn't say the name, part of "Pier Gynt," and then a long medley of contemporary, popular songs. Then silence. Light from stars and the moon shone in the big south window. Mike opened my guitar case, took out the white rag, polished my guitar, put it into the case, coiled the shoulder strap and the rag into the case, closed and fastened it. He said, "That woman, your woman Diana, she ever coming back?"

"No."

"Damn them women."

Pete chuckled from the dark. "You say it, Mike. Damn them damn women. Give me one more beer. Damn them damn women he says,

and he's got six kids. Get another one. There's plenty. Get a Mexican woman. Mexican women don't do you that way."

Mike said, "Crap. Women's women. Mexican means nothing."

Pete said, "I bet you think Mike's Mexican, don't you?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

"Indian. Mostly Indian."

Gary sold the farm.

The new owner came by and said I had to go. No rush, but the house wouldn't be there by winter.

The leaves on the cottonwood trees lose their green. Leaves on the willow bushes growing densely along the river turn red and blow away in fall wind. Nights turn cold. I'm walking well. No limp. Usually.

I harvest six large, ripe melons from my garden, three cranshaws and three casabas. I pack them carefully in the back seat of my '53 chevy, and all the other produce I have room for. My black dog rides on the back seat, melons, carrots, kohlrabi, and cabbages piled around him. My cat crawls under the front seat and stays there.

I take the long journey slower than I ever have before. I look at all the country I drive through, Oregon desert, forests of southern Oregon, northern California, mountains.

I sleep two nights near side roads on the ground beside the car, with my dog beside me and my cat in the sleeping bag with me. I'm cold on the ground in the mountains before daylight, but in morning sunshine after I get out of my sleeping bag and put my boots on, I feel full of energy and alive. My dog and I run through forest and then back to the car. We load up and drive toward the highway.

The third day of my journey, I drove down into the northern

Sacramento Valley, across a hundred miles of valley floor, and back up into the Sierras and into Chip's place. Trees, brush and grass were still green, that far south.

I talked to old friends in the afternoon sunshine.

We sat in Chip's front yard in sunshine and ate ripe, juicy melons I brought from my garden.

Chip said, "You can't buy melon like this in the store."

"Nope. Nope, sure can't." Everyone agreed.

Diana drove in.

"Hello."

"Hello."

Like the passage of time never changed anything, just for an instant; just for an instant, everything fixed, as in a photograph.

"Hey, you're just in time for some mighty fine melon."

"I didn't know you were here. I didn't know you were back."

In letters, friends say several of them got together and harvested the rest of the garden. They canned 120 quarts of tomatoes. They picked half a pickup load of carrots, turnips, cabbages, melons, kohlrabi, beets, onions, garlic, beans, parsnips, peppers.

The new owner burned the house, tore down the barn and cow shed, cut down the cottonwood trees and pulled out the stumps, leveled the farm so he could water it all from one ditch.

The coldest winter in many years hit that part of Oregon, twenty-seven below zero. Mike's chickens froze to death and fell out of the trees where they roosted. His bitch had a litter of pups, and two of them were dead ringers for my black dog, down to their white chests and white front paws. I saw a photograph.

But in California, the days were still warm.

The chevy missed and lost power. I left it with a friend of Chip's

to fix it. I thought I'd go see my brother for a day or two.

I tried to catch a ride in a fast-moving machine. After dark, on that dark road, no one would stop, so I cut across, away from the highway down the roadless side of the mountain.

I carried my guitar, walked by starlight and felt my way with my feet. I climbed down dark bluffs, trying for an easy way down, thrilled with the idea that I might lose my footing, fall down the rocky face of the bluff, and die on rocks scattered at the bottom as the guitar hit rocks and busted with the full tone of six strings giving up life together.

At the bottom of the bluffs, I sit down on a rock and take my guitar out of its case. I play and sing the waxing moon up from the horizon and part way up the sky as it floods the earth with pale, silver light. I sing many songs, things I've been wanting to say but haven't gotten to, evolving back to "Hello moon. Welcome moon. It's been a long, dark night." Then I sit a while in the night, quiet as the moon.

I wipe my guitar down, put my guitar and the rag back into the case, and snap the case shut. I pick up my guitar and hike down the mountain in moonlight. I walk through wild grasses, wild rocks, toward the valley floor. It gets colder, but I keep moving, and that keeps me warm.