

The Garden

Carol Anne Malone

“We should plant a garden,” my son said. “Ya know, like the one Grandpa had out back of his house.”

I looked up at the sound of my son’s voice. I stood at the counter where I chopped vegetables for a salad. “Good morning,” I said with a forced smile. “You’re up early.”

“Yeah.” He yawned.

His scent hit me first—the rank smell of sour alcohol and acrid cigarette smoke that clung to him made my nostrils burn and my over-burdened mother’s heart constrict like too-tight stilettos.

My knife jerked back and forth, mutilating the onion I held against the cutting board. I pitched the remains into the bowl filled with salad greens. I volunteered to make a salad for the elderly ladies of our church, a service I performed with gratitude. I loved to help raise these lonely women’s spirits—instead they raised mine.

My son, twenty-eight—mentally anchored at fourteen—moved back home with his father and me after losing job number five. He stood in the doorway of the kitchen, chafing the palms of his hands across his pot-reddened eyes.

He yawned again and pulled his hand through his thick, unwashed hair. His brown hair stood up in tiny spikes like someone had yanked it through the holes of a colander. His jaw was beard roughened and patchy reminding me of the 1950’s toy—the Woolly Willy Magnetic Face where metal shavings are moved around a bald guy’s head and jaw with a small magic wand to create strange hair combinations.

“Gotta go to work early,” he said.

“At the machine shop?”

He grabbed a carrot I’d just peeled and took a bite. Chewed. “I’m working on some new gun barrels. Ak47. So smooth.” His eyes lit up. “Where’s dad?”

“He had to go to the office today.”

“Too bad. I wanted him to see my new gun barrel.”

I envied the relationship my son had with his father. I guess they’re close because my husband also experimented with marijuana and drugs in the early seventies. They had something in common.

“I could dig it up, ya know, get it ready to plant and stuff,” he said.

“What? Oh, yeah, the garden.” I felt encouraged. He’d never shown any interest in gardening and growing things before. He hadn’t shown interest in anything around the house, except for strip-mining the refrigerator and bumming money—I assumed he used for drugs. He told me he used the money for gas.

Sometimes when I looked at him, I saw the baby I held in my arms. Such promise. Or the happy, innocent child he’d been, laughing, building childhood dreams with his Legos. So full of life. He’s my only son—my only child—I loved him.

“Okay,” I said. “But it’s hard work. There’s a plot of open garden space in the backyard. The raised flower bed would be ideal for tomatoes and lettuce. You could plant me some jalapenos for salsa. The garden tools are in the garage. Knock yourself out.”

“Sweet.” He nodded, his smile took on a mysterious glint, but he moved around the counter and gave me an awkward one-armed hug. “Thanks mom. I love you.”

“I love you too.” I was so surprised by his seldom-shown display of affection that I ignored the funny feeling in my stomach, then I returned to my chopping.

He walked to the sink, poured himself a glass of water and drank. “Almost cut my finger off at work yesterday,” he said, then paused for effect.

“Ohmigosh.” I looked up again. Panic gripped my stomach. My son held up his right hand. I saw a nasty red mark above his pinky. “How?”

He chuckled. “Got too close to the grinder.”

“I thought you only worked the metal press.”

“I do both. Actually I can work most’a the machines in the shop.”

This is his sixth job, each requiring less and less skill, less brain power. “You better be careful. Don’t they make you wear gloves?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Can’t. Gotta feel the metal, if it’s still rough, ya know.”

“Well, be careful.”

“Got anything to eat?” He wandered through the kitchen, poked through all the cupboards, the pantry, opened the refrigerator, left the door open while he perused each shelf. I guess he hoped the food would magically pop out at him and become an edible meal.

“I’m making a salad for the lady’s luncheon. I made extra for you, if you want it. It’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

“Yeah. OK. Whatever.”

He closed the refrigerator door then slumped onto a bar stool across the counter from me. This morning he wore mourner’s black. Surprise. His ripped t-shirt sported a figure dressed in flowing black robes with a ram’s head covering the face. Didn’t they use that sort of stuff in Devil worship or was it a rock group?

I concentrated on slicing cucumbers, careful not to cut off one of my appendages.

“I’m scum.”

I didn’t look up. “What makes you say that?”

He crossed his arms on the counter then rested his chin on them. “My friends tell me I’m an idiot.”

“They’re hardly good judges. I wouldn’t give two cents for any of them or their opinions.”

“I can’t get good friends.”

“Relationships based on smoking pot, getting high, or ruining your life with alcohol doesn’t exactly build long-lasting friendships.”

“I can’t get a girlfriend.” He sighed—a frustrated sound.

I stopped slicing through a yellow pepper, looked up again. I saw despair in his hazy eyes. “I sure hope you’re not talking about Crissy. She’s hardly girlfriend material.”

“Nah. I know. She’d do anything for a score. But . . . maybe.”

I shook my head. “It’s hard to build a loving relationship beyond what you have with her when you’re both stoned all the time. You and Crissy are always mad at each other because you want the other one to be strong and stay sober. It’s hypocritical to think the other one should change when neither one will.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

The title of an old film popped into my head, “The Days of Wine and Roses.” Jack Lemmon married an innocent Lee Remick and because he’d been an alcoholic, he got her addicted too. Today’s equivalent should be entitled: “The Days of Wine and Doobies.”

He picked up a large red onion, tossed it in the air and caught it. “Did ya know I’m working as an apprentice?”

“That’s nice, dear.” I felt hopeful. Had he found another job, something that would require the use of his mind or his exceptional computer skills? “Apprentice for what?”

“Yeah. I’m helping my friend grow marijuana in a garden hidden in his lemon grove.”

“Oh. My. Gosh.”

I breathed in and out of my mouth, fought to remain calm. When had I turned into such a lousy parent? In the past, he’d tried to shock us by telling us about all the drugs he’d used, even threatened suicide. His father—much more lenient and forgiving than I—told me to be patient, that our son might one day realize how much we really loved him. I had my doubts. We continued to pray for him. However the only answer we received was to love him and get him help when he’d wanted help. Believe me; we’d tried—again and again and again.

What could I do but love him? I gave birth to him. “Well, that sounds . . . ah . . . ambitious. And illegal.”

He rolled his eyes. “Not anymore. Mom, ya just don’t get it.”

“I thought it was still illegal in California?”

“Arnold didn’t care. He said nobody cares if you smoke a few joints. It’s not illegal if it’s grown for personal use. Jerry’s cool with it.”

“Your own private pot paradise.”

He grinned. “Yep. Mom. Ya should have seen it. I held one pound of pure weed in my hands.” He held up his hands, his eyes glossy with pride, awed, like he’d been holding a newborn infant—like I had held him.

“I’m thinking of selling it.”

A piece of me broke off, joined the rest of my parenting skills on the cutting board. “I thought you grew it for personal use only.”

“Geez, mom. There’s stores all over the place. Just walk through Venice Beach. Med clinics right next ta weed stores. I’ve got a medical marijuana card. Growin’ and sellin’ marijuana could make me some serious cash.”

“How ambitious of you.” I bit my tongue. I had to try again. “Please let us get you some help—”

“Dammit, mom.” He threw up his hands and flashed to his feet. “Just stop. We’ve been over this before. I’m not gonna go to rehab. I’m not gonna quit. I love getting high and getting drunk with my friends. I love that feeling. It makes me feel normal. Just leave me the hell alone.”

“It’s turning your brain into marshmallow fluff—and you into someone I don’t recognize anymore.”

He looked at me as if to say, “Buy a vowel, or go to hell,” then slunk away.

I felt the sting of tears behind my eyes. For a long time I stood staring outside at the empty garden plot in our backyard.

My God, what had I done wrong?

My hands trembled when I sliced through another carrot. I felt physical pain for him. I looked down at the cutting board. A dark red puddle began to flow across the board. The tip of my finger lay next to a carrot. I watched—fascinated—as the red engulfed the orange carrots, the green cucumbers and the yellow peppers.

Once again I’d given up my own flesh and blood for my son.