

The Nature of Giving, Receiving & Lilac Bushes

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I planted a lilac bush beside my home when I moved to this place four years ago. It is situated amidst an ever-expanding garden of perennials and what has become a bevy of bird feeders. I can see its glorious clusters of purple flowers through my bedroom window as I awaken, catching a hint of its unmistakable scent. Beyond the lilac bush, the deep green woods are filled with wildflowers bearing colorful local names like Trillium, Trout Lily, Jack-in-the-Pulpit, Solomon's Seal, and Jacob's Ladder. As you can tell, I have a great love for all things that flower and fly. But if I were asked to single out one bloom as my favorite, it would have to be the purple lilac. Many times I have buried my nose in clumps of them. I've lingered beside them on city streets, looking both ways before pinching a couple to take home or carry with me. I've tucked them behind an ear, in a shirt pocket or through a buttonhole. I have arranged them in vases or glasses of water, making humble living spaces smell extravagant.

With very few exceptions, I've planted lilacs in every place I've ever lived. I planted one next to the garage of the rented duplex where my daughter was born. I planted two in the front yard of the brick fixer-upper where my husband and I laid down the hardwood floors board-by-board. I planted one at a house by a lake and another next to a small apartment across from a park. I planted one beside a cracked sidewalk, another next to a vegetable garden, and one small twig of a thing alongside the water meter of an inexpensive walkup with linoleum floors and good light for painting. Because lilacs take several years to bloom, I have seen very few of those plants come to flower, even though I can imagine them all faithfully blooming each spring. I can envision a man slowing his pace as he catches the scent, or a woman greeted by their fragrance as she gets out of her car. I can see someone pause while washing dishes, a light breeze carrying that scent through an open kitchen window. I imagine an older woman cutting a few to bring inside just to brighten up the place, and a teenager looking both ways before pinching a few to take home or carry with him. I see them tucked behind ears, in shirt pockets or buttonholes, and arranged in vases and glasses of water. I can picture a person unconsciously perceiving the scent as it floats on the air, and when their heart feels lighter, they don't know why. I can even imagine someone giving the same blessing I've spoken myself when presented with blooms I did not plant: "Whoever you are, wherever you are, a blessing upon your head and heart."

Lilacs are old-fashioned flowers. They remind me of visiting my paternal grandparents, Calvin and Edna Newcomer. Grandpa was a twin, but his brother was born too small and did not live beyond a few days. He spoke to me only once of his brother, saying his tiny head could have fit in a teacup; his name was James. My grandfather did not go to school beyond the eighth grade, but he always had a stack of books from the library and his cherished *National Geographic* magazines beside his reading chair. He played the fiddle. He married my grandmother. He worked thirty years for the New York Central Railroad Line. Board-by-board he built their kitchen cabinets, and when he did not feel like

listening, he turned off his hearing aid. He attended church every Sunday, went fishing religiously, and his backyard was filled with the fruit trees, gardens and lilacs he had planted. My grandmother's people were Indiana Amish folk by the name of Brenamen. She was raised by her older sisters after their mother was lost to the fever when Edna was only three years old. She named my father James Benjamin in remembrance of her father and Cal's brother. Her most prized possession was an image of a distelfink bird her mother had painted on a piece of good cloth. When times were tight, she worked as a cook for extra cash in the homes of the affluent. She canned tomatoes, corn relish, and bread and butter pickles, and put up pears and peaches in sweet, heavy syrup in blue mason jars. She embroidered elegant floral patterns in small, neat stitches on practical items such as dishtowels, tablecloths and handkerchiefs. She often smelled of rosewater, Lily-of-the-Valley, and lilacs, which she dabbed on her wrists from the five-and-dime perfume bottles she kept on her nightstand with her hand mirror, brush and comb.

My grandparents lived in a small city in a small house with a small yard, but together they created a Garden of Eden. I remember stepping outside; the whap of the screen door and the whitewashed wooden steps. In that moment, I was Dorothy Gale walking out the back door into the Technicolor Land of Oz. You see, my grandparents had planted every inch of their backyard with flowers, fruits and vegetables. There were corn, beans, strawberries, rhubarb and several types of fruit trees: apricot, plum and sour cherry. There was also a little pond where large, lazy goldfish swam and waited for the little bread balls we'd drop into the water for them to eat. Together my grandparents had created something glorious, useful and beautiful – all this and a lilac bush. And so it came to pass that New Eden was wrought by the hands of a railroad worker and a woman who cooked in other people's kitchens for extra money.

Calvin was first to pass beyond the veil of this world, and a few years later Edna followed him. I don't know if the next owners of that little house kept up the gardens. I figure, at least, the trees remain there, blossoming as reminders and giving the gifts of their best nature whether or not the fruit is put up in blue mason jars. I imagine there are still lilac bushes preserved like love letters written on good stationary with an old style fountain pen. In the course of our lives, we plant many things, assuming we will see the results of our work. We plant a row of tomatoes, expecting to eat them in mid-July. We put water on to boil, intending to drop in ripe corn immediately after it's been picked and shucked (which incidentally is the only sanctified way to eat Indiana sweet corn). Yarn that we bought in October is knitted into warm wool socks and then wrapped in Christmas paper. A baby conceived on New Year's Eve is born nine months after. The good chocolate we saved becomes a birthday cake. But despite the fact that we can and do see the literal fruits of our labor, so much of what we are and what we do moves out into the world like the scent of flowers on a warm spring day. We sing our songs, which are momentary and mostly made of air, light and our best intentions. We work for social, environmental and political change for the sake of our children's children. We are here and then we are gone. We bloom but for a season, leaving behind footprints and echoes, fruit trees and embroidered linens. We pass on a love for books and *National Geographic* magazine. We send out our songs like

birds into the air and trust that these winged things will land safely enough. We give our children middle names that belonged to people we remember with great tenderness. We pass on the idea that it is honorable to give to an unknown recipient and that giving the best of ourselves was never designed to be a transaction with an equal balance sheet. We write love letters, we learn the names of wild flowers and birds, we build a life board-by-board, we plant lilac bushes and in moments of awareness and gratitude we raise our hands into the air and whisper, "Whoever you are, wherever you are, blessings upon your head and heart."