

The Secret Garden

A secret garden door leads the way into my mother's heart. In the past year and a half we have been wandering through a difficult garden. Since she moved in with us, we have been marking boundaries, desperately trying to create spaces for our flowers to grow. Her life has changed from personal freedom to one of imposed boxes. Too many stairs impede her movement, loss of her driver's license restricts her choices. The frustration of a temporary stay has mushroomed into an unending twilight zone of WAITING FOR THE MOVE TO CALIFORNIA, as we wait for our house to sell.

It has taken us a year or so, but the garden is beginning to bud. Spaces are being filled by piano music and shared books, eating out and plays and concerts. As Spring is spreading throughout the coast, sunshine brushes the sky with sparkling diamonds of warmth. Our garden is helping my mom cope as the demands of old age are claiming her body. As we are settling into a more peaceful garden, our separate areas are being swept clear, allowing the fragrance of memories to arise...

The fragrance of roses tumbles into the air as I open the envelope. Pink Cecil Bruner petals float into my hands. I know immediately who sent the letter. It is from my mother.

Ever since I was young, my mother wove flowers into my life. As a child, I learned not to touch the delicate gardenias, to preserve their graceful scent. My mother filled the house with roses, though gardenias are her favorite. The baby roses (we always called the Cecil Bruner roses by that name) were also fashioned into floral wreaths for the

Spring crowning of Mary at our church. We had a procession in May when all the children dressed up and the girls wore wreaths in their hair. We sang and a high school girl put a crown on Mary's head, honoring her as the Mother of God-with maybe a hint of the honor due to all mothers in the month of May.

When I moved away from Southern California and moved north to Portland, where flowers don't bloom all year, my mom began sending me the dried blossoms in winter to warm the dreary days. Every time I came home to visit, the baby roses were in tiny vases in my room, near the bed.

This separation was very difficult for us. I grew up surrounded by family, cousins and friends, especially at every holiday. A longing for home drew me back each Christmas. But the spaces became very empty between Christmas and summer vacation.

Yet distance served its purpose, as all things do. My parents and I surged through intense emotions at every greeting and parting. We established new rules and boundaries as we progressed from a child to adult relationship to an adult to adult relationship. I, of course, view our relationship as adult to adult, but I have the feeling that my Mom still views it as child to adult sometimes.

As my children have grown, I have come to understand my mother's relationship with me through my interactions with them. On the good days, when one of them has shared something deep from their life, I marvel at the bond between us. One night as I looked at my daughter in slumber, enjoying the warm moments that had just passed between us, I realized that this was what my mother missed so much when I was away. This is what I will miss someday when my own

children grow up and develop a life of their own that is not totally centered around me. This thought of course, made these moments all the more precious and magical.

Last year I planted a baby rose bush outside my deck. I am waiting for the day it blooms. I want to fill an envelope with those tiny blossoms and send it to my mom, just so she'll know I remember all those special memories with flowers...

Magically the plum trees burst into blossom outside my window. I watch my daughter racing by early spring bulbs pushing their green stalks out of the earth. Newborn grass climbs the hillside. The sun, becoming less shy, glistens through the raindrops. Some days it is actually warm.

I have to create time to see those blossoms, though. This seems to take a lot of effort. In this frenzied world, all of my moments are filled with the performance of daily necessities. I am so exhausted sometimes, that I collapse in front of that mechanical box that offers cheap representations of the life that is flowing all around me. TV melts the time for awareness into oblivion.

Yet it really only takes a few minutes to look out the window and muse over the passing of the seasons. Another day I walk outside to look closer at the daffodil leaves. As I touch them, I remember what the bulbs look like. Their flimsy outer shells are often cracked, revealing their tough, inner core. Out of this center the flowers rise each year. It is a miracle that beauty comes from this struggle. From this core a bud develops each Spring, withers and passes away. But the next year it unfolds again.

The force of life is humming everywhere, through everything. As I look at my daughter running, and listen to the strains of Peter and the Wolf coming from my son's clarinet, I recognize the cycle of rebirth and death in their growing.

As soon as I got used to those enduring baby smiles, the baby was no more. S/he became a toddler. As soon as my ears learned to yearn for that cute cadence of baby talk, my child had grown beyond that tender neediness of me and was changing into an independent person. The days of babyhood and toddlerhood are gone forever, except in memory, pictures and video. That precious child is no more, but their essence arises again in a resurrected form.

As I see my youngest child becoming herself, and my oldest ripening away from me into maturity, I realize how all these cycles and seasons are connected. Spring is so magical, because it makes everything new again. Our spirits need to be renewed. Pausing to wonder and mourn change is a necessary part of being. Understanding life's journey involves acceptance of the natural cycles of death and rebirth, pain and growth. If we are patient and take time to be aware, everyone in our lives redeems themselves too, just like the earth every Spring...

The rose bush is ten years old or more now. My husband calls it BARB-Big Angry Rose Bush. It reaches out to claim more space on the garage wall, the deck railing. We trim it back each year, tie its expanding frame to the support posts. She rewards us in May with aromatic blossoms.

As I gaze at those tiny pink flowers, I know I will take cuttings to our new house. I will also get cuttings from my mom's house. These

roses will grow together, as my mom and I have, as my children and I have. And in this new house, this new life, my mom and I will create another garden. We will share the secrets of life that we have learned, as we have matured from child to mother, to grandmother and great-grandmother. Flowers are the symbols of creation and rebirth. Their scent the invisible lingering of wandering souls. My mother has shared her love of flowers with me, I will share this with my children. In the garden of life we have created our individual spaces. Our hearts spill over with gratitude for the lessons we have learned. The secret of growing a garden is love.