



I thought I wanted to create
my mother's dream garden.
But the plants taught me a
different, important lesson.

Force *of* Nature

BY ALEXANDRA RISEN FROM
UNEARTHED: LOVE, ACCEPTANCE,
AND OTHER LESSONS FROM AN
ABANDONED GARDEN

A photograph of green leaves and a pink flower. The leaves are in the upper half of the page, and the pink flower is in the lower left corner. The background is white.

WE ARE NOT actively looking for a new house. A bigger garden, though, is often on our minds. Are we finally becoming our parents? It seems our agent, Wesley, knows us better than we know ourselves.

The property is in our midtown Toronto neighbourhood—right across the street, in fact, tucked just out of view. I’m curious: I love hidden places, like the secret buildings that I constructed out of shoeboxes as a child, and this one fits the bill.

Wesley walks us down the long, narrow lane that

runs between and behind two neighbouring houses. The driveway opens to an asphalt courtyard in front of a rectangular one-storey ranch-style building with a flat roof. “Wait until you see the back,” Wesley says. “An acre of garden.”

Impossible, I think.

I stare at the three-and-a-half-metre-high brick facade. It *is* like a shoebox house.

There’s a gaping hole at the base of the front door. Its perimeter sprouts jagged dandelion leaves.

“Sorry about the weeds,” Wesley says. “Uh, the place might need a little work.”

“Fairy clocks. Not weeds,” I say.

“Excuse me?” Wesley asks.

“She loves dandelions,” my husband, Cam, says. “Believe it or not, those are working in your favour.”

“Dandelion flowers close at dusk and open in the morning light,” I explain.

Mom introduced me to the flower when I was a toddler. "Look for the longest stems," she'd say. And I did, because the garden was the only place I got her attention. My mother braided yellow chains into crowns and bracelets that I would wear for days. She stored them in the refrigerator at night to keep them fresh. They made me feel important.

Inside the house, we enter a room that's bordered by windows on three sides. I catch my breath. It's the outdoors magically brought inside. The remaining wall is a painted canvas. A single tree starts on the right, and its branches spread up, down and to the left. Translucent white flowers cover the branches, each with five petals and a blush of pink.

"Sour cherry," I whisper. "Mom's tree." The smell of fermenting fruit fills my memory. At 77, Mom still spends much of her time in her garden, which is not so much a hobby as it is a source of bounty—gooseberries, peas, corn—that can be put up for sustenance throughout the winter. Though she's lived in this country since 1952, my mother still has the homegrown-is-best sensibility of the new Ukrainian immigrant she once was. Back home in Edmonton, she's busy with the usual late-summer harvest, gathering bowls of cherries that she pits and preserves in a heady liqueur, their juice leaving bright red stains. This room is

what the entire house could be. An ode to my mother.

Wesley hurries us through a large living area to glass doors that open to a cantilevered balcony. "This land was part of a prominent family estate about 100 years ago," he says. And suddenly, we have our first view of the garden. The forest. The jungle.

This property is my parents' dream, the next generation's betterment of their lot, literally. Now we stand in front of it, struggling between the guilt of our opportunity and our fear of not knowing what to do with it.



WE HAVE TO CLEAR
THE GARDEN BEFORE
MOM GETS TOO
FRAIL TO TRAVEL.
I WANT HER TO SEE IT
IN ALL ITS GLORY.

ON OUR FIRST day of tackling the Amazon, I inhale the verdant heat that wafts off the leaves. The sun glistens on the spiderwebs that crisscross the path ahead. We'll have to cut through those, the police tape the spiders have laid to keep us out of their territory. "I'm sorry," I whisper to the gangly arachnids. I quash my guilt for wrecking nature's course of the past decade. We're returning the garden to its splendour.

Mom still can't believe we bought the house. "I hope you crazy kids know what you're doing," she said on the telephone not long after we moved in. "So tell me about the land."

"It's been let go for years," I said. "It's an overgrown forest down a cliff, once owned by a famous family."

"Really?" She didn't believe me.

When we talked, I noticed that Mom's voice was slurring a bit. And her dizzy spells have become more frequent. It turns out they're actually a series of mini-strokes, caused by a blood clot in her carotid artery. Though the surgery to remove it goes well, Mom's failing memory leaves her with no choice but to sell her house, the one I grew up in and where she spent so many hours tending to her garden. Cam and I offer to move her to Toronto, but neither she nor my sister, Sonia, agrees. She opts instead for an assisted-care facility with plants.

We have to clear the garden, I tell myself, before Mom gets too frail to travel. I want her to see it in all its glory, and to go home and tell Sonia, "I didn't know she had it in her."

MY GARDENING BOOKS take up a wall of shelves, categorized by type of plant or cultivation advice. I also have several books about the human relationship with nature. Cam rolls his eyes when I talk about biophilia (love of living things); he laughed when I told him dirt is the new Pro-

zac because some soil bacteria produce serotonin. It infuriates me. But "Never give up" is our family motto, and I'm determined to convert him, and especially our five-year-old son, Max, to a deeper understanding of the natural world.

"This project is bigger than I thought," says Cam, surveying a growing pile of bills as he contemplates the work still to be done: we're already a year in, and there's landscaping, a pond to rehabilitate, weeds to be tackled—not to mention the interior of the house itself, which needs to be renovated.

"I guess we save what we can," I say.

"Well, winter is coming—let's start again next spring."

That night, I sleep and wake fitfully, dejected that we've gone as far as we can with the garden, which seems to be nowhere. Waiting until next spring will feel like an eternity.

I'M DISCOURAGED AND determined. Too much time has passed: Max is almost eight years old now, and we're stuck on garden cleanup. Cam won the battle: the house came first, and we postponed a year of outdoor work.

Now another spring has arrived. The outdoor paths are roughly clear, but I'm still tackling the weed cover. I walk up and down the garden stairs, up and down, shoulders hunched as I carry at least 15 kilograms of plant detritus per trip. I've amassed almost

two dozen biodegradable waste bags at the top of the driveway; they're spilling onto the front of the property next door. These steps are so embedded in my muscle memory that their form pulses through my nightmares.

My physical body has unexpectedly meshed into this project as much as my emotions have. The grueling work brings our family closer to the garden. It makes us feel we deserve its beauty.



MOTHER NATURE
DECLARED WAR WITH
A BRUTAL STORM,
LEAVING UTTER
DEVASTATION ACROSS
THE GARDEN'S BASE.

IN AUTUMN, I stare at my counter of pine cones—natural mulch, the same stuff I'm about to blow across the garden with a giant pumper truck. Maybe I should've left them under the trees, like Cam should have left the grasses. As much as we think we're working *with* nature in the garden, we're also working *against* it. We celebrate it, and then we manipulate the hell out of it. I hope Mother Nature forgives us.

Sonia calls with an update. Mom's not eating well. I sense the resignation in her voice.

"She needs a change of scenery," I say, starting to panic. "Can we fly her here for a visit? I'll come get her, and we'll hire a nurse to come, too."

"She can't fly, Alex," Sonia says. "With her heart, it's impossible."

My anger comes from deep within, rising quickly like a new spring, surprising both of us. "How do you know it's impossible? Have you asked her doctor? *You're* not the one who decides."

"She'll have a stroke. Her arteries are blocked. She *can't* fly," Sonia says firmly.

"Let her doctor decide," I demand.

She agrees, annoyed that I don't trust her. I'm offended that she has become the gateway to my mother. We hang up, both wanting to say more. My sister has lost hope.

"Sonia's not giving up," Cam explains when I tell him. "She's preparing for the inevitable."

MY PULSE POUNDS in my ears as I examine the aftermath of the brutal summer storm that swept through last night. Mother Nature declared all-out war, leaving utter devastation across the garden's base. The demolished 150-year-old oak is lying across our path where it fell, crushing all the trees and shrubs in its way. What's left of the trunk, the bottom four and a half metres, is cracked, splintered and stripped.



The author, in the meticulously reconstructed pagoda at the centre of her garden.

The new redbud, the serviceberry, the old peonies, the mulberry tree, all the flowers near the bog, macerated. I've never seen a lightning strike's fury. The heart of the garden—my beloved white oaks, with their sweet kernels that feed the neighbourhood rodents and birds—is broken. To make matters worse, mud covers the slope, and the mulch has been pushed to the property's tableland in soggy piles.

In the evening Cam tells me a story about a wagon builder who always left a few exposed oaks in the middle of cleared farmland. He claimed that exposure to the elements made these trees stronger, and wagon wheels made from them were able to withstand the heaviest loads.

"Do you know how much work has been destroyed? How much time and money lost? This is all I have been doing for the past few years."

"I know it feels that way, but the garden will emerge stronger," he says. "And we can fix it."

ONE EVENING A few weeks later, Sonia calls. I assume it's for our usual Sunday night chat. It's not. Mom's health has worsened. When my sister visited that afternoon, the nurse explained that it's become impossible to feed her. Even the thickened liquids choke her, and she's refusing to open her mouth when the nurses try to slip a straw between her lips.

Sonia pauses and I stare out the kitchen window, clutching the

phone. A few maple keys float down like helicopters, as squirrels on the ground munch on the interior berries. I remember when I convinced Max to eat one, telling him it tasted like a green pea.

I fly home to Edmonton immediately. Within a week, Mom is unresponsive. I sit in the chair by her bed, curl into a ball, and close my eyes. I dream of my mother. She's smiling. She descends a hilly dirt path to a still lake under a cloudless violet sky. I watch the back of her favourite flowered dress flutter in the wind as she gets smaller. She is *ch'i*, the Taoist life force, soon to be *shui* of flowing water and plants.

ONE YEAR LATER, Sonia arrives with gifts: a gardener's apron she had sewn for Mom and a cutting from a peony that was grown from a piece of one of our mother's plants. I'm overcome with relief, joy and sadness.

I watch her dig a small hole in the cold November soil, put in the root, and gently cover it as if she's swaddling a baby. Legacy is a responsibility.

The wind blows against the chimes hanging on a nearby tree branch, ones my father created out of copper pipes—the only thing I brought home after his funeral more than 10 years ago. And suddenly, the tears flow.

Tears for my parents. Tears for years of scrapes, an injured back and the realization that Mom didn't really need to see the garden; I just needed to finish it. As the seasons passed and the plants lived, died and disintegrated into the earth over a decade, their seeds taught me that it's never too late to start again.

I didn't know when we bought the house that blossoms are symbolic of our brief journey in this world. I see it now, because I, like every living thing, am transient too. Yet I'm never alone in the energy of nature.

Max will walk into his future connected with the earth, the oceans and the life within. I'll watch him, and all who follow, from the vantage point of my garden, grateful that my parents gave me an unspoken connection to the land, and an understanding that life is fleeting, and that life is *now*. **R**

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FACT OR FICTION

A perfect life makes horrible art.

CHRIS ROCK