

Strangers in the Garden

Nancy Bourne

“There’ll be rats,” she said, facing him over English muffins at the red Formica-topped kitchen table. She noticed, not for the first time, the decided slope of her husband’s once broad shoulders, the skin sagging at the corner of his right eye. From the open kitchen window, she breathed in apple blossoms, freshly turned earth.

“It’s scientific,” he said. “Read the book.” She stared at the liver spots on his hand as he shoved the book across the table. A slight figure, just over five feet, she had more gray now than red in the twist of hair fastened on top of her small, compact head.

“I don’t have to read a book to know about rats. You remember Craighead Grocery. It took us years to get rid of those rats. They’ll be back if you take to burying garbage in the yard.”

“It’s scientific,” he repeated, as though he hadn’t heard her.

“Maybe so. But in this yard, it’s unsanitary.”

“Read the book,” he said and got up from the table.

“Stubborn old man,” she muttered.

She peered over half-glasses at his faded blue slacks, stained with the black dirt of the garden, the moth holes in the sleeve of his navy wool sweater. His thick white hair hung ragged on his neck.

“Look at you,” she said. “You’re a mess.”

He turned and fixed her with the light blue eyes she had fallen in love with forty years before. “Goddamn it, Lucy! Be nice to me.”

That made her look, really look, through the battered clothes, through the years, to the intense lean face, the thin prominent nose, the sudden, unexpected smile.

“It’s not easy,” she said, smiling up at him.

“Read the book,” he said.

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Forty years ago it had been easy. Forty years ago she couldn’t take her hands off him. She was teaching seventh grade and had run the gamut of the so-called eligible bachelors in Spottswood, Virginia. They were a dull lot and she was hungry for a fresh face.

“I hear there’s this new man in town, buying that printing business over on

Loyal Street," her friend Elsie told her.

"What'd you hear about him?"

"Name's Frank Stamps and he's back from the war. I've seen him. He's tall, about six feet, and his hair's naturally curly and coal black."

"How come he'd want that print business? They say it's about to go under."

"You can ask him yourself. I hear he's coming to the Victory Ball."

"You think so?" The city was putting on a dance in the City Armory that weekend to celebrate the end of the war. Everybody was coming.

"What else do you know about him?" she asked.

"He smokes cigars."

"Yeah?"

"He likes whiskey."

Lucy smiled.

"And he cusses."

"I want to meet this man!" she said.

Elsie laughed.

Well, you couldn't miss him at the Ball. He stood a head taller than almost everybody, and he looked like victory itself in his Army uniform. His black hair was shiny; she could tell he'd tried to slick it down, but sprigs of it kept springing up. His face was red, not like he was blushing but a healthy red, like he'd been in the sun a lot. And his large nose was thin along the ridge and straight.

Right away he asked Lucy for a dance. She didn't remember much of what they talked about that night; she just remembered that he danced like he was in charge and he smelled of cigars and she couldn't take her eyes off of him. He was that powerful.

The very next night he showed up at her house in navy gabardine trousers, worn shiny at the knees, and a white dress shirt that was frayed at the collar. He later told her he'd worn that Army uniform for the last time and good riddance.

"I've just had raw onions for my dinner," he said, holding out a peeled onion. "Better take a bite, or you won't be able to stand me."

Lucy took one look at that curly hair and those light blue eyes, and she bit down on that onion like it was ambrosia.

It was true. He liked his whiskey and he cussed and he smoked cigars and he was more fun than anybody she'd ever met. She loved the way he spun her around when they danced, loved the easy way he laughed, his head thrown back. Loved the way he touched her with his square-shaped hands and blunt fingertips. He didn't have much money, but he had the smell of the future on him. She married him six months later and never looked back.

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She read his book and admonished herself for being so cranky. Composting seemed harmless enough. But then a month or so later, as she was standing at the kitchen window, she saw him rummaging through the garbage, picking up egg shells and rotten tomatoes and dumping them into a blue plastic bucket. He carried the bucket over to the composting pit he'd dug, and then, like in a fairy tale, a large gray rat streaked out of the pit and ran for the fence.

She stormed out to the back.

"I told you there'd be rats," she yelled.

But he just stared into the tangle of red tomatoes and eggshells on the ground.

"What are you hollering about now?"

"Are you blind? A huge rat just ran practically over your foot."

And he started laughing. Laughing! "Well, I'll be," he said. "And I didn't even see it."

"It's not funny," she said.

They stood facing each other over the open pit. She crossed her bare arms in the cool September air.

"You have to cover up that hole," she said.

"Why?"

"Why?" She couldn't believe him. "Because it's unsanitary. Because there are rats. Because it's crazy."

"Stop yelling," he said.

"I'm yelling because I'm scared," she said.

He frowned. "Of a rat?"

"No. Well, yes. Of course I'm scared of rats."

He laughed again. "They won't hurt you."

"It's not just that; *you* scare me."

"*Me?*"

"Not you exactly." She didn't know how to say it. She didn't even know what she meant. It was something about that laugh. Not his usual belly laugh with his head thrown back; it was like he was embarrassed or confused. And he hadn't even noticed the rat. "Forget it," she said. "It was the rat."

"I'll get some poison," he said. And then he stood there, waiting, watching her.

“No,” she cried out, close to tears, “no rats, no poisons.” And she rushed back to the warmth of the kitchen, leaving him standing there, the blue bucket dangling from his hand like a child’s Easter basket.

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It wasn’t his to poison. The garden was hers too. Before they married, Frank had never even touched a spade, but Lucy had learned to grow vegetables from her father. So in those early, giddy days, she taught her new husband to make a vegetable garden. They dug up the entire back yard of their recently purchased house and planted carrots, tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, parsnips, onions, even corn. Their Forest Knolls neighbors peered over their hedges, from their identical squares of green grass and tulip borders, staring at the two of them, the tall, dark-haired man and his young, red-headed wife, groveling in the dirt, laughing, kissing. But before long, the neighbors were grinning down at them, shouting advice, and taking home buckets of vegetables.

Lucy remembered one summer evening early in their marriage, Frank bursting into the kitchen, his fingernails black with dirt, holding up in the sun-washed air a perfect sphere of an onion. Their first.

“Open up, Red,” he said, thrusting it at her.

“Let me sauté it first.” She was laughing, kissing his neck, his chin, his mouth.

“Nope. It’s the very first onion from the Garden of Eden. We don’t even have fire yet. We eat it raw.”

She started to peel it, when he shouted, "Wait," and reached under the kitchen sink for their bottle of Jack Daniels.

"Sit down, Red, we're celebrating." And he poured two full glasses of bourbon, put thin slices of the onion on toast, and they celebrated right into their second-hand brass double bed.

Frank took to gardening with the same zeal he applied to everything: printing, dancing, chatting up customers. He had bought the printing business with a little inheritance from his granddaddy down in South Carolina. The business was heavily in debt, but Frank figured that the country was coming out of the depression, and with luck and hard work he could turn that shop into a thriving operation. Which he did. Stamps Printing. First he figured out all by himself how to use a Linotype machine to set type. Before long he knew everybody in town and had more business than he knew what to do with. He was thirty-five at the time, seven years Lucy's senior, and a ball of fire. Running the press, talking to customers, racing about town drumming up business, always laughing and joking and smoking those cigars. His energy never flagged. He served on the school board, ran the Community Fund Drive, and was president of Kiwanis. The only organization he didn't run at one time or another was First Baptist.

"God's got enough soldiers in his army without me," he'd say, when the preacher tried to recruit him for the Board of Deacons. "Besides, I'd have to cut back on the whiskey and the goddamns."

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The three children they brought into the world rebelled against all the weeding, watering, and picking they were forced to do. The garden was a

chore, not a passion. And so it was left to their parents to tend with all the love they felt for each other. But after the children left home, the garden began to overwhelm them. There were just too many zucchini and eggplant, cabbage and carrots, beans and peas, raspberries and strawberries. Lucy cooked and canned and froze, shared with the neighbors and gave to the soup kitchen at First Baptist, but the vegetables kept multiplying. She insisted on planting a smaller garden, and Frank agreed. But by then he was retired and had more time, and the garden grew even larger, the yield more abundant. Lucy had nightmares of rotten vegetables spilling out all over the yard. Frank seemed unaware of the burden he was placing on his wife, even though she was getting older and was constantly reminding him.

And then the people started appearing.

First, a woman, somewhere in her late fifties, showed up wearing faded pink cotton slacks and a lime green tie-dyed shirt, with a cloth bag dangling off her skinny arm.

“Who’s that?” Lucy asked Frank. They were standing at the kitchen window, watching the woman pick green beans off one of the bushes.

He smiled and nodded in her direction. “Her name might be Page or something like that.”

“You know her?”

He thought for a minute. “I could have met her at the soup kitchen.”

“What do you mean, you could have met her at the soup kitchen?”

“I suppose I did.”

“What’s she doing here?”

He shrugged. “I guess she’s hungry.”

“What’s wrong with the soup kitchen?”

“Nothing, I guess.”

“Then why’s she here?”

“I must have invited her.”

“Well, did you or didn’t you?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Come on, Frank,” she said. “You know we can’t have strangers rummaging around in our back yard.”

“She’s not a stranger. I told you, I’m pretty sure I met her at the kitchen.”
He went back to reading the paper.

“It’s my garden too, Frank.” Her voice was high-pitched, shrill.

“Why are you fussing at me?” he asked.

It was a good question. He was only being generous. So why was she be-

grudging this poor woman a few vegetables? She liked her privacy; that was part of it. But it was more than that; she felt irritated at Frank when she should have felt proud of him for being kind, and she didn't know why.

The next day a couple of teenagers showed up. She said nothing while they picked their fill of berries, but afterwards, she called the Reverend Lee at First Baptist.

"If it's alright with you," she said, "I'd rather send vegetables and fruit to the soup kitchen than have folks show up in our garden."

"Of course, Lucy, and thank you. You can call any time, and I'll have somebody pick up whatever you're donating."

"Frank says he invited folks from the kitchen to our garden. Did you know that?"

"I *have* heard him inviting folks to your garden. He's so generous, but I did wonder." The Reverend Lee hesitated. "You know, he's been hanging around the soup kitchen a lot lately."

She tried to hide her surprise. "Cooking?"

"Not exactly. He's been mostly chatting with folks. Eating with them sometimes."

Lucy felt something inside her chest tighten. She told herself that there was nothing wrong with going to the soup kitchen, being friendly with all those hungry people. She could imagine Frank cooking or hauling a truck-load of corn up to the church. He'd done that frequently. But it wasn't like

him to sit around just talking to a bunch of homeless people.

The preacher echoed her thoughts. "I'm probably off base here, but Frank doesn't seem himself."

She wanted to say, you're right. He's luring rats and strangers into our garden and doesn't remember it. But she wasn't ready to admit she was scared.

So she said, "I'd appreciate it if you'd talk to him. Maybe you can find out what he's thinking."

Later that night she brought up the subject with Frank, but he got defensive.

"Can't I help out at the soup kitchen without you nosing in?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "You're right."

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For several weeks, no more visitors appeared. Then one evening just before dusk, a young man with a mean looking dog, part German Shepard, part mutt, showed up in the garden, a paper bag tucked under his arm, and started picking raspberries. He had a scarred-up complexion and a skinny blond pony-tail, and his tee-shirt didn't quite cover his bulging white belly. Lucy saw him from the kitchen window and came running out of the house.

“Who’s that?” she hissed at Frank, who was stooped down in the cabbage plants pulling weeds.

That started the dog to growling.

Frank looked up and frowned. “Hey there!” he called out.

The man watched Frank for a minute, then unzipped his baggy khaki trousers and started to urinate on the berries.

“Oh my God,” Lucy muttered and turned away. The dog bared its teeth and growled even louder.

But Frank just laughed. “What’re you doing?” he asked, as he struggled to his feet.

“You said I could pick all the fruit I want,” the man said, zipping up his trousers. He sounded defensive.

“Well, I’ll be damned. When d’I say that?”

“Yesterday.”

Lucy stared at Frank. Suddenly the dog lunged at Frank, barking and snapping at his pants, and knocked him into the cabbage plants. The man grabbed the dog by its collar and smacked it hard on the nose.

“Shut your face, you bitch,” he yelled, and he headed out to the street without another word, yanking the whimpering animal by its collar and pick-

ing up his bag of berries with his free hand.

Lucy took Frank by the arm and supported him as he struggled to get up. After several attempts, he pulled himself to his feet while she dusted him off.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

He managed a laugh. “That was some dog,” he said.

“That man was lying, wasn’t he?” Lucy asked, her voice shaking. “Surely you didn’t invite that man in here?”

Frank was staring at his trousers, which the dog had ripped. “I might have seen him in town. He had a sign.”

She exploded. “You invited that man into our yard?”

“Like I said, I might have. I don’t remember. You keep telling me we have too many vegetables. I was trying to help. He had a sign that said he was hungry.”

“What he is, is dangerous. Frank, look at me.”

He turned to face her. His shoulders were sloping down; his light blue eyes searched Lucy’s face for approval.

“I’ve been trying to do what’s right,” he said. His usually deep voice ended on a high note, like he was asking a question.

She stared up at him. “And you think bringing stray men with dangerous dogs into our garden is doing what’s right?”

He didn’t answer. Instead he said, “Don’t be angry.”

“I’m more scared than angry,” she said. “I don’t know what to do.”

They stood there for a long time, looking at each other, not saying anything. Finally, she took his hand and walked him back into the house.

They sat in the kitchen, where they had sat for over forty years, at the Formica topped table, facing each other.

“Lucy,” he said, “What’s happened to us?”

She searched his old man face, sagging around the eyes, still dominated by the straight, thin nose.

“I told you before. I’m scared.”

“Scared of what?”

Suddenly she had the words. “I’m losing you,” she said and started to cry. “It makes me sad. It makes me angry. I don’t recognize you anymore.”

He took her face in his hands with the blunt-edged fingers she had loved, still loved.

“I don’t either,” he said.