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# The Borders

Michele Bowers

As many times as Anna has been painting or drawing among her borders they were never the same. They changed daily—hourly! The sun through the locust draws her. She never knows what light will be cast when she starts or how the light will develop by the time a piece is finished. Often she has worked from a photo but the light is never presented the way she remembered when she took it.

Season after season, year after year, her gardens have been her only study. They've served her well, keeping her art unique, desirable. It always amazes her how she can barely complete the bones of a piece while the phlox is in bloom, then the monarda would begin to fade and another work would beckon for a fresh canvas. She'd wait for the evening or rise early to catch the radiance of their magenta and lavender umbels.

She's lucky. Her paintings have provided supplement to her soul as well as her pension. Often patrons sought to visit her floriferous wonders, her magical gardens. "And ruin the mystique? No, absolutely not," she said, her agent left with the task of polite refusal. It was just a suburban lot, for pity's sake, not Giverny; not even close. They were a random result of fitting into the neighborhood; Peter's hobby, like her painting, while in their thirties and forties when she was a housewife, mother and teacher. Early on they fought about the structure. She envisioned something natural, woodsy. Peter needed it orderly; weed-free, crisply edged and pruned to within an inch of its life. So Anna yielded—she had other priorities.

After Peter left, her sister Fran encouraged her to do something for herself convincing her to spend a week at an oil painting workshop in Nantucket which turned into a month's retreat. It wasn't the sweeping seascapes, cranberry bogs or quaint architecture, but the spectrum of light on a single spray of heather or the myriad greens of fox grape, sheep laurel and bayberry that filled her canvas. When she returned, the foundation plantings and flower beds took on a whole new importance.

Anna left them to do as they would. Her weeding was minimal as the dead nettle and ivy filled in where Peter used to with summer annuals. The shade that resulted from the maturing locust, ash and pines allowed the hostas, ferns, foxglove and astrantia to proliferate and spread. Each summer the phlox and monarda popped up in places other than where they were originally planted, fighting each other for the remaining positions of full sun. The weight of early-August flowers on the Rose of Sharon would splay its branches all the way down to the tops of the chrysanthemums beginning their leggy growth spurts before budding out in September. Edges became less and less defined as time went on. Each plant merged and branched to the next, nary a gap between them. Even the rim of the birdbath was hard to disseminate from the strappy leaves of Siberian iris and those of a struggling Bourbon rose.

It was her next door neighbor, Lee, who took over tending her lot. She hadn't even thought to ask. She was so out of sorts. Her thoughts were on the art supplies she'd need for New England. Somehow she gathered the presence of mind to stop her mail, though. Over the years between the two of them (mostly Lee, to be honest) the yard was sufficiently watered and the lawn mown.

Lee became a widower about six years after her divorce. Pam died when her car skidded off a culvert one crystal June day while on a drive to visit her parents. His teenage son survived with a broken leg and some cuts and bruises. Although he must have, Anna didn't see him come out of the house for almost a year. She struggled that summer to keep the place in shape. She hardly knew how to thank him for helping her when Pam was alive. To provide him any comfort after that tragedy was beyond her.

He began tending her gardens again with nighttime watering. She often heard the opening of the spigot while cleaning her brushes and capping paints in her studio that used to be her daughter Meagan's bedroom. Months passed before she approached him one late afternoon with a cold glass of minted tea after he'd worked in her yard. And so the summers would go. Sometimes, when he finished near dusk, they'd sip iced Chablis sitting in her weathered Adirondack chairs, halting their conversation to watch flickering fireflies amid the pines. She remembered his hands, dirt outlining his nails and accenting the creases while pinching a sweaty goblet.

How had he known that she loved the garden the way it was in all its randomness? Did he and Pam hear those arguments years ago? Was it some cue he'd picked up on like the wildness of her silvering hair and her paint-stained clothes? Can people take on the look of their gardens the way they sometimes do with pets? Though they'd often make small talk about the news or the weather, she could never bring herself to make demands. She didn't want to have to be more than thankful; simply took what he willingly gave. Then again there was one, if you could call it that. Lee wanted to replace his graying and dry rot cedar fence including that that lined their properties. Anna felt herself go pale. She couldn't imagine that beautiful backdrop to her blues, pinks and violets replaced with stark orangey planking. "Please, Lee, leave it be. It will be years before a new one has as much *wa*." So he nailed and patched but replaced the rest so that the line between their yards had two fences, the fresh cut cedar on his side and the calico one on hers.

When Lee moved to be closer to his son and grandchildren the impact was not overt but immediate nonetheless. Her painting fell flat. It was proved out by their slump in sales. She wanted to believe she'd glutted her market but looking back, the lifelessness was more than evident. While her works languished in the storerooms of the gallery and in her studio, her pension dwindled.

The ache in her shoulder made her work slower now, for shorter periods, as well. She could hardly afford maintenance on the house other than the neighborhood boys who would come by now and then to shovel snow, rake leaves or mow. Last spring, the fence had slowly fallen like a clouded wave frozen in time.

She never thought that she would have to hustle her work at art shows and festivals again. But, it was the only thing she could think to do. She looked forward to starting afresh. Meagan even agreed to fly up next month to help. What a change from those early years when she could only count on her daughter to be self-absorbed, unreachable.

It must have been hours since Anna came to on the landing of the kitchen steps. Her arm tingled, her clothes were wet and her leg felt like it was replaced with a ball bat. She remembered that she should finish the piece where a stalk of phlox had flowered through a missing part of the fallen fence. Yes, she must. But before her mail overflows and the newspapers amass on the driveway will anyone notice? Will anyone call or knock and find her in time?