



I Will Tend to My Garden

by Shawn Matheny

Closing the door to the shadowy bedroom, the doctor felt a hand clutch at his elbow. Although the head of the woman, still raven-haired, hardly reached his chest, the black eyes immediately commanded his attention and demanded an answer to the unspoken question.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Murphy, . . . Helen. I have no different news. He's . . . the same. It could be any time now. It could be months, weeks, days, or hours. I just don't know. He isn't improving, but there is always . . . hope."

He watched her eyes in the pointed, almost unlined, face close in a silent prayer. "Poor thing!" he said to himself. "Once Walter is gone, what will she do? With no family, no children, who will she turn to?"

"Helen, get out of the house today. The nurse can watch him and you need some fresh air. Go take a walk along the beach or something."

With a flicker of her eyes dismissing his last remark, she simply said to the young man, "I shall work on the garden, no? Some of the beds look terribly neglected. Once my bread comes out of the oven I will tend to my garden."

Breaking the large clumps of earth with her fingers, Helen knelt down beside the freshly cleared flower bed. It was good to be outside again she decided. It had been too long since she had truly worked in her garden. Too long since she had weeded, hoed, and picked. She liked to smell and feel the fresh, ripe vegetables and flowers, for they reminded her of the large open markets in the streets of Paris. There the vendors had sung out the quality of their produce. There the vendors' sons with their sultry eyes had romanced a shy, dark-haired, young girl in a white lace dress. She softly murmured aloud, "Paris, my love. Paris . . ."

Would Walter die today? She had asked herself that question all morning as she had each morning for the past months. She had dreamed the night before that this time he had died. In the dream his death had been no release from this abeyance, for she had spent the rest of her life cleaning the urine and vomit from the oriental rug under his bed. What do dreams mean? she wondered.

She grew tired of kneeling so she stopped her work and stood for a minute. Her back hurt. She said to herself, "You are getting old. Where have all the years gone? I don't feel like an old woman, and I still don't feel at home here. I still feel like a little girl." Yes, she felt the same as she had felt when she was ten years old and living in Paris long before the war. She still felt as young and tiny as when she would follow Grandmere to the sweet-smelling bakery or the kosher deli. But now she felt alone.

She picked up the hoe and began to break the small clumps of hard clay. "If I plant early, this patch will bloom soon. It will in a few weeks no longer be a barren patch of earth. But I am barren. I have no children to care for and to care for me. I have . . . no one. Have I failed? Yes, I have by their standards. Grandmere had ten children and I had six brothers and sisters. Dead. They are all dead now. Dead in the fires of a hell on earth. Only I survived the flames. Why?" She remembered Mrs. Weinstein the summer before, after their trip to Israel, loudly talking at some tea.

"Helen was afraid to enter the museum. I asked her what she could possibly be afraid of—it was all so long ago. She said that she was afraid of what she would see. She was afraid of looking at those pictures. How silly! I said."

She looked across several rows of flowers at the huge ripe tomatoes. I will make stew tonight, she decided. But, who would eat it? Only the nurse, and then only because the silly girl was scared of her. She bitterly laughed to herself. The perfect wife who is no perfect wife. But, then, Walter was never, could never, be the perfect husband.

Beautiful, blond Walter. So pretty. So polite. How was she to have known the truth? She has only associated with nice Jewish boys in Paris until she had arrived in Algiers, and by then all the nice Jewish boys were either scattered across the continent or they were dead. She remembered Algiers and the memory brought a bitter taste to her mouth. "I was alone then and Walter said it would be strictly a business arrangement. He reminded me of the marriage that Mama and Papa would, no doubt, have arranged had they lived. In his arrangement, I would become a citizen and he would share my wealth after he paid his debts. I laughed when he explained the nature of his problem, for I had never heard of such a thing. I thought he was joking in a very decadent, but sophisticated way. It was against nature. At least, it was against nature as Grandmere explained it to me. Then he told me that he was serious and that it was something that I . . . that we would both have to live with. Somehow, I think he lived with it better than I. I, at first, thought I could change him. How young I was. How innocent. How naïve."

Walter. Walter. She didn't know whether to laugh or to cry when she said his name. She remembered all the small pokes, the jeers, and the squabbles. "What do you desire right now, now before you die—could you ever desire me, your wife? What do you feel now?"

What had they all felt? What had Papa felt before he died somewhere in Germany? Once she had seen pictures of it—that hateful thing. They were shown on some television program and she had not been able to tear herself away. Had they looked like that when they died? Had they been together, exposed for the cameras? If she looked among some stack of old

photographs would she see Grandmere's sagging breasts? Those parts of her brothers that her sister and she had whispered about in the dark? Or the new baby's swollen stomach? They were all gone now—gone.

Holding a dandelion in one hand, she once again thought of the upstairs bedroom, and the reality of the situation overcame her. She said to herself, "He's inside dying on a silk-sheeted bed and soon I must live alone. I am no longer that young girl in Paris with all of the world before her. I am an old woman with . . . nothing. I will grow old with the cats that scamper through my garden in this country that I do not, can not yet call home. Oh Grandmere, Mama, why . . . why?"

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the distressed voice of the nurse who was running towards her down the garden paths. "Mrs. Murphy! Mrs. Murphy! I'm sorry . . . so sorry. I thought he was only asleep, but . . . Please come, hurry!"

Helen stood up and brushed the dirt from her grey slacks and then turned toward the girl. "It's okay, darling. Please gather control. Now, go and call the doctor. I will see to my husband."

She slowly walked to the door as a thousand thoughts gathered in her mind. "This is the last time I will clean the rug, because now he is dead. My Walter is dead. I must find a priest to do those priestly things, for he was Catholic, wasn't he? Alone. Now I am alone. Alone as I've always been alone. What do you have now, Helen? A house? A garden? Oh yes, I have immense brandy snifters on the end tables that are overflowing with matchbooks from every resort and casino in California, Cuba and Europe. Also, I have a vault of diamonds, gold and, perhaps, a few pearls which miraculously escaped, along with me, the grasping hands of an evil race. Except for those things, I am alone. Who will stand with me beside the grave? Who will come to the funeral? Will they come? The scores of blond, young boys—do they miss my Walter?"

With amazement she felt tears fall from her eyes and weave their way down her face. She had never cried before. Not when she had waved good-bye to them. Not when she had heard the news. Not even when she had learned the truth. Now she was sobbing and gasping for air. "Walter. Walter. I am so alone now. Who will comfort me? I am so alone."

