How Stuff Grows

When his son was born he planted a tree. Not a large tree, but a small stick of flowering cherry, its three whippy branches clutching Spring's promise of pink blossoms within their green wood. He dug a deep hole in the front of the property, just behind the asphalt curb and next to a weather-worn fire hydrant the city seemed to have forgotten. It was a corner that always struck him as too lonely, too exposed, with nothing good to say for itself. As he tamped down the bare roots and filled the hole with a mixture of good soil and bone meal he dreamed of the day the tree would anchor the property; how it would be the first thing he could claim for his own that the neighbours would see as they approached the house. How in time it would fill the March air with the fragrance of joy and delight his family with its delicately falling petals.

When his second son was born, two years later, he planted a hedge: a row of stocky, golden bamboo to fill the bare patch behind his house that divided his backyard from the neighbour's. He placed each heavy clump just far enough apart that the plants would seek out the others' company; that the new growth emerging from the earth javelin-sharp would form an unbroken row of thickening, jade-green stems, each capped twelve feet above the ground by fronds that slid over, under and against one another in the least summer breeze. Giant, amber-green hands rubbing together, whispering of a job well done.

When his daughter was born he built a fence. The cherry tree was in full bloom, by now large enough to fill the once-bare plot of land in the corner, and the bamboo out back had become a tangle of nodding, dozing spires, wistful of the open space that once was. The house behind the bamboo was completely hidden from sight.

How Stuff Grows

Spring came late that year, so it was nearly May when the spent cherry blossoms were launched from the inverted umbrella of knobbly branches by an unseasonably bitter wind. But he was out in the garden all the same, the tails of his red flannel shirt flapping loosely about his waist as he dug the post holes. It was a high fence that shut out the remainder of his yard from the neighbourhood. He fitted his gate with a clumsy, old latch he'd found still attached to a piece of bent wrought-iron someone had dumped to rust by the side of the road. So excited by the find he'd used the back of a wrench to hammer it off the iron. It was never quite as flat as new, but it was serviceable and performed the locking and unlocking function with little complaint, happy, perhaps to be nailed to a fresh cedar post still carrying the scent of the mill that shaped it. The brand new galvanized hinges squealed out their matching contentment each time he passed through the gate.

Everything grew. Two arbutus seedlings appeared one year at the end of the driveway, an accidental gift of birds passing through. Like miniature gate-posts they took up residence, barely three inches tall, sporting four waxy, green leaves apiece. They assumed their sentinel duty like eager children, soaking up Victoria's generous sunshine and wet winters until their branches met in an arch twenty feet above the driveway. Friends joked that if he wasn't careful the driveway would vanish altogether. He shot them a look that suggested this wasn't news to him.

And he went on, year after year, planting and building, shaping and shifting, until everywhere he went in the garden the wind whispered *you are safe, you are safe,* and the birds that came to the many feeders and bird baths devotedly placed where others might have set pots or ornamental statues sang out *Home! Happy home!* until, one day, he

believed them. He built vegetable beds that overflowed with tomatoes, chard, garlic and carrots. He picked so much rhubarb he had to build a stand for the end of the driveway with a sign that read *Free! Help yourself!* so that nothing went to waste, his growing family couldn't eat any more. Cucumbers swelled on the vine in the sun. The blueberries that punctuated their bowls of vanilla ice cream were fresh and sweet and never lasted longer than a day after ripening on the branch.

Then his oldest son announced he was moving away. He wanted to start his life with his own special partner in his own special place. The crocus had just arrived: a carpet of purples and mauves and whites and yellows, like spilled paint on the dark, wet earth. He didn't know what to say, but shook his son's hand and wished him well. He returned to the garden. Surely something needed tending. The arbour he'd built when his daughter turned ten groaned beneath evergreen clematis that had only borrowed the roughened cedar frame in order to reach the house, where it had fixed itself with a tenacious grip and flowered boastfully every summer afterward, even as it swallowed two stucco walls. He took out his sheers and began to slice through the lower growth. What was needed was a little more light, a little clarity.

Then his second son went away. To school in Toronto, as if none of the schools nearby were good enough. He told his son how proud he was; how much good he would do in the world, such was this boy's natural inclination. He retreated to the little bench in the front yard and watched sparrows and finches quarrel over the millet that spilled from a feeder hanging from the lowest branches of the cherry tree. At his feet the three mosaic tiles his children had created some summer long past were caught in a wedge of sunshine that slipped between twisted elbows of arbutus. He squinted, brushed the side of his foot

against the lawn that was always trying to engulf the tile triangle. The one beneath his shoe was his Toronto-bound son's: a red T-Rex dinosaur, livid against a white field. What else would a nine year old boy want to make, given the choice? It was a beacon beside his sister's yellow butterfly and his brother's blue boat. How many times had he trimmed back this patch of lawn, preserving these images against the encroaching fescues? How long before the lawn took the hint?

When his daughter married and moved to Texas he stopped going into the garden. His wife reminded him often of the weeds and the pruning and the overflowing vegetable beds, the scarlet runner beans dried out on their vines, but hers wasn't a scolding tone. Imploring was closer to the truth. She knew how much he loved his garden; cherished what he'd made. But the juice wasn't in him, seemingly. He avoided looking out the windows, keeping the curtains drawn or hurrying past with his eyes on his slippers. His days were spent reading the paper from cover to cover, or watching old hockey games on the extra cable channels he'd ordered for his new, flat screen TV.

Summer made no difference. The house was empty, so quiet: childish sounds no longer leaked through closed bedroom doors, now banished to memory alone. When he went out he backed the car quickly, his eyes locked on the road beyond the driveway, concentrating furiously on the view through the rear windshield. Empty bird feeders rocked on the warmest winds of the year and the birds looked elsewhere for sustenance.

Maybe they followed his children.