

Where the Flowers Grow

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Life is a series of weddings and funerals and this tale is no different. It starts with an engagement, a joyful occasion by any standard, and even more so in this case because it was my own. On an unusually sunny day in March, among the redwoods of Humboldt County, my boyfriend, Lucas, threw a small, leather box across the table and suddenly became my fiancé. We celebrated with cabernet and coziness on our couch, feeling like the luckiest people on earth, and happily discussed the details of an outside wedding. Because summer was only a few months away, we decided that we could only have a July wedding if my family agreed to host the event.

Like many little girls, I had planned my wedding years ago, when I still wore one-piece bathing suits and “cannonballed” off the dock at my family’s lake cabin. My cousins and I would paint our toes and plan our future weddings in elaborate detail. I had envisioned the dock as my wedding aisle, and planned on wearing a white bikini with a fluffy skirt. As soon as the pastor would marry my super-hot future husband and me, I would strip off the skirt and, together, the groom and I would dive into the lake, swim to Turtle Rock, and kiss passionately—no tongue, of course.

“But where would all the guests sit?” my aunts asked.

“They’d sit in the floating chairs in the water,” I said, because I really had thought out every detail.

“Well,” my Aunt Nancy said, “If that doesn’t work out, you can always get married at my house.”

Thus, fifteen years later, after Lucas and I came to the conclusion that we’d never find enough floating chairs to hold two hundred wedding guests, we asked my Aunt Nancy and Uncle Larry to throw the biggest party of their lives at their home in Selkirk, Washington. To our relief, they agreed, and we started planning our wedding. At least *I* started planning; Lucas just watched me do it.

Calling Nancy and Larry’s place a “home” is an understatement. Most of our friends and family refer to it as “The Erickson Estate,” or “The Erickson Ranch.” The house itself, although large and beautifully decorated like a country cabin, is probably not impressive enough to be called “an estate.” Rather, it is the landscape framing the house that deserves attention. My uncle Larry, a type-A Pharmaceutical Administrator, took such pride in his acreage that he had become an unofficial landscape architect. For years, he made apple cider from the fruit of the trees in his orchard, which he stroked and groomed like spoiled pets. Even his lawn was perfect, with its razor sharp edges and geometric lines just daring to be measured. As if that wasn’t enough, two summers ago, Larry decided to build a waterfall behind the house. Nancy loves telling the story of how that came about.

“Can’t you see it, Nancy?” Larry said to her, closing his eyes to the enormous view of the valley on his back deck. “A little waterfall amid the trees? Can’t you hear the gurgling water?”

My Aunt Nancy, who Larry often called “The Dream-Killer,” just smiled widely and said, “No.”

Larry built it anyway, but what started out with the blueprint of a babbling brook ended up being a thirty foot waterfall— the largest residential waterfall in the county, *and* the perfect backdrop for my wedding.

In the months leading up to my big day, Larry bought books on natural grasses, because he wanted a very green but natural landscape around the waterfall. He planted dozens of different varieties of grasses in little bunches, and he dug each hole with his own hands. The love Larry put into his yard blanketed the property in the color of spring, and he used so much water in his effort to keep it all green that his water pump broke two weeks before the ceremony.

The day before the wedding, as my friends and family set up tents and my mom cried because they weren't as clean as the company had promised, Larry continued to plant. The sunflowers he planted two months before disappointed him because they had yet to sprout, so he concentrated on the flower bed behind the altar.

“For God sakes, Larry,” my Aunt Nancy said, “The yard looks perfect. Leave it alone.”

Patient as always and confident in his work, Larry said, “Nancy, you have your job and I have mine. I still have twenty hours left.”

Then, after we all went home to sleep, Larry came back from the garden center with more greenery to put into the earth. He hopped on his John Deere tractor and mowed the lawn in the moonlight, one last time.

Nancy is one of three sisters often referred to as “The Johnson Girls” by old flames and high school friends. All three share the same massive smile and the same light eyes that squint when they grin.

“I have three daughters,” my grandpa often says, “Pasty, Nasty, and Juicy.”

Juicy (Judy) is my mother, the baby in the family, Nasty (Nancy) is the middle child, and Pasty (Patsy) is the oldest, the most academic, and the most organized of the three. My mom and Nancy always say, “Thank God for Patsy. If it wasn’t for her, nothing would get done.”

They sell themselves short when they say this, however, because without Nancy’s dancing and my mother’s laughter, Patsy would be too busy to have fun. Together, the Johnson girls create a female triumvirate where each one needs the other two to identify as a whole. Whenever the phone rang in my house growing up, my family assumed it was one of the sisters calling to comment on last night’s *E.R.* episode, or to exchange stories about their dogs. I remember chat sessions on the dock at our lake cabin revolving around hospital politics (Nancy and Judy are both nurses) or reality television, or the last good Harlequin one of them read, because they all read romance novels at the speed of light. Their mother taught them to read everything they could get their hands on, and to earn their own income. As a result, all of them found good careers and intelligent, good-humored husbands. Just as the sisters unite forces, so do the husbands, often teaming together at the cabin to chop wood, or huddling close at holiday parties to make fun of their spouses. Because the sisters all live in the same town and share a lake cabin, sisterly gatherings happen quite often, and it was during one of these that I learned a shocking fact about my family. I was ten years-old when, via eavesdropping, I found

out that Nancy had been married once before and, even more significant, that my uncle Larry wasn't my cousin Heather's biological father.

Nancy's children, Heather, Shelly, Jake, and Dusty, grew up alongside my brothers and I, and we considered them more as brothers and sisters than cousins. We pushed each other into the lake, hunted for Easter eggs together, and short-sheeted our parents' beds as a team. At the age of ten, it seemed that I should have known this information about Heather long before. With her strong build and dark hair, she did look a little different from her brothers and sisters. On the other hand, I could acknowledge that my older brother and I looked nothing alike, and we still came from the same place. I thought my way around the Heather dilemma until I was so upset that I decided not to care anymore. She was one of us, and once I came to the conclusion that Heather was still my cousin, and Larry was still my uncle, I began obsessing over someone else: the uncle I never knew.

When I asked my mom about my mysterious uncle, she was more than happy to appease my curiosity.

"Bruce was . . . the most amazing guy. He was the type of guy everyone loved being around—just SO funny and gregarious . . . always joking and laughing." She paused and shook her head, "I loved Bruce. We all did."

Bruce grew up with the Johnson girls, and my mom told me many crazy stories about him instigating dares and practical jokes. She told me about the time Bruce drove her waterskiing and convinced her to go off a ski-jump which, although a fun memory, ended with my mom crashing headfirst into the lake from thirty feet in the air. She told me that she loved him like a brother, and that he made her laugh so hard her stomach hurt from the effort. I started drawing pictures of Bruce in my head, because the more she

told me, the more I wanted to meet him. Bruce sounded like a really fun guy. Why couldn't I know him?

"He died in Vietnam," my mother said. "Nancy had just had Heather and he never even got to see her."

Over the years, I've seen the impact of Bruce's death on my mother. She always walks out of the room when Vietnam movies play on T.V., and she will never talk about the politics of war, or even what it was like for her to watch her friends get drafted. She was with Nancy when the military delivered the telegram.

"I was on summer break. We saw the car pull up through the window and then she just started screaming. She fell to her knees and just kept screaming," my mother paused, getting lost in her thoughts. "It was horrible. I will never forget it."

Nancy has said that the first year after Bruce died, she lived in a fog and didn't feel anything—no pain and no joy. But the second year after it happened, she fell apart. Although taking care of Heather kept her alive, she could barely function and relied heavily upon her parents. Though I was only ten when I first heard about Bruce, I grieved for him. A few years later, when the traveling Vietnam Memorial Wall came to Selkirk, my mother and I went with Nancy to honor Bruce. I taped a poem next to his name that I had titled, "The Uncle I Never Knew," and I gave a copy to my aunt, admiring her determination to remember the past. I still think about Bruce, and even today, I feel nauseous when I imagine what it must have been like for Nancy, alone with a newborn baby. How could such a terrible thing happen?

My mom's eyes lit up when she said, "But then Nancy met Larry."

When my Uncle Larry first saw Nancy, he thought she was a hot divorcee. With a gentleman's courtship, he stepped up to the plate and easily became a part of Nancy and

Heather's lives, and thus, Judy and Patsy's lives. He made everything better without even trying.

As my mom explained, "Nancy always said she could never love another man like Bruce, because she would just compare the two. But that's what's so great about Larry. He is nothing like Bruce. Larry is quieter, less social, and he lets Nancy shine. When Bruce and Nancy were together, Bruce was the outgoing one. Nancy faded into the background a bit more."

This astounded me. My aunt Nancy was the quiet one? I knew her as "The Wedding Dancer," famous for her moves on the dance floor, and as a social butterfly that bounced from person to person while Larry watched from the sidelines. Larry taught her to country-swing and they got so good at it that they started hosting big dances at their barn. Nancy created their social calendar and engaged people with her charm at Larry's pharmaceutical conferences. In fact, during one of those conferences, while Larry chatted it up with people he deemed "very important," Nancy slid right off her bar stool and onto the floor, gripping one glass of wine in each hand.

"We love your wife," the VIPs told Larry. "You should bring her to all of the functions!"

The Rolling Stones put it best when they said, "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you might find that you get what you need." Nancy needed Larry.

"Look at her work that crowd," Larry said to my mom at a recent wedding they attended. "Just look at her."

On a hot, breezy day in July, with my two-year-old flower girls leading the way through the grass, I put my hand through my father's arm and walked out Nancy's front door. Orange, yellow, and red gerbera daisies lined the river-stone walkway and a string quartet played "Here Comes the Bride" from underneath a white tent. I married Lucas in front of two hundred people, who sat in regular, non-floating white chairs, on the Erickson's beautiful green lawn. My Christian marriage counselors sat near the front, beaming with approval, and the Dixes, Nancy and Larry's only neighbors, waved at me as I walked past. The flower girls forgot to drop their petals until the very end of the aisle, and at one point, my maid-of-honor had to unleash a honeybee that got stuck inside my veil, but everything else went perfectly. I didn't get stage fright when I played the song I had written for Lucas, and he remembered to say, "I do." We even gave Larry's waterfall the audience it deserved by setting up a lemonade stand behind the house. And, although the sunflowers hadn't fully sprouted along the path to the barn, everything else was in full bloom.

When we tried to thank Larry for all of his hard work, he said, "You don't have to thank me. I am honored to do this. Besides, we're family. That's what we do."

Exactly one month later, on a day that Lucas and I spent returning wedding presents and cashing in our gift cards all over the city of Selkirk, my mother called to tell me that Larry was dead.

"I'm at Nancy's and they're taking the body away now. Come up here."

I drove up the hill and through the wheat fields south of town, barely hearing my husband say, "Pull over. I should drive. Pull over."

But I couldn't.

My uncle's body was just taken away in a body-bag while my family watched.

"I drive faster than you," I said.

When I parked my car next to six others in the field, I saw the house through a gray fog. The sun burned down on me, but as soon as I walked up the front steps, I knew the gray would engulf me, too. I put my hand through my new husband's arm, walked up the river-stone walkway lined with flowerpots, and stepped through the Erickson's front door into the fog.

Immediately upon entering, Nancy grabbed me and squeezed me so tight that I felt the sobs pulse through her bosom. I put my cheek on hers and felt the salt pour out of her.

"Oh Reagan," she said in between gasps, "my heart is breaking." Her eyes sagged so low on the sides that it looked like her skin might fall off her face.

Then, as she passed from me to my mother, I took inventory of the twenty or so people camped in her living room. Nancy's neighbors stood frozen against the wall, while my cousin Heather nursed her new baby, Bruce, in the rocking chair. My two-year-old flower girls toddled around trying to make Nancy and my cousins smile, and my marriage counselors held a vigil on the couch, promising to pray for us. My grandpa went from person to person asking how in the hell we were going to fix that goddamn tractor tire, and then my maid-of-honor told him she wasn't the one to ask. These were my wedding guests, our friends, our family, and even Buck, the perfect dog, who snuck into one of our wedding pictures. Amid all these people, some of whom had danced with Larry at a wedding the night before, one common unspoken thought bounced from eye to eye.

Nancy is a widow. Again.

The story revealed itself in fragments, told by different narrators, until I had a clear view of the nightmare that had occurred. Larry had made Nancy pancakes, and then went out to mow the lawn. Nancy went to their bedroom to finish a good book and, after an hour, she realized she couldn't hear the mower.

“Any other day I wouldn't have worried,” she said. “Sometimes he works in the yard all day and I don't even notice he's gone.”

On this day, however, she had noticed. She walked across their big lawn and through the sunflower patch, down to the barn where fake gerbera daisies still hung on the walls. No Larry to be found. She had looked for him out near the orchard, and then made her way towards the back of the house, calling his name out loud. She found Larry in the weeds to the left of the waterfall. His body was trapped under the upended John Deere tractor-mower, and she told us this over and over again, as if the details comforted her.

“I ran to the basement door and it was locked. I screamed and pounded on the glass until it almost broke, yelling for Dusty.” When he finally came, she told him to call 911 and then call Patsy. “She'll take care of things,” Nancy had said, and then she told Dusty that his father was dead.

“I knew he was dead. I knew it. I knew. His face was blue and sometimes you just know and I knew.” Her shoulders gave a helpless shrug.

Together, she and Dusty had lifted the seven hundred pound tractor off of Larry. A rock, coupled with a steep hill, had caused the tractor to pitch and overturn, instantly crushing Larry, a man who had driven that machine a thousand times. When I arrived, the tractor still lay in plain sight of the house, an angular piece of machinery amid the yellow and green grasses. I wanted to throw up.

Nancy said, “I didn’t do CPR because I already knew. I looked at him and said ‘I have to let you go. I am letting you go.’”

She knew, and when the medics came and spent hours working on Larry, Nancy, flanked by her two sisters, stoically sat in the living room and said, “I don’t know why they’re doing that. He’s gone.”

Patsy gave Larry’s eulogy, and she told us that the morning of the accident, before Larry went out to mow the lawn, he said to Nancy, “You are so beautiful.”

Nancy laughed and said, “It depends on what you’re looking at.”

“Well,” he said, “Right now I’m looking at your smile.”

I knew that smile very well, and if my joyful Aunt Nancy lost her smile forever, our family would never mend. Her heart was breaking, and so was mine.

“Can I do this?” she asked my mom the day it happened. “Can I even live? Can I even do this again?”

The day Larry died, I stood on his back porch with my husband and looked out over the valley, the cries of my family echoing in my ears, stretching over the pond and into the yard that is Larry’s opus. The waterfall gurgled a consistent pattern of sound, and like a gift from Larry, it soothed us in our silence. We took our wedding pictures here, overlooking the same bright flowers, the same beautiful horizon. I looked up at my new husband, absorbing every detail of his face, and prayed that he never be taken from me the way Nancy’s husbands had been taken. I wondered if the world even had enough empathy to contain all this grief.

“What will I do without Larry?” Nancy repeated. “What will I do?”

None of us could make sense of such a freak accident. We mulled the details over in our heads, over and over again, trying to envision how an accident could even happen

to careful, methodical Larry. The answer eluded us, however, and we only found solace in knowing that it happened quickly.

“He could have mowed that hill a thousand other times and been just fine,” a friend mused. “On any other day, he would have mowed right over that rock, or just tipped over and broken a shoulder. Any other day he would’ve been fine.”

At the funeral reception held at the Erickson Estate, white tents shade people from the sun and my flower girls vie for Nancy’s attention. For me, the sun, the tents, the food, and the people provide an overwhelming sense of déjà vu. I have been here before, in a white dress with my family stretched out around me like a net. But this time, I am here to play music for the crowd that loved Larry, and this time Nancy is the center of attention. She hugs a friend whose wife has battled cancer for the last two years.

“I have learned that life is unexpectedly hard,” he says to her.

“You have to be really tough,” she nods, holding his hand. “So tough.”

Every song I play seems to reflect the ache in my body and the sadness in the air. Earlier in the day, I watched Larry and Nancy’s oldest son, Jake, fix the tire on the tractor and mow the lawn. As it buzzed in the background, Dusty sat next to me on the porch overlooking the waterfall and said sarcastically, “For some reason, I didn’t feel like getting on that thing and mowing the lawn today.”

I wanted to run that mower off a cliff, but we all have our own way of dealing with tragedy. My grandpa continues to switch the sprinklers around in the yard, and Larry’s brother-in-law just bought Nancy a new toilet. Most people bring food, which means the stock in Nancy’s freezer rivals that of Costco. People like to help, and I help by playing music.

“Thank you so much,” Nancy tells me, her eyes red but smiling in the corners.

“You don’t have to thank me. We’re family,” I say. “It’s what we do.”

When I pick up my guitar to play another song, hundreds of gigantic sunflowers sway along with me in the wind, a ray of yellow that outshines the sun. I notice they have finally bloomed.