

JANE KIRKPATRICK

Author of *The Daughter's Walk*

A NOVEL

Where

LILACS STILL BLOOM



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To Jerry, who at eighty began a new garden with me.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Hulda Klager—wife, mother, gardener

Frank Klager—dairyman in Woodland, Washington;
Hulda's husband

Klager children—Elizabeth (Lizzie), Idehlia (Delia, Della),
Martha, Fred (Fritz)

Klager grandchildren—Delia's children: Irvina, Clara, Fred;
Lizzie's children: William, Roland

Amelia and Solomon Strong—Hulda's sister and
brother-in-law

Bertha and Carl Tesch—Hulda's older sister and her
brother-in-law (also Frank Klager's best friend)

Emil and Matilda (Tillie) Thiel—Hulda's brother and
sister-in-law who lived next-door

Thiel children—Albert, Elma, and Hazel

Bobby—Klager dogs

Dr. Alice Chapman—family doctor in Woodland,
Washington

Dr. Carl Hoffman—local family practitioner in Woodland
and surrounding areas

Laura Hetzer—lecturer, Lowthorpe School of Landscape
Architecture for Women

*Nelia Lawson—a garden helper, formerly of Mississippi

*Jasmine—Nelia's nanny

*Ruth Reed—a garden helper

*Barney Reed—Ruth's father

*Cornelia Givens—a reporter

*Shelly and William Snyder—botanists from Maryland

*a fictional composite of people in Hulda's life



In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house
near the white-wash'd palings,
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-
shaped leaves of rich green...
With every leaf a miracle...

WALT WHITMAN, "When Lilacs Last in
the Dooryard Bloom'd"



Catch on fire with enthusiasm and people will
come for miles to watch you burn.

JOHN WESLEY, founder of Methodism



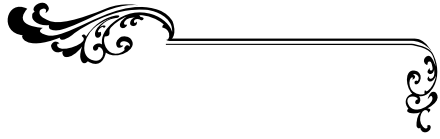
And out of the ground made the LORD God to
grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight.

GENESIS 2:9



I am thinking of faith now...
and what we feel we are
worthy of in this world.

DAVID WHYTE, "The True Love"



PROLOGUE

1948

It's the lilacs I'm worried over. My Favorite and Delia and City of Kalama, and so many more; my as yet unnamed double creamy-white with its many petals is especially vulnerable. I can't find the seeds I set aside for it, lost in the rush to move out of the rivers' way, get above Woodland's lowlands now underwater. So much water from the double deluge of the Columbia and the Lewis. Oh, how those rivers can rise in the night, breaching dikes we mere mortals put up hoping to stem the rush of what is as natural as air: water seeping, rising, pushing, reshaping all within its path.

I watch as all the shaping of my eighty-five years washes away.

My only surviving daughter puts her arm around my shoulder, pulls me to her. Her house is down there too, water rising in her basement. We can't see it from this bluff.

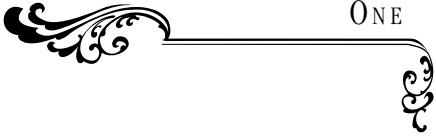
“It’ll be all right, Grandma. We’re all safe. You can decide later what to do about your flowers,” my grandson Roland tells me.

“I know it. All we can do now is watch the rivers and pray no one dies.”

How I wish Frank stood beside me. We’d stake each other up as we did through the years. I could begin again with him at my side. But now uncertainty curls against my old spine, and I wonder if my lilacs have bloomed their last time.



SELECTION

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Hulda, 1889

Daffodils as yellow as the sun, ruby tulips, and a row of purple lilacs from the old country border the house I live in with my husband, Frank, our three young children (ages eight, five, and three), and next month, if all goes well, our fourth child. We are hoping for a boy. My parents live with us, but only for a few more months. They've built a new house near Woodland, Washington. We'll be moving too, to a farm of our own south of Whelan Road. We'll still be within a few miles of each other, a close-knit family of German Americans captured by this lush landscape between the Lewis and Columbia Rivers. We call where we live the Bottoms. It's made up of black soil that was once the bottom of those great rivers—and sometimes becomes so again with the floods. We hope our new places will be less prone to flooding, though it's the nature of rivers to rise with the spring thaws. We live with it.

My mother and children have dug daffodil and dahlia

bulbs, snipped lilac starts to plant, and my sisters and brother and neighbors will give us sprouts from their bushes once we move, which is the custom. A lilac says “Here is a place to stay,” and how perfect that such promise of permanence should come from family and friends?

We can't move the apple orchard. But I wielded my grafting knife and wrapped the shoots, *scions* they're called, in sawdust and stored them in the barn earlier this year when the trees were dormant. Today I'll graft them onto saplings at my parents' new house, so one day there'll be an apple orchard there. I've also stepped into the uncommon for a simple house Frau: I've grafted a Wild Bismarck apple variety known for its crispness with a Wolf River, an apple of a larger size. My father encouraged such dappling with nature—and that I keep my efforts quiet, at least for a time.

It was April, and we tied the scions onto the saplings he'd started as soon as he knew they'd be building the house. I liked working with my father in the orchard, a misty rain giving way to sunbreaks, and the aroma of cedar and pine drifting down from the surrounding hills in the shadow of Mount St. Helens. So much seems possible in such vibrant landscapes. A garden is the edge of possibility.

He was a great storyteller and advice giver, my father, though this day his story surprised. “Don't tell Frank right away,” he told me. “Let him think you're just grafting plain old apples to help us extend the orchard.”

“Frank wouldn't mind.”

“In time—when you have the final result in hand. But Frank discourages you. I see it, Hulda.” I pushed at my frizzy walnut-brown hair and stared at him. “He dismisses your interests if they go beyond your children and him.”

“It’s a woman’s duty to meet her family’s needs.”

“Meet their needs first. But you want a crisper, bigger apple too,” he said. “Nothing wrong with that.”

“I do. I get so annoyed at those mealy things that hang on to their peels like bark to a tree.”

He nodded. “Some would say that meddling with nature isn’t wise. Frank might agree—especially if the one meddling is a mother who should be content with looking after her family.”

I stood, using my hoe to help me and my burgeoning belly up. I was nearly as tall as my father. He liked Frank; at least I always thought he did. My love and admiration for both men were rooted deep. It felt strange to defend my husband to my father. “You’re wrong, Papa.” I pushed my pointy straw hat back. “Frank’s a good helpmate for me. And he’ll like having more pies.”

My father tied another scion onto a branch, making sure the cambium was fully covered in the slanted cut I’d made so the two would bond securely. “You have a gift, Hulda. You can see distinctive things in plants. You see the possibility, like a crisper, larger apple and then imagine it into being.” He lifted another scion as emphasis. “Those are gifts few have, and people can be envious.”

My father had never granted me such a compliment, and I was both pleased that he noticed and humbled that he shared it. “Not Frank,” I insisted.

“Not everyone understands that we are all created to have complicated challenges and dreams. We must honor our longings, then go beyond them whether others support us or not.”

I wondered if he spoke of my mother. Did she resent my father’s dreams that took us from Germany to Wisconsin, Minnesota, San Francisco, then back to Wisconsin, and then here to the Lewis River of the new state of Washington? My father had many longings: farming, becoming a brewmaster, investing in creameries and cheese factories before the landscape was dotted with cows. He’d done all those. Now logging interested him, and he’d built a big two-story house; yet another adventure that meant more change for my mother—and the rest of us too.

“My dream is to raise my family.” I didn’t see getting a crisper apple as any budding desire. I wasn’t rising beyond my station. “These apples will make life better for them.” I was merely an immigrant housewife wanting to save time peeling apples.

“Just think of what I’ve said.” He wrapped his big paw around my hand that was holding a scion. He looked me in the eye. I swallowed. “Huldie, don’t deny the dreams. They’re a gift given to make your life full. Accept them. Reach for them. We are not here just to endure hard times until we die.

We are here to live, to serve, to trust, and to create out of our longings.”

“Yes, Papa,” I said, but it wasn’t until after he was gone, years later, that I came to understand what I’d committed to.

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SECRET PROGRESS

Hulda, 1899

In the ten years after my father's caution, I accepted that I did have an eye for seeing what wasn't there, something formed out of subtle differences from the blending of two things. He passed on three years after our conversation. My mama's gone now too. Their big two-story house sits empty, though I keep the apple orchard under my wing, hoping for that crisper, bigger apple.

"I love making you pies," I told my husband of twenty years one morning, "but the apples are so mealy and small it takes a week of Wednesdays to get enough to bake."

"Ach, woman. You do more than the average mother, I submit, but there's not much you can do about the nature of an apple." Frank washed his sinewy arms at the sink, removing the barnyard stink clear up to his elbows before grabbing the towel and placing a peck on my cheek. He sat down for

breakfast. I set the platter of biscuits and gravy, Frank's favorite—after eggs and bacon or pancakes and sausages or hot sauerkraut with spices and juniper—before him. Lo, that man can eat despite being only an inch taller than my five feet seven inches!

“Remember what happened to Eve and the apple,” he said.

“Eve was being curious.”

“See what it got her?”

I set hot coffee next to his plate. “Yes, but God gave us curiosity along with the ability to listen. That's where she failed. So it's natural to wonder about everything, even the nature of an apple.”

“Wonder all you want, but nothing will change. Blooms come when they will. Rivers flow and flood regardless of our efforts. I submit, we humans can't do a thing to get an earlier bloom or extend the season either.”

I reminded him that where a rosebush was set could change the blooming time and of how it seemed to me the activity of birds and bees from one year to the next changed the colors of my daffodils. I love daffodils and have hundreds of them planted around the house, lining the walkway, perking their yellow heads up against the barn, marking spring as they push up beneath the water tower and windmill. I'd dabbled in changing plantings, not understanding how it worked until I read about Mendel's and De Vries's efforts and how

they “bred” plants, though I’ve never told Frank of such readings. I’m not sure a wife should keep such things from her husband, though, so I took a deep breath.

“There’s this Californian, Luther Burbank. He’s extended the season of certain plants by having them bloom earlier in the year, bringing on the fruit before you’d think. He put thousands of french prune buds into young almond saplings, grafting them in June. With careful pruning, by December, he had nearly twenty thousand plum trees ready for orchard planting, enough for two hundred acres.”

Frank looked at me. “What would you do with twenty thousand plum trees?”

“Nothing.” I waved my hand to dismiss his words. “It’s the idea of it. That grafting one plant to another can make significant changes.”

“There certainly have been changes since I got grafted onto you.” He wiggled his eyebrows. They had a touch of gray already.

“Frank. Listen.” I sat beside him. “Where once was an almond tree, now is a plum, or at least it behaves like a plum tree. That’s almost a miracle.”

“I submit, you’ll twist the minds of our children with all this talk of changing nature.” He didn’t sound cross, so I took it as a wary jest, but then he added, “You’re a simple German housewife, Huldie. A good mother, my helpmate on this farm. That’s enough for any woman, or should be.”

I remembered my father's warning, brushed at the bun at the back of my neck and stood. I picked up an apple. It looked bigger, but it still didn't have the crisp I'd hoped for. I considered telling Frank about my grafting efforts as I sliced and placed apples in the bowl with the other soft little chunks. "Ouch!" I put my finger to my mouth.

"What?" Frank said, turning to me.

"I've cut myself. These apples! The peels cling like babies to their mothers." I sucked at the cut, then Frank, who had gotten up, handed me a clean cloth and held it to my wound, his big fingers warm and comforting around my hand.

"Guess I shouldn't sharpen those knives so often."

"It's not the knife." I pointed. "It's this apple!"

"No sense decrying its nature." He looked at me, must have seen the determination in my face. "I submit that if anyone can bring about a change in God's design, it'd be you," my husband lauded.

I took the strip of cloth Frank ripped, and he helped wrap it around my cut finger. It would annoy me all day having that cut.

"I guess every great inventor has to have a little pain in his life," Frank said. He still grinned about my wanting that better apple, but he kissed the bandage and returned to his oatmeal.

"Frank." I stood beside him.

"What?"

He turned and I popped a piece of the soft apple into his surprised open mouth. “Just remember this conversation on the day you have a big, crisp, sliced apple and pies more than once a week.”

JASMINE AND NELIA

Old Fort Vancouver, 1900

The once-slave woman, old and worn, ambled up the hill from the river carrying the cargo she'd been sent to recover. "If I've told you once, I've told you a dozen times, you ain't allowed near that river. Too dangerous and deep your papa tells you, and I'm telling you too, though Lord knows, you don't listen to either of us no more." She set the six-year-old down, heaving from the effort. Nelia, the child, turned and stamped her foot.

"I hate you! I hate you, and I hate Papa. I hate everyone!"

"Well, I suppose you do, but that don't change the fact that you ain't allowed near the river without an adult beside you. They's currents in that stream could suck you under. It ain't like that paucity, Leaf River, where you was born and growed."

"I want that river back," Nelia screamed.

“We don’t get back what we lose.” The old woman sighed. “We get what we got comin’ to us. I ’spose, though, we can make somethin’ outta that. God gives us tools, child, He does.” She softened her voice. “You missin’ your mama, and that’s a worthy fret.” She touched the girl’s narrow shoulders. “It surely is.”

“I hate it here. I want that river to take me under.” The child stood defiant, but her arms no longer crossed her slender chest. Hair as black as oil splayed around the child’s face like grass around a fence post. The child had found a pair of scissors and hacked at her curls.

“Come here, child. Let me put a little huggin’ on you for a time. I could use some of that myself. We’ll ’member all the good things of your mama. Then we’ll catch the day, strengthened by our bit of honoring hope.” They walked the lush grounds separating the buildings Mr. Lawson had called the Fort. “Let’s count all these gardens, Nelia.” The child used her fingers.

“One more than all my fingers,” she announced. “Eleven.”

“You’re such a smart girl. Eleven gardens. Hmm-um.” The old woman smacked her lips. “All them taters and kale. Those men eat well. And see them strawberries marching beside the paths there? They’ll be ripe soon.”

Jasmine wondered if their new home near Woodland, Washington, would look like this place, with chilly winds in the morning kissing squares of growing things. She wondered

how her employer had found such a place for his tailoring business. She guessed the man wanted to go as far away from the memories as he could and had chosen a landscape and relationships so different only his accent—and the presence of a colored woman—would link him to his past. She hadn't seen many people like her in Fort Vancouver, though seeing a few Indians made her feel a little at home.

She watched her charge, Nelia, lean over the strawberries, poking with her small fingers at the tiny green stubs that if left alone would turn red and be ripe for picking. The child needed time and tending just like those berries, but she ought not to be left alone the way Mr. Lawson did his daughter. Jasmine ached for the sadness of the child's life, a hole she could not fill. She watched the girl pull at the berry, toss it aside. To distract her, she shouted, "Look there." She pointed past the six-year-old child. "Over there, Nelia Lawson. Would you look at that!"

The girl turned. "I do believe that's a lilac blooming," Jasmine said. "Like the one your mama planted when you was born. Let's go take a sniff and then sit." Jasmine could use the rest



Nelia didn't want to smell flowers. Flowers wouldn't bring her mama back and they wouldn't make her papa smile again and they wouldn't make her like this cold breezy air or those

trees that made your neck ache as you tried to see their tops. This Washington was a strange place and she wouldn't love it, not ever! She crossed her thin arms again, pressing them against the ivory buttons of her dress. She kicked at the hemline of her skirt, didn't care about the mud collected there that Jasmine now brushed at.

Jasmine pushed up against her knees. It was the old woman's heavy breathing that finally loosened Nelia's arms. She worried over the woman. People you loved died if you weren't careful. Nelia must not have been careful looking after her mama. Now Nelia was in a strange place, her father distant as the Mississippi and as elusive as feathers floating on wind.

"If you don't want a hug, that's fine," the old woman said. "But I needs one real bad today, and I know yours is a tender heart, Nelia."

She didn't want Jasmine dying, and that breathing worried her, and so Nelia sighed and walked behind the old woman who lifted her heavy legs up the hill.

"Let's take a sniff. Where your papa is taking us, we'll find a lilac bush like that. Won't that be dandy?"

The child nodded, took the old woman's hand, and they sauntered to the shrub. Nelia gentled the pale lavender bloom in her small hand and inhaled. Tears formed and spilled. The scent brought back thoughts again of all they'd left behind.

Jasmine sniffed too, saw the child's tears. "Ah, Nelia, let's

let the fine smell of this here flower be a hope for the future as well as a sniff to honor the past.”

“Mama would have liked this flower?”

“I declare, she would have.”

Nelia nodded, and before Jasmine could stop her, she broke a bloom from its stem and headed toward the big building she’d seen her father enter earlier. The stately man stepped outside at the knock of his daughter. He looked at the flower she held up to him, but he didn’t take it. He scowled at Jasmine as she waddled up behind Nelia.

“She was just interested in the bloom, Mr. Lawson, sir.” Jasmine puffed from the effort of her fast walk to catch up to the child. “Reminded her of Mistress Mary. A good memory, don’t you think, sir?”

“There is no good memory of a woman who died before her time.” He stepped back inside, away from Nelia.

Jasmine bent to inhale the bloom, held Nelia’s hand. “Some folk can’t face what is, child. Always make it harder to move forward.”