

Roses

Neville worked alone transplanting a truckbed full of trees, bushes and flowers. Although he couldn't carry a tune when he sang, his whistle was full and rich and right on key. A gentle breeze stirred the hair on his forehead as he whistled a jaunty rendition of "In the Mood." Years had passed since he'd felt this peaceful and confident. The smell of plum blossoms from the thicket across the road filled the air as he turned rich, black soil out of the hole he was digging for his weeping willow tree. Reluctant to sell him the tree, Emil at the nursery had told him they didn't do well with the winds in Nebraska, but Neville felt confident he could make one grow just fine. The tree would be the centerpiece of his landscaping, with the driveway circling around it. With the tree set into its place, he dug a moat around it to hold water on its roots and carried four buckets of water to fill it. He knew he would have to bucket water to it every night when he came in from his fieldwork, but that effort was nothing compared to all the equipment he'd had to carry around in New Guinea.

With the willow in place, he lined out his box hedge, leaving a wide gap on either side of the sidewalk, another big gap between the house and the barn and a last one leading to the orchard and the outhouse. He planted four dozen fast-growing Siberian elm trees that he could keep clipped about waist high. He was just about finished with the hedge when Maggie called him for dinner.

"You looked like you were actually having a good time out there working yourself to death," Maggie said over her shoulder as she stirred the gravy.

"I am, Maggie. I don't know as I've ever told you this, but if I'd had a chance to go to college, I'd have been a horticulturist." He took the basin out by the front step and pumped some water from the pitcher pump, carrying it in to wash up before sitting down at the table.

Maggie set the gravy on the table and joined him. "You could use the G.I. Bill," she said.

"Oh, it's not enough to get me through four years. I'm just going to take some agricultural training and play around in the yard here in my spare time."

After they ate, he helped her clear the table and then took her hand. "The dishes will wait. Let me show you what I'm gonna do out here. I hope you'll like it."

He led her first to the willow tree. “See, when people come; they’ll drive around the tree and park over here.” He grinned. “It’ll have to be watered every day . . .” He walked her to the opening he’d left in the hedge. “People will come in through here. It will be up to about here,” he gestured toward his waist, “I’ll keep it trimmed square. They call it a box hedge.”

She nodded. “Sounds like a lot of work.”

“Great work for Sundays,” he beamed at her, a gold filling glinting in his smile. “Then up against the house, I’ll plant the spirea under the windows so we’ll have a cascade of little, white flowers drooping down to the ground. They’ll bloom in the spring and in the summer we’ll have some yellow roses, like Mom’s, to smell up the yard . . .”

Accustomed to concrete and asphalt, Maggie wouldn’t envision the landscape her husband was creating. All the plants looked like sticks poked into the ground. But she could see those little sticks were making him happy and peaceful, so she’d had no trouble expressing her enthusiasm. When he’d finished walking her through his landscaping plans, she returned to the house to wash the dishes and start the evening meal. They had plans to visit some of his friends in town that evening and she wanted to have time to get cleaned up. He went back to his planting.

Whistling “Moonlight Serenade,” he set an American elm on the south side of the house for summer shade. He dropped the shovel and stamped the dirt tight around the tree, then shoveled more dirt into the depression made by his feet. After repeating the process a couple of times, he took his buckets to the stock tank and brought them back full of water, pouring it on the roots and watching the water disappear into loose soil.

Then he started on the roses. First, he stuck his head in the front door and yelled, “Maggie, I’m going up to Mom’s to get some of her yellow roses. I’ll be right back.”

He’d already asked his mom about taking the roses, so he just jumped out of the car and started digging. His mother came out on the front step, wiping her hands on her apron. “You seem happy today,” she commented.

“Yeah,” he said. “Mom, I almost feel like a normal human being doing normal stuff.” He dug up a couple of likely-looking canes, stuck them in a bucket, and put them in the car.

“What’s Maggie doing?”

“Oh, she’s cleaning up and getting supper ready. We’re going to go over to Jake and Mary’s tonight.”

“It’ll be a nice night for it.”

“I think so. I gotta go get these in the ground, Mom. See ya tomorrow.”

Back in the car, he whistled a few bars of “Nothin’ Like a Dame,” on the way home. He was still whistling when he climbed out of the car with the bucket and set the roses at each end of the clothesline, making mental note that he would have to be sure to keep them confined so the thorns wouldn’t snag the clothes—or his wife.

Finally, he made beds for the tea roses on either side of the front step. He planted the Crimson Glories on the left and the Peace roses on the right. Then he hauled buckets of water to everything he'd planted and put his tools away.

