

Ms. Dale Writes

TAMARA'S FLOWERS (A wedding, a funeral and a seed packet)

by
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My garden in the lush Pacific Northwest is a world away from the triple digit temperatures of Phoenix in the summer. But that's where the flowers grew. They started as table decoration fluff at my niece Tamara's wedding reception. Goldfish on each table treaded water and stared through their glass bowls at the tiny seed packets scattered on white tablecloths. I longed for the shade of my magnolia tree back in Portland. The leaves would be sprouting, surrounding the pink and white blossoms with solid green shade. Under a white tent canopy my husband and I mopped perspiration from our arms in Tamara's Arizona backyard.

But the church had been air-conditioned and when my niece stood at the back, arm-in-arm with her dad; well, my sister and I, unexpectedly but spontaneously broke into tears. Our brother, Tamara's father, was in the last brutal round of an agonizing multi-year fight with cancer. Emergency room visits and infections had made his participation in the ceremony a long shot, but when we out-of-staters started to show up, he rallied.

Cane in one hand, when the processional music started, he clutched Tamara's arm. Like an ancient turtle, his bald head stuck out of the starched neck of his new white shirt. Chemotherapy and the desert sun had rendered his skin into dark wrinkled leather. He looked old and shriveled enough to be her grandfather. Yet he was her father, a single dad

and her hero. She had prayed that he would be able to give her away. And he did. As my sister and I sobbed in each other's arms, he hobbled down the aisle with her. It was his parting gift. Two weeks later my little brother was dead.

I wondered if the "regional spring flowers" of Arizona would take to my Northwest patio. The seed packet only two inches by three inches proclaimed new beginnings for the married couple. I felt the need to plant them, but could find only one left on the table when, giving in to the heat, we made our exit. There couldn't be many seeds inside so I would have little to experiment with. Back at our motel room, I retrieved the single white envelope from my purse. Grinning, my dear husband surprised me with one from his pocket. I think he knew I would want to plant them even before I did.

They rested in the living room for at least a year. It was too late to plant spring flowers and a lot happened too quickly. My brother's funeral. Grieving, aging parents. More cancer. And I wanted, no, needed time to enjoy them. I knew they were there. I often fingered the envelopes and when the memories subsided I would put them back on the mantle next to bowed snapshots propped up against a gilded mirror.

By the time seeds hit dirt, their placement had been analyzed and rearranged ad infinitum. I couldn't sow them into any of my existing beds for fear of losing their identity. I wanted to see them every day so they had to be in a high traffic area. Sunny spots change as vegetation expands so a pot on wheels seemed the ideal solution. As I assembled container, soil and casters, Tamara's flowers were sown. They took a place of honor on the patio, a rolling companion to my herb garden on wheels and two other mobile pots overflowing with what local nurseries call "trailing accents."

Nothing happened for a long time. No amount of fertilizer, water or sun exposure seemed to help. The pot, two feet high and almost as wide, looked conspicuously bare alongside thick spikes of thyme, oregano and sprawling lobelia.

It was summer by the time green life broke through the brown crust of peat moss. Nasturtium. Of course. I should have recognized the seeds. Then came sweet alyssum. At least we'll have orange and white, I thought. I celebrated by taking a picture.

"You remember those seeds from your reception, Tamara?" Through my kitchen window I admired the meager sprouts.

Her cell phone crackled, but didn't distort her excitement.

"Did you get some of those?" she gasped. "They were all gone, so I didn't have any for myself. I was sure there'd be plenty leftover, but there weren't."

"They've just started to come up."

"Oh, I wish I could see 'em. Take lots of pictures."

No wonder I like that girl, I thought, once we hung up. She and I think alike. The smallest things delight us.

Tamara's pot filled out nicely. Sweet Williams and baby carnations rose above the white alyssum. Tall dark-centered daisies spiked up over them. Then, in the heat of late summer, scarlet salvia reached up and towered over everything. I captured each stage of growth on film. To set scale and perspective, I included lawn furniture, tree or bird bath in the background. New red cushions on our steamer chairs matched the salvia's scarlet.

It took weeks to find the right picture frames. A collage with all those different sized holes? Boring. A small book of snapshots in cellophane pages? Not quite. But, like Goldilocks, when I saw it, I knew it was just right. Five black frames, hinged together to

stand accordion style, they provided a panorama of progressive flowering color. It was hard to pare them down to just five pictures. With wrapping paper and a bit of ribbon, they folded down into an unassuming Christmas box that I took to the post office with a great sense of accomplishment.

The phone call came a week before Christmas, always a good sign, indicating gift-giving success.

“Oh, thank you,” Tamara said. “They’re wonderful.”

I agreed.

Only the daisies came back this summer. My husband and I still call them Tamara’s flowers, reminiscent of the months we spent pushing them around our patio, doting over them like new parents. Their brief flourish has moved on to a sunny spot in our shared memory. As grief therapy they served me well. Nurturing them provided final punctuation to a rambling unspoken monologue about a wedding followed too soon by a funeral.

The daisies look drab now flanked by vigorous sweet basil and pansies that won’t quit. By spring the soil will be reworked and offered to new salad seedlings. Maybe red leaf lettuce or a bit of arugula. That’s the beauty of gardening. Seeds and soil seek new beginnings. Despite our fear of future failures and our regrets about what should have been, so must we. We make memories and languish in past achievements, but sometimes we just have to move on.

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