

Brambles

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Tango dancers all wore high heels, Mrs. Padelford told Rosanne. She said they slicked their hair back into a bun and had fabulous posture. "You should try it," Mrs. Padelford said, fixing Rosanne with her big gray eyes which always seemed to be open a little too wide behind her sequined glasses. Rosanne responded that she had never aspired to fabulousness.

"Aspire," Mrs. Padelford said. "Do something fun. Do you even drink?" Rosanne said she drank herbal tea. "Good God," Mrs. Padelford said. The tango had come up during a townhouse owner's meeting, while they were all gathered around Mrs. Padelford's table, heads bent dutifully over the spreadsheet. Mrs. Padelford had lifted her skinny arms as if summoning spirits and said, "It's perfect, as always." Then she had fixed her trifocular gaze on Rosanne and said, "Why are you doing this? Why aren't you out dancing the tango right this minute? I would be, if I were your age. All I've got to look forward to is knitting and baking cookies and I can't do either one worth a darn."

Her father had come south from Oregon for his annual dose of spring sunshine and said something similar, not about the tango but that she ought to get out more. Then he went back to Eugene and some time after that Mrs. Padelford moved away, and Rosanne one day she realized she was the youngest person in her townhouse complex, but not so much younger than she had been. She noticed a flyer on the bulletin board at the library where she worked. Tango lessons, ten dollars. At the least, her posture would improve.

She dug through her heap of sensible, round-toed sandals until she unearthed her mother's old high heels, pointy-toed, slick-soled, dark-red pumps. They were only two inches high, but a teetery two inches. Her mother had always described herself as the kind of feminist who plucked her eyebrows and wore attractive shoes. Rosanne practiced a careful figure eight on her living room rug, pretending to balance against another person. It didn't feel right.

"Snap that leg!" the tango teacher cried. "Controlled passion. Elegant. Precise." Taking a stab at precision, Rosanne snapped her leg. Her partner said, "Ow!" and let go of her hand to rub his shin. A moment earlier he had compared dancing with her to driving a sports car. His face, what she could see of it above his beard, seemed to express suffering. She said, "Sorry." He resumed his grip and twirled her twice, fast, making her gasp. Was this fun or revenge? He twirled her for the third time and Roseanne's right shoe flew into the outer darkness of the community center. Off balance, she clung to her partner to stay upright. His name was Bert—she'd been staring at his name tag for the last fifteen minutes. She tried to limp after the shoe, but Bert maneuvered her to the edge of the floor and parked her next to a folding chair. She pointed to a gym mat and he set off in that direction. Rosanne sat down and hid her bare foot behind her shod one. Her mother, she remembered, had worn a half size larger than she did. She'd always expected her own feet to grow that extra bit, but they never had.

Bert handed her the shoe and she slipped it on, hoping he wouldn't notice the sweaty toeprints she left on the polished floor. Other couples glided or lurched around them, in and out of step with the music. She was the only one with her hair slicked back in a bun, which, she felt, could almost compensate for the shoe fiasco.

"How about a cup of coffee?" Bert asked after the lesson. He had decaf, she had cinnamon tea. She waited to hear a litany of complaints about his ex-wife, but none came. He said he was in research. She said she was a librarian and that her favorite part of the job was reading to the preschoolers on Wednesdays. She said she thought tango was worth learning for itself, he said he mostly enjoyed the twirling. Rosanne said that speaking of going around in circles, she had taken a spinning class the previous autumn and liked it.

"Bicycle spinning?" Bert asked. "I ride my bike to work sometimes."

"Wool spinning. I spun sheep's wool and made yarn out of it. My hands were so soft, from the lanolin. I made myself a pair of mittens."

"Why did you stop?"

Rosanne refused to blush. "I didn't meet anyone I wanted to date."

Bert chuckled, though she hadn't meant it as a joke.

"I think they should call it tangle, instead of tango," he said. His hair was a tangle that, taken with his beard and glasses made him look like a large nearsighted animal peeking at her through a cover of bushes.

A moment passed. "What kind of research?" Rosanne asked. He told her it was to do with crystallization studies of enzymes. "I'm too deep into crystallography to get out now," he said, and added cautiously, "I could show you my lab some time."

Rosanne said, "We'll see."

They persisted week after week, twirling and kicking and gliding, not improving much, until one Tuesday night before the music had even started Bert said, "Let's skip this joint and go for coffee."

The music beckoned, but Bert looked toward the door and held out his hand. Rosanne had driven past his house and noted no toys in the front yard. As far as she was able to discover, he had never been sued. His divorce had been finalized five years earlier, with no reports of domestic abuse on the court website she liked to visit. He was, if anything dull, but he might say the same about her. She took his hand and left the music behind.

In the coffee shop they carried their cups to their usual table. Bert said, "I had a great idea at work this afternoon."

She waited, thinking she would have to ask him to explain his work one more time and this time she would really try to understand.

Bert sipped his decaf. "I think we should get married." She'd been about to observe that a late cup of decaf could keep some people awake. She'd found research online to back her up. She shelved that conversational idea and studied him. The trouble was, she'd grown very fond of him, and not just because of the way he twirled her until she was dizzy. He was a sweet, trusting man. Hurting him would be akin to hurting a child. That made the decision more difficult. Bert didn't look at her while she considered, just kept adding packets of sugar to his coffee. When she saw the fourth sugar packet trembling in his fingers, something gave way inside her, like a loose board in an old fence. She said, "It could work."

"Whew," he said. His beard shifted and the ends of his moustache moved upward. There was a good bit of gray in his beard. She wondered if they could learn to dye each other's hair in their old age. It could be "their thing."

She said, "I hope we know what we're getting into."

"You're getting into the rest of your life, with me," Bert said. "You're the nicest, sweetest woman I've ever met. You keep calm. I wouldn't be dancing if it wasn't for you." He drank the rest of his coffee and made a face at the sweetness. He said, "I can't sustain this kind of talk. I mean what I say, but don't expect me to keep on saying it. It wears me out."

She nodded. "Me, too."

She moved into his house and every day they went off to their respective work. Bert seemed contented to have her to chat with over dinner. He was a conscientious man, trusting, a little shy. Driving home after work she reminded herself that he was smart and sweet but a thought prickled in the back of her mind: he's no musketeer. She told herself it was because she was surrounded by racks of romance novels at work all day. Neither of them could have modeled for those voluptuous cover pictures.

Bert said he loved the café in Eureka. He took a bite of chicken pie and said, "This is great stuff." A little pearl of sauce clung to his beard. He was taking that rare thing for him, a vacation, a week away from his work. Rosanne thought his enthusiasm must be a disguise for anxiety. He worried that his life's work would disappear if he wasn't there hovering over it day and night. They'd been married on October 15 and were now into their third marital week. "So far, so good?" Bert said. Rosanne nodded, fearing "so far" might not go far enough.

Her seat was uncomfortable, some flaw in the café chair. She winced, and Bert said, "What's wrong?"

“It’s nothing.” She forced herself to wait until he had finished his chicken pot pie. Standing up she cast a glance at her chair and saw a dried green pea stuck to the fake leather.

“Look,” she said. She grabbed Bert’s arm and pointed.

“What?” he asked.

She said, “That was it, that was what was bothering me.”

For the next ten miles up the coast they argued the weight-bearing capacity of a dried green pea, the thickness of denim, and whether regular exercise made a person more or less sensitive to pain. It was their first quarrel, such as it was.

They crossed the border into Oregon and immediately Bert had to turn on the windshield wipers. Rosanne hadn’t been back to Oregon since her divorce—her father preferred to visit her in sunny California-- but it was just what she remembered, lush, green, wet, the kind of weather that drove people inside their houses and their heads. Bert’s new red raincoat glowed against the gray sky. He said, “Do you want to skip Eugene? I’m getting a vibe. Too stressful?”

“Why would I want to do that?” She heard a querulous tone in her voice and took a breath and began again. “We have to let him know we’re married. You have to meet him. I need to remind him I exist.”

“Is he frail?” Bert asked.

“You mean Alzheimer’s?” Again that sharp tone. She must be tired. “Not at all. He has an acre in back and he keeps it like a park. He’s past president of his garden club.”

“Sounds idyllic,” Bert said, with a trace of envy in his voice. She thought of her mother playing solitaire on the dining room table while her father fertilized the rosebushes, and thought, no wonder I’m a boring person married to a boring man.

But she had got herself into this. It wasn’t poor Bert’s fault. The motel room in Florence had a Gideon bible in the bedside drawer. She flipped it open, hoping to come across some pertinent advice to those who had married in haste, and found herself in the middle of the Song of Solomon. Bert came out of the shower humming, naked except for his hair and beard.

“What are you reading?” he asked.

She held up the Bible.

“Glorified fairy tales—in my opinion. Obviously I respect your beliefs.”

So then she had to ask him if he didn't think the Song of Solomon wasn't the greatest love poetry ever written, and he said he didn't read love poetry. "'Bert and Rosanne, sittin' in a tree,' that's the closest I get to poetry."

"No, but listen to this," she said. He got into the bed and propped his pillow behind his head.

If she could do anything, it was read to people. "Thy neck is like a tower of David."

"Hot stuff," Bert said, and fell asleep.

She dreamed she had married a bear by mistake, and both of them regretted it. She woke up and resisted the urge to turn on the bedside lamp and make sure it wasn't true.

The closer they got to Eugene the pricklier she felt. They took the scenic route in from the coast, the road that went past the hillside cemetery where her mother was buried. You told me, she thought. You warned me for years to be careful and look what I've done. Her mother had cried at her first wedding, being able to see the big picture and the divorce looming sky-high in the background.

Bert found Honeycutt Road on the third try. The sky was low and gray. A man and woman walked along the edge of the road, raincoat hoods up, holding hands. Rosanne's eyes burned with sudden tears. She wanted to walk along the road holding Bert's hand, but she feared it would be a tedious exercise devoted to weed identification and reminiscences of the chicken pot pie in Eureka.

Her father's black pickup stood in the driveway like a steed with its nostrils flared, waiting to gallop away.

"My dad goes to Walmart a lot," she said, suddenly remembering. "Does that put you off?" Neither of them had opened their door.

"I'm not married to him," Bert said. "He's got to buy groceries somewhere."

"It's not groceries. He buys an item, like a fertilizer spreader, and after a couple of days he takes it back. It's never quite what he expected. Then he buys something else, like a pruning saw, and after a couple of days he takes it back. He always finds a flaw."

"They must hide when they see him coming."

"I went with him the last time I was here, after my mom died. He's very polite. He always has the receipt. He thanks the clerk. One lady even gave him her phone number."

Bert opened his door. "We've all got a fatal flaw."

Rosanne got out of the car and scanned the house, trying to see it from Bert's point of view. From the front it looked almost the same as ever, a white two-story with an enclosed porch and a metal storm door. The door snapped shut with a bang, like a trap. She would have to warn Bert. There were drifts of maple leaves on the lawn and the grass looked ragged, too high.

"I'll rake the leaves while we're here," she said. She looked at her watch. It was only two o'clock.

"Right now?" Bert asked with a smidgen of panic in his voice.

"I'll talk to him for a while, but the football game will be on and he'll want to watch that. You can watch the game with him. Then you can come out and help me with the leaves, and then we can take him out to dinner and go back to the motel—job well done." Bert's face, what she could see of it, looked apprehensive. Rosanne took his hand. "Follow me. I want to show you where I grew up. It wasn't the house. It was out here. I used to lie under the apple tree and read, just like Abe Lincoln."

They scuffled through leaves and pine cones to the back gate which was oddly ajar. A blackberry vine like a prickly snake poked through the gap. Rosanne pulled the gate as far open as it would go. It wobbled and almost fell over.

"Holy cow," Bert said behind her. "Gothic."

She had once done one hundred somersaults on this lawn as a child, and lain on her back too dizzy to get up for ten minutes afterward. She had run laps around the fish pond with her dog and she and her brother had pretended to drown in their plastic swimming pool and been sent to their rooms for scaring their mother. Now blackberry canes filled the space like some gigantic, prickly art installation. Blackberry fingers explored the rear wall of the house as high as the gutters, and their tips seemed to be reaching for the back bedroom window—her old bedroom. The grass beneath their feet lay bent over in wet, heavy swaths. A narrow little trail made a dark line in the wet grass. A cat, maybe, hunting something inside the blackberries. Or maybe some other animal hunting cats. There was no sign of rosebushes or the fishpond or the apple tree. They had been overrun. "There used to be horses back there, before they built the townhouses," she said. "When I was a teenager I used to resent that I had to look at townhouses instead of a barn."

"You don't have to look at them now," Bert said. "They're invisible."

The side gate fell over when she tried to close it. Bert propped it at an angle and they fled to the front door.

Her father hugged her with a distracted air, as if he had just seen her the day before and couldn't get enthused about her company again so soon. His hair was silver white now and he had a neat white beard. He was wearing a black turtleneck sweater which made him look a bit like Sean Connery. He wasn't stooped. He didn't shuffle. Good things, and yet he didn't seem quite as she remembered him, not even counting the Amazonian thicket in the back yard.

He said, "Sit and watch the game with me, Bert. I hope you're a Duck at heart."

"I could be." Bert cast a glance at Rosanne and took a seat on the couch. Rosanne went to the picture window that looked over the back yard and shifted the curtain a few inches. There was a crack in a lower corner of the glass. She pushed back the end of a black berry vine that had found or maybe caused the crack, and pricked her finger.

The Ducks scored a touchdown on the kickoff return. "Hey!" Bert said with more enthusiasm than he had shown so far on their trip. He smiled at her father. "Hot stuff."

"You just wait," Her father said.

"I think I'll do a little yard work," Rosanne said. She picked up the rain jacket she had just taken off.

Her father said, "I've been busy lately. I'll clean up the garden after it frosts. A lot of it will die back when it frosts."

Face must be saved, for him, in his house. Rosanne said, "I've been sitting in a car for the last few days. I need the exercise." Bert made to stand up and she said, "I'll just get some fresh air. I'll come back inside a few minutes."

She found a small pair of clippers in the garage. She also found a box full of baking dishes and serving plates, none she recognized from her mother's kitchen. Walmart purchases, she hoped, but they didn't look new. She pulled aside the wobbly gate, stepped over the creeping blackberry vine, and looked for a place to begin. The little cat's trail seemed the best bet. She followed it, sidling between outstretched vines until she was surrounded. She began to clip. Almost immediately a blister began to form on the inside of her right thumb and she remembered the pair of mittens in her raincoat pocket. She put them on and began again. A sticker poked the back of her neck. She zipped her raincoat up to her chin and continued cutting. When she reached the back fence she would stop, she told herself. She mustn't leave Bert alone for too long.

An hour later, she felt as if she had been hacking at blackberries all her life. A sticker poked her ankle through her sock, but she merely swore and kept going. She would have to take off her mitten to pick the sticker out and if she did that, the skin of her blistered thumb would come off with the mitten. She sized up the cane presently in front of her—tall, prickly,

self-absorbed--and crouched and worked her clipper blades into its base. It was too big around to cut in one go. She dug the clippers into it, squeezing the blades to chew away the tough cane. When the cane finally came apart and slumped onto its neighbor she grinned and hurled it behind her. One more down, a thousand more to go. Strange to find out now that this was what she'd been born to do.

Her right hand got tired, and she developed a two-handed grip to work the dull little clippers. With the tougher canes she found that it helped to roar like a tennis player. She abused the blackberries, whose fruit had turned moldy weeks earlier. "Begone!" she yelled, and cut three vines right in a row, cut, cut , cut. The air was so fresh and clean she thought she could live on it.

She heard the snap of the screen door as if from miles away. Someone said, "Rosanne." She lowered the clippers and peered through the canes. There was Bert, the man she had come here with, who was her husband, standing at the edge of the jungle.

"Are you okay?"

She said, "I'm making progress. I don't want to quit just now."

"It's raining."

So it was. She pulled up her hood and felt the water that had collected in it run down the back of her neck. She pulled the hood down again.

"What's going on in the house?"

"The Ducks are winning. A little old lady stopped by with a bowl of candy for your dad to give to trick-or-treaters. She asked if he wanted company handing it out."

"What did he say?"

"He said he already had plans."

Rosanne clipped a branch that swooped in front of her face. It was a thin, wiry branch, the sneaky kind she hated most.

"About our plans," Bert said after a minute. It's getting dark."

"Just a couple more," she said.

"Promise?"

He must be bored. She said, "I know a restaurant in town that makes the best pot pies.

We'll all go there, soon as I'm done."

She expected him to say, "Hot stuff," but he didn't, just said, "Okay," and went away.

She kept cutting, casting the branches behind her, winding around the biggest canes and making side routes around the yellowed remains of the rosebushes. A watery yellow light shone through the clouds to the west and she realized she'd gone off course. She turned and began to cut through yet another tangle. After several minutes of struggle she glimpsed the boards of the back fence and felt a surge of happiness. Hacked-off cane stubs poked between her legs and tried to trip her. She stamped them down and pushed on, reckless of scratches. "I'm getting there," she said, and cut off another three-foot section.

Getting to the fence took longer than she'd thought but eventually she clipped her way right up to it. Several of the boards had fallen in, pried away by the blackberries that had woven themselves around them. There was a neat path of bark mulch on the other side and just beyond it the patios of the nearest townhouses, not so different from the one she lived in in California. There were lights on in the townhouses. In the nearest one she saw a cat's dark silhouette on the windowsill.

Something tickled the back of her neck and she jumped, but it was only a blackberry leaf. She heard a clock chime five times and realized that she had been cutting blackberries for three hours. It was Halloween. Parents would be taking their children around to collect their treats. Her father would be handing out second-hand candy to kids who probably thought he was the scariest man on the block. "He lives in that house with the blackberries going up to the roof!" She suddenly felt tired and guilty for staying out so long. It was time she went in and behaved herself. She turned to retrace her path, but it had changed while her back was turned. The branches she had cast behind her along the way had tangled themselves into a sticky obstacle course. "As you sow, so shall you reap," her mother would have said. Rosanne edged sideways around the first pile and a jagged branch tangled itself in her hair. She shifted the clippers to her left hand and moved her right hand carefully upwards until she could touch the branch. She pushed it free, but it sprang back, catching her across the back of the neck. She felt the sting of cool air on torn skin.

She thought of calling for help. If the game was over, if the television set was off, or at least turned down, they might hear her. She thought of the children trick-or-treating. Would they hear her and be frightened? It would be horrible to spoil their fun.

She would get herself back and stroll in as if nothing had happened. She crouched to slide under a branch and felt a sticker snatch out a strand of her hair. If she let the blackberries have all her hair, maybe it would be enough. If she was bald and ugly, they might allow her to go free.

She thought, I am losing my mind. She made one last attempt to free herself and dropped the clippers. Bending to retrieve them, she saw the porch light come on in the nearest

townhouse. She moved toward the hole in the fence, a request for help ready in her mouth.

Mrs. Padelford came running out the back door of the townhouse holding a flaming baking sheet out in front of her. She flung the thing onto the bark mulch and a small cloud of smoke wafted up smelling of scorched sugar and cinnamon. She said something that sounded to Rosanne like, "Don't give up, dammit." She seemed to be wearing a tiara, and she seemed to be crying. The Mrs. Padelford she had known never cried. She was the most vivacious lady in the complex. This couldn't be her. She wondered if Mrs. Padelford had a sister. Where had she gone to when she moved away? Rosanne had a sudden memory of seeing her father and Mrs. Padelford in animated conversation during his visit the previous summer. They were standing in front of a saguaro topped with white blossoms and she'd thought they were discussing gardening, but now she thought she must have underestimated both of them.

Mrs. Padelford turned and stared straight at her through the hole in the fence. She stood very still, like a cat that has seen something no one else can see. Rosanne held her breath. How embarrassing for both of them if they saw each other now, in the state they were in. She wanted to retreat into her prickly sanctuary, but she stayed where she was until Mrs. Padelford picked up the empty baking sheet and went back into her house.

She suddenly felt lonelier than she had ever felt in her life. She was shivering with loneliness. She stripped the mittens from her hands. Skin came away with them but it didn't matter. She unzipped her rain jacket and found her phone in the inside pocket where it had nestled all afternoon. It shone in her hand like some magic device in a fairy tale. Don't go there, she told herself. Later. She dialed and heard Bert's phone ringing, both on her phone and somewhere outside. She dialed again, hearing his ringtone over and over, the theme song from "Lawrence of Arabia." She kept redialing, kept listening. She heard the storm door slam, and after a moment the sound of a car door opening. She heard fumbling on Bert's phone and his voice saying, "Hello?"

"It's me. Your wife."

"Where the hell did you get off to?"

"Nowhere. I'm still in the back yard." She tried not to cry. "I'm stuck."

The wet grass muted his footsteps. She didn't hear him until he said, "Ouch, dammit."

"Be careful. I piled up cut branches all over the place," she said. "I made a maze by mistake and I don't know how to get out."

"Rosanne, that wasn't a smart thing to do." It was the sharpest tone he'd taken with her, in the six months she'd known him.

She said, "No, it wasn't smart. It was ridiculous."

His voice came nearer. "I thought you'd left me. I thought you'd looked up some old flame and run off with him."

"Why would I do that? You're my flame," she said.

"Well. That's good to know."

"It's true."

He moved closer. "Ouch. You must be torn to shreds."

"Pretty much. Could you shine a flashlight or something? I might be able to work out a shortcut." She sounded pitiful. She felt pitiful. "Be right back," he said. He padded across the wet grass. She heard the car start in the driveway and drive away.

Her legs were tired. She would have liked to sit down, but the ground was wet and littered with cut sections of blackberries. She marched in place for a minute until her swinging hand smacked into a prickle.

Someone far away set off a firecracker. She heard cars, and the shrieks of children.

Long minutes later she heard Bert's voice and she saw a flashlight shining through the canes.

"I'm here," she called. The light moved back and forth in a purposeful way between the back of the house and the clump of blackberries nearest the patio. She saw the old wrought iron patio set, engulfed. Bert settled the hedge trimmer under his arm like a lance and then she heard a hum like a swarm of friendly bees. He cut straight through, unlike the meandering route she had taken to the fence, but it still took a long time. At last he stepped through the circular opening he had made and set down the hedge trimmer. He put his arms around her. She said, "Oh, please don't take me out of this briar patch."

He laughed. "Man, that machine's a keeper. I'm not going to let your dad it back to the store."

"It's symbolic," she said.

"Everything that's happened since we got here is symbolic. Your dad and I have been sitting in there trying to impress each other, while all the time I'm looking at a bag of manure on the patio and trying to figure out which one of us it is."

“But it makes things grow,” she said.

He said, “I have a surprise for you. I did it when your dad and I couldn’t think of anything else to say. I thought I might have to compete with your secret lover so I took drastic measures.” “I don’t have a secret lover. You’re it.”

“If you say so.” He shone the flashlight on his face and said, “Boo!”

He’d shaved his beard. His face was smooth, with a square chin and an interesting, even cynical mouth. His nose looked beakier, his gaze more penetrating. His bare face told her there was more to be reckoned with than she’d expected.

He said, “The lady who lives in the townhouse back there came over a while ago. She’s in the house getting your dad into his costume. He introduced her as his favorite witch. I think they’re an item.”

She must have followed him, after a few months of phone calls and hope and doubt, up to Oregon. Rosanne leaned against Bert to balance herself. “I made it all the way to the back fence. You made it to Walmart and back. Where do we go from here?”

“Anywhere we want,” he said. “But I’d like to start with a nice clean motel and a box of bandages.”

They walked across the wet grass through the opening where the gate had been. The front porch light was on. Her father, wearing a pointed hat and a paisley caftan, and Mrs. Padelford in her tiara, were handing out candy to two children who looked glad to have their mother standing right behind them.

Bert said, “You know it’s going to grow back.”

“Let it,” she said.