

Spring Planting

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Joe Emmett, working in the weedy patch of ground Mrs. Hunter called a garden, looked down across the yard and saw two black crows sitting on the fence. The crows positioned themselves on the faded gate, scraping their feet on the pickets. Once settled, they began cawing loudly to each other with their raspy, crone-like voices; their cries shattered the stillness of the warm spring morning.

Joe watched them for a moment and then went back to his work. He was forty-two. His face was simple and round, and his eyes were as dark as shoe polish. He looked gaunt and lean in his outmoded attire, his large hands and wrists extending awkwardly beyond the reach of his worn, white shirtsleeves, his buttonless black vest hanging down and open in front, and his black trousers, which were torn and frayed at the edges, revealing his bony ankles. He wore a faded straw hat to protect his head while he worked in the morning sun. His brown leather shoes, cracked and coated with a fine layer of garden dust, sported no laces, and there was always a pebble in one or the other of them.

He was digging up the compact earth with an old trowel he had found in Mrs. Hunter's garage, removing the stubborn weeds and preparing the ground for spring planting. He looked up toward the crows by the gate now and then. His face was determined and childlike; occasionally his tongue darted out of his mouth to moisten his lips as he concentrated on the uneven rows he had defined with the trowel. The task of weeding and planting required all his attention.

Joe wiped the perspiration off his brow with the back of his hand, and left a smudge of earth on his forehead. Behind him stood the white, Victorian mansion with lace sheers in the windows, its iron railings reaching up to pierce the sunlit sky. It was a tired looking house, in need of new paint, one that had been designed with grand intentions but was now sagging sadly, like an old woman.

Joe cast another glance toward the fence. The crows, their bright eyes glinting in the morning sunlight, tipped their black heads arrogantly toward Joe as if to challenge his authority to dig in the earth. Suddenly, they took flight to find a higher advantage on the telephone wires across the street.

Finally, when half the morning was spent, Joe lay down his trowel and put one bony finger down into the dirt, drilling seed holes. He removed the seed packet from the inner pocket of his vest, ripped the package open and poured the wrinkled kernels into the palm of his hand. He brought the kernels up near his face, and spoke to them in a low baritone.

“Now, you little seeds, you listen to me now. You gots to grow up good and tall and make good corns. Fat and juicy like, and yellow. And lots of you. I’ll be here to help you grow strong, but you gots to do your part.” He fingered each shriveled yellow kernel, pressing it lightly into his hand. “And don’t worry none ‘bout them crows. They talks big, but we ain’t listenin’.”

Joe placed each seed into its hole and covered it with dirt. After the dirt was tapped into place, his hand lingered over the ground for a moment, and he closed his eyes. When he had buried the last of the corn kernels, he pushed himself off the ground and arched his long back, stretching up toward the blue Kentucky sky. His throat felt dry and closed.

Joe wiped his brow and started off across the yard toward the back porch. As he walked, the tongue of his right shoe flapped against his foot, making a gentle slapping sound. When he reached the porch, he mounted the sagging steps lightly, but then paused on the stoop before knocking on the screen.

Mrs. Hunter stood over the kitchen table, kneading bread. Her round face was etched with lines around her eyes and mouth, and threads of gray ran throughout her hair. She wore her hair pulled back and piled on top of her head, like a cinnamon roll; the style made her look taller than she was. Her hands and arms were covered with flour up to her elbows, and a green gingham apron covered her ample middle. Mrs. Hunter made a fist and punched down the soft white mixture in the ceramic bowl, leaning heavily into her task.

Joe watched as she took the white lump out of the bowl and pounded it down on the wooden table. She coaxed the floury paste into a ball, and then flattened it with strong fingers. Her flabby arms shook with the rhythm of her labor. As the helpless dough yielded to the force of her big hands, Mrs. Hunter began warbling a tune Joe didn't recognize, high and pinched. Joe removed his hat and cleared his throat.

"Scuse me, Ms. Hunter. I planted all them seed corns, like you said. I was wantin'..."

"Oh, Joe, you scared me," Mrs. Hunter said.

She took a startled breath and placed one hand on her chest, near her collarbone. Her mouth moved into a tight little smile, but her eyes were wide and bright.

"Let me finish with this, and I'll be right there. I've got to set this dough to rise."

"I was wantin' to know..."

"I said I'll be with you in a minute, Joe, if you'll just wait till I'm through here. I need to finish this."

She brushed her cheek with her shoulder, and looked back down at her work. She gave the dough a final pat, allowing her hand to linger for a moment on the pasty surface. The dough looked dull and dingy against the smooth wood of the table. She gathered the dough into a ball, placed it in the bowl and covered it with a red-striped towel.

With a heavy step, Mrs. Hunter walked over to the sink under the window. After she bent down and turned on the faucet with her elbow, a squeaky noise complained from the pipe. Joe heard a shuddering pause, followed by the sound of water splashing and gurgling in the porcelain sink. He watched the water run freely from the tap, and swallowed hard, twice.

The water ran and Mrs. Hunter waited. After several minutes, she darted one finger under the water, but quickly withdrew it. Finally, after trying it again, Mrs.

Hunter leaned down into the sink. Her gingham apron pressed against the countertop and the water rushed over her hands and arms. Her upper arms changed from white to red under the running water.

Joe turned away and faced the garage. He tossed his hat on the grass and put his hands to his sides, slapping his thighs with his palms. He curled his fingers into a ball and slowly rubbed his hands up and down his legs.

Rusty hinges squeaked, and Mrs. Hunter stepped out onto the porch, drying her hands on her apron. Joe unclenched his fists and turned to face her.

“Now what is it you wanted, Joe?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, Ms. Hunter, but I was wantin’ to know what you want me to do next.”

“Oh.... Well, the next thing is the tomatoes I guess. I’ve got some tomato starts on the porch, here, on the wicker table near the settee. The tomatoes need to be planted against the garage—in that sunny spot under the window.” Mrs. Hunter pointed to a small garden area on the south side of the garage. “My husband always planted them there—under the window. That’s the only place sunny enough for tomatoes.”

Joe turned to survey the site. The patch of ground near the garage was not large, but it was completely overgrown with weeds. Huge dandelions poked their heads out from under clumps of towering grass, and patches of clover appeared at odd intervals. Prickly looking plants, some brown with age and others yellowish-green and new looking, bordered the edge of the garden near the sidewalk.

“Be sure to plant the tomatoes this far apart.” Mrs. Hunter indicated a space of about two feet with her sausage-like fingers. “And let me know when you’re finished. When the plants are in the ground you’ll have to find the tomato cages in the garage.”

She turned to go.

““Scuse me, Ms. Hunter?”

“Yes?”

Mrs. Hunter stretched the word into two syllables, flipping her voice in a surprised diphthong.

Joe sucked in his breath.

“Do you have a shovel or a hoe, ma’am? I sure could gets more work done faster if I had a shovel.”

A fly buzzed around Joe’s head, and he swatted it away with the trowel.

“Hmm. I don’t know, exactly. Mr. Hunter used to keep all his tools in the garage. Did you check the garage?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I looked there already. But all I found was this hand trowel, and I was wonderin’ if ...”

“Well, if you didn’t find one in the garage, I must not have one. I don’t keep garden tools in the kitchen, you know.”

“No, Ma’am. I guess you don’t. I should a’ figured that, but I just thought that maybe...”

Joe stopped speaking as Mrs. Hunter stepped away from the screen. He stood near the back door for a moment, staring after her, rubbing the top of his head. He shrugged his shoulders and let out his breath in a rush.

Joe stepped over to the tomato starts on the table and examined the nearest plant. The start was green and tender looking, snug in its plastic container. The lone stalk, covered with wispy hairs, extended boldly out of the soil, supporting three smaller stems without complaint. The leaves sprouting out of these stems were similar to each other, but varied in shape and color. The ones nearest the soil were simple and yellow; the older leaves at the top of the plant boasted sharp-looking edges and spidery veins.

Joe reached down to stroke a tender leaf. The leaf was cool; it felt smooth and soft under his finger. As his finger traced the delicate green, he spoke to the plant in a low rumble.

“We gots to get you in the ground today, tomato, but it ain’t gonna be easy.”

Joe bent down to pick up the nearest four plants. When he gathered them to his chest, he inhaled the distinct scent of fresh tomatoes, the scent of green and goodness. Joe made his way toward the steps with a light heart, and his lips curved into a gentle grin.

When he stepped off the sagging porch, his flapping shoe slipped off his foot and his right leg jerked violently upward. A streak of brown leather flew through the air, as if it had a life of its own. Twisting his back to keep from falling, Joe grabbed for the handrail and dropped two tomato plants on the edge of the porch. The plants bounced down the steps, scattering dirt and leaves on painted boards. Joe let out a startled cry and clung to the rail. When he righted himself, his eyes immediately sought the plants. They lay broken and bent on the sidewalk behind him. One of the plastic pots was cracked in half.

Bent over and breathing hard, Joe looked up to see Mrs. Hunter's face through the screen. Her gaze shifted from Joe's foot to the damaged tomatoes, and back again. She put one hand on her hip and the other on her throat.

"Are you all right?"

Her voice was high and full of sugary concern, but she did not open the door.

"Yes, Ma'am, I'm fine. My shoe slipped off and I..."

Joe turned his head and scanned the yard for his missing shoe. He didn't see it.

"Well, I'm glad you're OK. You gave me a fright."

Mrs. Hunter pulled at her collar and adjusted her glasses.

"You'll have to clean up this mess before you get back to work. Be sure to sweep up the dirt so no one falls down the steps. I wouldn't want anyone to fall down and get hurt."

"I'll get right to it, Ms. Hunter."

Joe reached out for the tomatoes and began scooping them back into their containers. Mrs. Hunter turned to go, but then paused. She turned back. Her eyes focused on the broken starts.

"I'm sorry, Joe, but I have to take the price of the ruined starts out of your wages. Tomato starts don't grow on trees, you know, and I warned you when I took you on last week— I don't tolerate carelessness. You ruined them, and now you have to pay for them."

Joe squared his shoulders, and nodded.

"Yes, Ma'am. I'm mighty sorry 'bout them plants."

When the steps were clean, Joe went into the yard to find his missing shoe. He paced circles around the lawn, limping slightly, and scanned the green grass with large, dark eyes. After a few minutes of searching, he found the shoe under a budding rhododendron. He sat down cross-legged in front of the bush and reached for his shoe, pulling it to himself, dragging it across the grass. He held it up near his face, and his dark brows pinched into a scolding frown.

"You ol' shoe, you. Now, why'd you go and do that to me?" Joe tapped at the toe with his finger.

"Ain't I been good to you? Ain't I carried you with me wherever I went? You and me been together all these years, and you go and pull a stunt like that. Now Ms. Hunter's mad at me, and it's all your fault. And me bein' so good to ya'. Wanted to buy you some new laces, I did. Or maybe even get us enough money to get some new shoes, so's you can get some rest. Ain't you ashamed of yourself, flyin' like that? Just like a bird." The shoe made no reply.

Joe shrugged and put the shoe down on the grass. Leaning back on his elbows, he looked up at the sky and let out his breath in a rush. He lifted his brows and softened his rhetoric. "I guess this ain't no easy life for you, either, shoe. Trompin' from job to job, workin' all day in the hot sun. The way I figure it, you and me gots to work together if we're gonna' make it in this world. Don't ya' think?" As he said it, he tapped the shoe three times and nodded his head.

Joe pushed himself off the ground, smiling to himself. He pushed his foot in his shoe, picked up the damaged starts, and headed for the plot of ground Mrs. Hunter had indicated with her finger.