

## THE STRANGER (part 1, morning)

Daffodils, like people, have habits. When disturbed, they react in their own way. But when left alone or cherished by gardeners, they open their massed throats as if to sing in wintered gardens and frosty fields.

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The day was barely lit by its pallet of cloudy greys. Despite tiny moments of blue, there was a heavy sky. Rain was coming.

The indistinct bulk of a man slid past my side window towards the empty house behind my place. In a moment, curiosity fashioned imagination, then movement. I pulled on boots without thinking and added a scarf. I was out the door before I remembered a coat. Just in time to see the intruder's shoulder pushing open the gate to the garden.

I did not know him. He was out of place yet headed directly to the garden as though he was at home. By the time I reached the gate the drizzle started, chilled by wind and slanting sideways. No coat meant I'd have to get out of there soon. I paused for an uneasy breath, wary, foolish. What to do, what to say? Be decisive, think of an opening line.

On this bleak morning, the garden lay in its jumble of derelict spaces. The roses fought off ivy, rank periwinkle threatened patches of hellebores, all resisting my past poor efforts against rooted tangles. Native violets covered border rocks and blackberry vines hung across the dark pond. No frogs in there, but mosquitoes that fed fat dragonflies and spiders. In the untidy canopy and beyond at the forest's edge, silvereyes, honeyeaters and pardalotes thrived; abundant and safe from human interference.

I could hear him digging before I saw him. The thud and scrape of a shovel on damp earth didn't stop, even when I'd stepped through the gate. I tried to move with purpose. My heart stepped up its beat, thumping.

His hat had seen better days, stuck with buttons and badges, with a split in the brim. His beard belonged to another generation, long and thick, grey-black. A wide, frayed raffia basket slumped at his feet. His shovel, though, was new. Its steel blade, a handle of pale timber, surely, had never been used. I became more attentive to the shovel than to the man.

He was digging up clods of earth. Right where the daffodils emerged every year, in terraced rows all the way down to the pond. I stopped. He was lifting the bulbs, shaking them a little and dropping them into his basket.

I stood for a moment then began to pivot on stiff feet. Rain dripped from overhead trees on my neck, forehead, nose. I wanted to retreat, but he'd sensed me, my approach too quick for stealth. I tensed, clenched my jaw. The air turned hostile and the light seemed to dim.

He stopped and turned head and shoulders. The shovel held a clump of bulb and root. His face was weathered but not old, his eyes were clear, bright and blue. What I'd first seen as a rough tangle of a beard was combed, neat. He squinted at me. My stance unbalanced me, so I had to move forward another half step.

"What?" He snapped.

"Sorry, I thought you were someone I know." A suitable lie.

"Well, you don't."

I watched him drop the bulbs into his basket. Thud and scrape, another load. I remembered lifting bulbs myself this time last year, at least in the winter sometime—it's easy to lose track of long, dull days after a while—until the rain stops and the buds emerge on cue. This man had a

better grip than my furtive and ragged attempts, digging right around the plants, protecting them with a wrapping of dark earth.

He stretched his back; his task was done. Another blue glare at me, shovel raised and ready. He'd snookered me. I couldn't leave but would be wet through if I stayed. Then, a flash of tiny wings. A pardalote, so close to my face in a warning. I gasped, able to speak again.

"They're nesting near here, in the clay under the house. They come every year to the same place. They burrow because it's dry under there. They're working on their tunnels."

He lowered the shovel. I stopped chattering, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were trespassing," I said.

"Well, I'm not."

"So, what are you doing here?" Dumb question. Too bold.

"Making sure these bulbs get looked after. Someone's made a mess of them, broken them and left them out of place. Look at all my rows planted in order. Daffs, freesias, hyacinths along the front."

That would be me making a mess, I supposed. The shovel shook slightly. Blue eyes accused me. *My rows.*

"Every year I did these bulbs for my dad. Now it's just weeds and junk." He waved the shovel towards the blackberries and rampant agapanthus. He added, "You live in that other house, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. But no-one ever comes here but me. I've thinned out some of the bulbs."

"Well, you should've left them alone. They're not yours." The cold drizzle and the pointlessness of this exchange made me cranky.

“I know that. I’ve tried to look after them. I pruned the roses last year. If you wanted the bulbs why didn’t you come before?” I’d gone too far. Why was I fighting over a garden? Was I its custodian? Actually, I wasn’t, I had no right to it.

“You should leave things that aren’t yours. This was my dad’s garden. My Gran lived here with us when I was a kid. My dad and me couldn’t afford to live here and no-one cares less, do they? I’m taking these daffs and I’m putting them somewhere no one else can get at them.”

With that, he turned, picked up the basket, shouldered the shovel, and started up the path towards me. He stomped past with a glare and pushed through the gate, leaving me soaked, alone, silenced.