

Wild Irises

The morning of the day after I arrive, my mother wakes me up and takes me to see the wild purplish-blue irises that grow in the wet places in the woods. She's wearing formless green work pants and a cream shirt, the same kind of uniform she's worn since I was a child. She rarely wore dresses, used no makeup except a slash of bright red lipstick. She negotiates the deer ruts and the fallen tree limbs as effortlessly as a girl, pointing things out to me.

"Look, here's the mystery tree I told you about. This one's an apple tree, can you imagine? I threw an apple core and that's what happened."

We are deep in the woods. Mosquitoes buzz us, a continuous high-pitched symphony. There are pink and blue Virginia bluebells, star flowers, strawberry blossoms and sturdy, white bunchberries. At last, near the snowmobile trail, we reach a clearing filled with irises, a small sea of blue. "The Monet field." she points proudly, as if she had created it herself.

Her capacity for wonder is what I will miss the most, the most precious gift she has given me.

After lunch, my mother asks if I could transplant some irises. Of course, I say, thinking she wants me to move the purple flag irises from the woods to some spot near the house. But instead it's some "tame" ones, marooned in dry, sandy soil at the edge of the yard. I rock the shovel, finally break through the crackling grass, dry as hay and twice as resistant. We pile the irises and their sandy roots into the wheelbarrow. Then it's back to the forest. My mother wants

to create another iris garden in the woods, free the “tame” irises to flourish along
with their wild cousins.

She leads me through more deer ruts, past fading yellow moccasin flowers, over mossy hillocks, into mini-swamps. Despite my workouts at the gym, my marathon bike rides, I can barely keep up with her. How can this woman, who has survived blood clots and congestive heart failure, not to mention her recurred cancer, be so tireless? I’m afraid she’ll trip on a tree trunk, hurt herself, have a heart attack, but the truth is I’m the one out of place here, turned into a tame iris after nearly thirty years in cities.

We explore ever wilder and more watery stretches of forest. I drag the iris-and-shovel-laden wheelbarrow through tangled vegetation. Finally my mother selects a watery fen just into the woods below the house. I tell her my back feels like it’s going to break, and she agrees I can hand carry the clumps of irises to their new home, rather than attempt to transport them in the wheelbarrow.

The spot looks perfect: clumps of moss surrounded by puddles of standing water. I dig into the green moss, expecting it to give like soft chocolate. But it resists the shovel and then, as the blade goes in, emits a loud sucking noise. So this is what quicksand sounds like, I think, as I turn over the heavy muck. I feel a pang of empathy for my grandparents and all the other immigrants who tried to tame these swampy, sandy forests and peat bogs into the farms they dreamed of back in Norway and Sweden. Some of them must have despaired and run screaming into the forest or to the closest train station.

Finally the irises are in, nestled into the watery hollows among the moss clumps, but it seems impossible they will grow and prosper. From sand to moss, from parched grass to water? What would happen if I replanted myself back here in this northern wilderness? Would my roots reach into the ground and grow strong, or wither and die?

My mother's smile is radiant. "They're going to be so beautiful," she says. "Next year we'll transplant more."