

CLARA'S GARDEN



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The most valuable assets for the pioneer are naiveté and youthful enthusiasm. But, if most of us knew what awaited us in our future, we'd fear to make the trip. Clara had plenty of youthful innocence, surely enough to endure her husband's dreams, at least for a while.

He told her he knew farming in Ohio would be easy, but chose the wrong crops and failed. He just *knew* dairy in Minnesota would be successful, but cows didn't like him and only stubbornly gave up their milk. To go west and seek their fortune in the rich farm lands of far-off California was not her dream, but it *was* her husband's, so she moved again, as she had before, without complaint but with plenty of doubt. This was not the life she had hoped for, but in her wisdom she knew that no one lives the life they dream.

It was a hard and long trip. There was little adventure and ample drudgery. Chester's reassurance was wrong — to sleeping on the dirt night after night was *not* made easier with repetition. She once complained, but knew it was a mistake even as the words passed her lips. The makeshift tent he built collapsed on her the first time she used it. She learned that suffering in silence was often easier on their relationship than offering him opportunities to be kind. He always meant well, but his optimism so often led to disappointment. Chester could patch, but he could not build.







He decided to stop short of the valley they had set out for and make their future in the bright sun of California's high desert. It would be warm here and there was gold in the hills around Bodie, enough for any man willing to work. Everyone said so.

Chester staked a claim in a small swale between two low hills that no one else wanted. They moved into the abandoned shack. Here they would have some protection, he told her, from any wind that might blow. The wind did blow, every day, every season. She was understanding, as she had always

been, when dust and grit blew into every crevice of their lives. He borrowed a hammer and patched their home every time the wind changed direction.

Chester also borrowed a shovel and learned how to dig. He found that digging was easy; *finding* was much more difficult.



The first Spring, Clara silently planned, and excitedly planted her garden while Chester looked on in surprise. He told her to buy more canning jars than she knew she would need. She wished he hadn't cared. She grew just enough to feed them through the fall; she had prayed for enough to last through the winter. The second Spring she planted with care while Chester was away. The third she planted with concern. The fourth she planted in desperation.

In Ohio, the soil had been dark and rich and her crops found it a comfortable home. In the desert, the soil was dry and sandy. Crops would grow, but only sagebrush would thrive. A plot of land that completely fails to grow crops is kind. At least one quickly knows the need to move on. Here, there was enough growth to encourage, but barely enough to harvest.

Her children were born and died in sequence. When the last one died of measles, she felt only relief that her obligations to try were now ended. At least now she could concentrate her attentions on the garden.





Her tenth garden suffered from the drought and produced no seed at all. In their next California spring, she was tired and grew weak and sick. She spent April and May gazing out the window at the tree by the well. Chester cared for her as best he could. She died in June, quietly and without hesitation.

Chester buried her under the locust tree next to the garden, next to her children. The next day he dug for gold again and suddenly remembered she was gone.



He walked to the well and took a long pull on the cool water and thought of her smile and gazed at the patches on the walls of their home. Even as she died, he never saw *her* as old and dry. He leaned against the tree and dreamt of a bountiful garden harvest and the laughter of children and wished he had enough youth left to move on, to try again. He wanted to remember the sound of her voice, but could only hear the wind.

Then he'd spat, wiped the back of his neck with his handkerchief, patted the tree, and walked back up the hill toward the mine. That night, he patched the shack again, listened to the wind and thought of Clara, under the tree in the garden.





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Brooks is the author of seven best-selling books about photography and creativity: *Letting Go of the Camera* (2004); *The Creative Life in Photography* (2013); *Single Exposures* (4 books in a series, random observations on art, photography and creativity); and *Looking at Images* (2014); as well as a photography monograph, *Made of Steel* (2012). His next book will be *Those Who Inspire Me (And Why)*. A free monthly compilation of of this image journal, [Kokoro](#), is available for download.

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