

# Kevin Dohmen

## Gardening in Del Ray

*In loving memory of Judy Ingemunson (1949-2005)*

My wife Wendi and I arrive home at about 1:00 on a Sunday morning early one May after visiting her mother in Delaware. As I ease the car into our parking space, the headlights sweep over our next-door neighbor's side of the driveway. I see our neighbor, Dan, illuminated there, apparently startled by our presence, and brightly attired in yellow chest waders, red Amnesty International T-shirt, blue-and-white welder's cap, and elbow-length green rubber gloves.

"Hmm," Wendi says, smiling. "I wonder what this is about."

"Ask him," I suggest.

"I'm tired," she says. "You ask him."

I step out of the car. "Hey, Dan," I say.

"I, ahh..., thought you guys were away for the weekend," he says.

"We thought we would drive back tonight and have all of Sunday to relax."

I'm a little blurry from the long drive, so it's not until Wendi has gone into the house that I notice there's a black, plastic, fifty-five-gallon barrel of some sort sitting behind Dan on the driveway pavement, and that he's leaning on the handle of a garden spade. "A little nighttime gardening?" I ask, thinking this could be his version of some ancient Zen practice he's read about.

As I crane to see what's in the barrel, Dan shuffles back and forth, staying precisely between it and me. "How's Lieba doing?" he says cheerfully, asking after my mother-in-law. "I heard Delaware was supposed to get a big storm this weekend."

"She's fine." I say. "The storm passed to the east. Didn't even get any rain in Delaware. She's still trying to sell her house. What's in the barrel, Dan?"

"Oh, have you seen Magic yet?" Magic is our cat. "He and I have been very close buddies while you were gone. I took very good care of him." He directs his gaze toward the back of the house but keeps his body exactly broadside to me. He starts calling out, "Here, Magic. Come here, boy..."

He's whistling and making small puckering sounds, supposedly to attract Magic, when the breeze, which was to my back, shifts.

"Oh, man! What is that smell?" I say. "It smells like something dead!" Dan's face falls as if the air

were let out of it. I walk the three or four steps to look in the barrel. This time he doesn't move to block me. "Fish!" I'm truly puzzled as to what even Dan could be doing in the driveway in the middle of the night with a garden spade and a barrel of fish.

A couple of days before we had talked about our vegetable gardens. He decided that this year he would plant his in the front yard because of its southern exposure - and I'm guessing also to flout the bourgeois sensibilities of a certain neighbor who lives half a block down. "Daaaann...would this have something to do with your garden?" I ask.

"Welllllll," he says, drawing out the word. Then all in one breath,

"Look, I know how you and Wendi are really against chemical fertilizers and pesticides and I ran into this guy the other day whose uncle knows a guy whose girlfriend's friend runs the seafood place on Glebe Road and I put two and two together and decided to try a more, well, organic approach."



He sheepishly holds up a mayonnaise jar filled with multicolored dried corn kernels.

"Like the Indians..." I say. I burst out laughing, and immediately so does Dan, his eyes locked on my face in the light of the streetlight overhead, looking for a sign.

Encouraged by my inability to stop laughing, he lets out a lungful of air says, "I'm really glad you're not upset. I'm so relieved! I was hoping you would understand." I continue to laugh, convulsing soundlessly, and Dan joins in, maybe a little too loudly for the middle of the night.

A second-story window sash bangs open. "Daniel J. Whatsyourname, what the hell is going on out there?" It's Judy, who lives in the other half of Dan's duplex. She sticks her head out the window and glares down at us. Dan stiffens like a cadet. "It's the middle of the damn night, and you guys are having a party in the driveway! Pardon me for trying to get some sleep. Apparently unlike some people on this street, I have to work for a living. You both need to get yourself..." She stops herself and is quiet for a long moment.

Dan sings to himself through clenched teeth, "Oh, maaaannn!"

"And what is that smell? Dan...?" Then suddenly, "Stay right where you are. I'm coming down." She bumps her head and curses as she ducks back inside.

"Oh, geezzze!" Dan says.

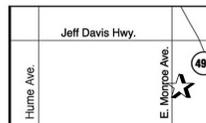
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## And Squanto Digs Rotting Fish

Judy emerges from her house wearing a long, white cotton nightgown, a man's navy pinstripe business suit coat, and big, furry, pink slippers. After surveying the scene from her porch for half a minute, she stalks down the three concrete steps and over to us like General Patton inspecting his troops. She clucks her tongue as she looks Dan up and down. Then her eyes scan to the barrel and up the slight rise to the new furrows in the garden. When she sees the jar of corn kernels in his hand, she erupts.

"Oh, no! No way! I can stand having my driveway filled with rusted cars and engines. I can live with your squashes and tomatoes growing in the front yard because the sun is better. I can deal with you doing industrial sculpture with torches and sledge hammers in the back yard. But I cannot - no, I will not - deal with some fertilize-the-corn-like-the-Indians thing. No. No. No! Do I make myself clear?" I feel an urge to point out that Judy grows strawberries in her half of the front yard, but now somehow doesn't seem like the right time. Judy is a full head shorter than Dan and at least fifty pounds lighter, but if the situation explodes, my money is on her.

Before Dan can respond, she points a finger at the garden. "I see you have been busy," she says, walking full circle around Dan, who remains immobile. She snatches the hoe leaning against the porch railing, marches up the six-foot slope to the level part of Dan's yard, brushes a stray blond hair from her face, and digs up a little fish from the tilled earth. "That... thing ...was buried no more than six inches deep," she says, tossing it with the hoe down onto Dan's bright yellow boot. Every cat and possum and raccoon for miles around will be here before the night is over. Her hot eyes bore into Dan. "Now, you will put every, last one of those, disgusting, stinking, dead, fish back into that barrel and take them back to wherever it is you got them, or I'm calling the police." She pushes the handle of the hoe at Dan, and he catches it, fumbling. She stomps back up the stairs onto her porch and turns to face us again over the wrought iron railing. "I mean it!" she says pointing a long finger at Dan. "And I don't want to hear a word out of you, either!" she says, re-aiming at me.

I say, "Yes, ma'am..."

She turns and slams the door as strides into her house, leaving an eddy of some sort of mystical



energy behind her.

I point at the front door of my house and say to Dan, "I think I'm going to, ahhh, turn in..." and head into the house.

Later, lying in bed, I hear digging and hoeing noises for another hour or so through the open window. Then, after three or four minutes of quiet, I hear what sounds like something large and plastic being loaded into the back of Dan's truck. The truck door closes, and

his pickup drives off.

The next morning at about 11:00 am there is no trace of barrel or fish, other than a faint aroma, a certain *je ne sais quoi*. Dan is working in his front-yard garden with a garden spade. In his driveway sits a just-finished, flowing haired, statue of Confederate General J. E. B. Stuart, carved from a single 4 ft. by 6 ft. sheet of 3/4-inch, cold-rolled, mild steel with an acetylene torch. It sits shining under the sun in its new red, white, and blue paint. Dan's been reading a lot about the United States Civil War lately.

I go out to admire the piece, and to ask Dan how his garden is coming along. I notice aloud that he's digging very deep. He says he's planning to spade up the entire yard to a depth of at least three feet to loosen the clay, so the roots of his corn can get a better hold in the poor soil. I tell him that when I was a kid, we used to grow an acre or so of corn most summers. I proceed to explain that corn roots go down only about eight or ten inches. He beams a gritty smile in my direction, holds up a hand and says, "Don't confuse me with the facts."

Forty-five minutes later, he stands at the open window to my office saying that he's hit something hard with his spade. "How hard is it?" I say. He ignores my perfect Johnny Carson impression.

"This is it!" he says, his face alight. He smears brown dirt on his forehead as he wipes the sweat with the back of his hand. A little, hysterical giggle escapes from his throat. Staring off in the direction of his yard, he says to no one in particular, "Who would have thought I would be the one?"

"No one I know," I say. Dan is lost in thought and doesn't respond. He is moving his fingers like he's adding up numbers. "Umm..." I add, "Would have thought you would be the one what?"

"Thought that it would be me to discover the famous lost shipment of Confederate gold. And buried right here in my front yard!"

"Oh, that lost shipment of Confederate gold," I say.

For no apparent reason, he suddenly looks left and right, and says in a whisper, "Listen, I can't talk right now," and marches off toward his garden.

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