

The Perfect Strawberry

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The Time to Be Happy Is Now is the title of a new book I have on my desk. Kathy Davis illustrates it with vivid, whimsical art-flowers, birdhouses and butterflies. The quote, attributed to Civil War veteran Robert Ingersoll, continues with *The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to make others so.*

It's easy to be happy in the glory of the summer we've all waited for. I'm inhaling the fragrance of sun-kissed sheets from the clothesline once again. I've shed my wool socks, finally, and dusted off cobwebs from the kayaks to paddle the Nehalem River. Every day I pick a bouquet of flowers from the yard with sizzling colors of summer—chartreuse, magenta, crimson. On summer nights, the cloudless sky explodes with stars.

In a strawberry pot on my deck, a blue pot the color of my mother's eyes, the color of a Michigan sky above her fluttering clothes on the line, a perfect ruby red strawberry hangs. A second berry alongside looks like it might ripen next, both unscathed by birds that haven't found them yet. A yield of two berries. Not bad, I guess, considering the rest of the garden on which Mother Nature and critters have run rampant. I can't bear to pick my meager crop. They may be the only perfect thing in the garden this summer, so I let them drape over the blue pot a while longer and relish the rapture of their beauty. My visiting grandchildren even discover the perfect berry, little four and five-year old innocents who say,

“Maybe it's ready Nana.”

I'm thrilled that they have a sense of waiting--waiting until it's ready. Not everything comes instantly in this life.

“No, it's not ready,” I say. I want to hold on to summer and strawberries and little boys and

scavenger hunts, beaches and balls, berries and blossoms.

Raccoons have torn up my squash plants and cucumbers; deer have eaten the roses; sweet peas died on the vine. The spinach bolted on our one hot day. The green onions rotted in the wet soil, and the radishes are the size of pinheads. Blight attacked the tomatoes, and I had to rip them up before they spread their contagion to others. You've got to be tough and ruthless to grow vegetables. Thankfully, our local grocery and Farmers Market keep me supplied with fresh produce.

We folks on the upper left edge appreciate the joy of summer days because we know they're fleeting. We saw the last of 9 p.m. sunsets in July, and we're losing daylight, all of us. All the more reason to love each other and each day of sunlight and warm breezes.

Seasons change along with life, and through it all in our stories, we're always dealing with loss. My grandchildren head back to Arizona. I miss their daily chant along North Fork Road: "Marshmallow Farm!" "Ice Cream Cows!" The house feels as hollow as a tin drum. Friends mourn the loss of their dog pal of a lifetime. I know that loss. Another friend battles with returning cancer, and all I can do is pray and make her soup. My own family is stunned when my niece dies suddenly in her sleep. A branch of our family tree has broken off. A toddler dies a senseless death in our town, and we all feel the loss. Life changes in an instant. Each day, another heart breaks.

Living by water as we do in our small towns on the bend in the river, overlooking the bay or against the mighty Pacific brings consolation, a balm for our souls. Whether it's the playful tumbling brook on my own property, ocean waves crashing on shore as I run into them with a grandchild, or the glass of evening on the Nehalem River filled with the dip of my kayak paddle—it doesn't matter. Water soothes.

Life is filled with uncertainty. That perfect strawberry I was waiting to pick? Gone to the birds. I waited too long. *The time to be happy is now.* Or maybe yesterday.