

A Girl and a Garden

by

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It's dim here. Dull and derelict. Suits me fine. A narrow back alley, lined with locked down garages, brick and aluminium. Asphalt clear from one side of the lane to the other, weeds sprouting through the cracks. I can see the darker edges of the road where it still hasn't dried even after a couple of days of weak sunshine. None of it matters. It's a shortcut. Saves me time. Gets me home that much quicker so that I can dump this fatigued body and mind onto the couch.

It's not that the work is difficult. God knows it's not. It's the mind-numbing repetition, the lack of reward, the invisible weight that crushes you, little by little. It's the heat in summer, the cold in winter, the movements that never change, the result that's always the same (or else!), the irrelevance of it all.

It's the knowledge that I'll be doing this forever. It's the life I have chosen, or at least accepted.

The lane is long, shaded, chilly. Colour is in short supply as it always is in my life. The blotchy brown garage walls, the battered garage doors, the old weather-beaten grey fences do nothing for me. How could they? After a factory of dingy grey walls and colourless machinery grinding away all day. Workmates in their soiled coveralls, their bloodshot eyes, their shaggy beards changing from black and brown to grey over the years. The whole damn thing smeared with the grease and grime of a thousand workdays. An endless churning cacophony of clangs and scrapes and bangs and hums, all of it denting my very soul.

I need colour I need quiet I need life to come and get me. I got cigarettes and alcohol and Netflix instead. Mind numbing, mind altering, pretty pictures on the screen. All of it leaving me dead on my arse, on the sofa, the hole deepening, my butt at its centre, my whole body sinking sinking.

The paling fence is new. Or is it? It must be. Still with that pine-coloured tinge to it, still untouched by the elements. I haven't noticed it before. I try to remember what had been there in its place but can't. That bothers me. Passing by twice a bloody day, how could I not know? Like a zombie I stagger, eyes open, seeing nothing. My days are slipping away, my life, spinning around the bathtub plughole on their descent down the drain. So much time has passed and where has it got me? To this suburban wasteland, to back streets and alleyways, where I escape the traffic, think I'm taking an improved route through life. And still I see not a damn thing.

I tell myself to stop. To stop the damn mind as it leads me down another rabbit hole. To stop in my tracks, stand still for a God damn moment. Here is something new, a fence, not yet roughened by the weather, a vague scent of fresh cut pine. I veer towards it, run a hand along its palings. I peer over it, into the yard beyond.

I am stunned.

I had imagined concrete, rusted clotheslines, junk piled up in mounds. I expected piles of bricks and sand and dirt, old car parts, abandoned appliances, dog shit and weeds. What I see takes my breath away.

I raise myself up on my tiptoes. It's bigger than I thought. There is a path, a brick path, winding towards the small house. My eyes follow it, they lead me on, pulling me in. And there she is, crouching low, leaning forward. The afternoon sun catches her, lighting up her auburn hair. It glows, framing her face, running down her back. She is the centre of it, of everything, the light of the universe concentrated on her. There are packets beside her, seeds no doubt. With quick practiced movements she sprinkles the seeds into the grooves in the soil. It has been prepared, long shallow trenches waiting for whatever it is - flowers, vegetables - I have no idea. She is feeding it, feeding the soil, Mother Earth herself, bringing life, nurturing life.

I am enraptured, unable to move, the edges of the rough palings of the fence digging into my hands. I don't care, don't even notice.

The soil is rich, that I know. This is not the wasteland of some neglected yard, neither useless sandy soil nor the gluggy clay that prevents anything from growing. It's dark, and pungent. She moves quickly, takes up the small trowel, covers up the seeds with careful, practiced movements. She stops to gather a woven straw hat and places it roughly on her head. It has a wide brim, a flowery sash tied around it. It floats down her back, sliding across her woollen jumper. The jumper itself is loose around her, a bright mustard colour, sagging at the elbows, loose around the neck. A white bra strap comes into view as she reaches with the trowel, the jumper sliding along her shoulder.

With one row complete she moves backward, standing as she does so, stretching her torso, rubbing her lower back with her thumbs. There is grace to her movements, the old jumper rippling across her body, hugging her before falling limply around her. Returning to the soil, she takes up the trowel and prepares another stretch of soil for planting. The waiting earth stretches across the yard. But it's not unbroken, not an empty expanse. Already, without the results of whatever she is planting, it's a garden, trees offering shade, clumps of bushes, a stretch of grass, some potted plants, a small rockery along the perimeter.

I move along the fence aiming for a different angle, a clearer look at her, at what she is planting. She looks up as if she has heard something. I step back quickly, heart pounding, then stand stock still. I don't dare move. I scurry off, aware of my transgression. What the hell was I doing anyway? But I know what I was doing. I have found beauty. Between a drab place of work and a soulless home, through rough wooden palings, I have come across the unthinkable.

I had forgotten: there is colour in the world.

Each day sees me return. I get up early, the sun barely over the horizon, allowing time to linger at that rough-cut fence in the dim light of the mornings. I sneak away from the compound during lunch breaks, walk as fast as I can to my back alley, snatched minutes peering between the slats. And I head back there after work. Each time I loiter, wondering what I will see. What will she have done? What miracles will she have accomplished within that perfect space? Some

days she is not there at all; some days there is nothing but her coffee cup left on the wooden table under the pergola. Some days the back door is open, muffled sounds from within.

The days are getting longer. One day I catch her by the trees in the corner of the yard, near the back window of her house. They are apple trees, I know that much. The trees are twice her height, but spindly, far from full grown. New leaves are beginning to appear, the weather finally starting to warm up. She reaches with her clippers, pruning the most distant branches, her jeans low, her woolly sweater - black today - riding up as she stretches. I notice the pale almost translucent skin of her waist. She stops, steps back, inspects her work, pulls her jeans up a little higher around her hips.

Soft rays of light penetrate the budding leaves of the apple trees. In amidst the grove is a willow, just one. It already has its new foliage, its long green-yellow leaves glistening, shining. The entire tree has a golden sheen as the sun, briefly out from behind the heavy clouds, hits it full force. It will be dark in half an hour, but for now, for this moment, the tree glows. As if aware of my awe she too stands, hands on hips, and looks towards it. She tosses her clippers onto the ground, rubs her forehead with the back of her hand and stares. It is a moment. Pure, beautiful, golden. Beauty in beauty. I stand there with her, watching her, watching the willow. I am with her, part of it, I imagine.

Until the cramp in my calf, brought on from standing on tiptoe, craning to see over the fence, reminds me of where I am, of who I am. I am on the grey side of the fence; I *am* the grey side of the fence. Nevertheless I remain, perfectly still, until the sun has gone, until darkness sends her inside and sends me back to my house and its empty, lifeless rooms.

Winter has departed. The last shock of cold has given way to milder weather. Days of brilliant sunshine interspersed with clouds and showers. I don't remember the light like this. All the years I have lived here. Has it always been like this? She wears the sunhat always now. Some days her hair is tucked up under it, only a few errant coppery wisps escaping down the nape of her neck. On other days she ties it back and allows it to cascade down her back, or over her shoulder. She will stop her weeding, use her gloved hand to toss the hair back over her shoulder, out of the way. And then she will return to the task at hand.

On the left side of the yard there are flowers. I hadn't noticed them. They had been invisible; a dull green splotch in the yard attracting no attention whatsoever. Now they demand attention. Flowers raising their heads, pointing at the sun. Purples and whites, subtle mauves, striking deep blues. I recognize the tulips to one side. Tulips. I had never imagined tulips in a suburban yard. It stuns me. Like watching a cartoon, or a Discovery Channel program come to life. The perfect white bell shape of the flowers, standing so straight, lording it over the other flowers.

I follow her with my eyes. She too admires the tulips, but she doesn't linger. She is heading to the azaleas. They, for now at least, are her favourites. There is long row, a hedge, running parallel to the brick path. The colours over the past couple of weeks have captivated us both. Among the vibrant green of the leaves there are the shimmering flowers, white, but purple too, and pink. There is even a patch of incandescent red flowers that seem too bright for this

world. She admires them once again then moves to the back stairs of her house where she keeps her fold-up chair. She carries it across the garden, sits beside the bushes, book in hand but unopened. It is her way. She intends to read, but rarely does she bother. The garden takes hold of her, its own story unfolding. She stares at the flowers, the bees coming for their fill, before tipping her head back, eyes closing, a look of graceful calm settling upon it.

I catch myself at such times, become all too aware of who I am, what I am. Me with my dirty scuffed workboots, my grey coveralls with the caked-on grime, the faded T-shirts, blacks turned to grey, whites turned to some ugly tan. My skin, loose these days. I have developed a grey pallor over winter. Or perhaps it has come upon me over a lifetime. Work in a darkened factory will do that to you.

I do not belong in this pristine garden tableau. I sully it, a tear in the fabric. But only now do I notice what I am, only now do I resent it. Only now, seeing her with her head back, framed by those glowing colours, do I realize what I have allowed myself to become. I want to say that this is what the world has done to me. And perhaps it's true. But seeing her, legs stretched out, her soft khaki shorts exposing her thighs to the sun for the first time this spring, I am appalled at what I am. The world has done this to me while the world has done something entirely different to her.

I walk on, chastised, wondering.

She has a heavy pair of garden shears in hand. It is unseasonably hot, the air still, humid. As the sun sinks, the birds have started. I hear them now, wonder if they have always been around. She is dressed differently today, in honour of the weather. A maroon tank top, tight around her, the straps narrow. A pair of baggy grey shorts with pockets, the material soft, light as air. She is attacking the azalea bushes now that the flowers have begun to wither. Although 'attack' is unfair. It's a labour of love, delicate clippings, unrushed, considered. She is tidying, managing, bringing out the best of what these bushes may provide. There is an air of devotion, her to the bushes, me to her, or me to something bigger still. Her rhythms, the rhythms of the garden. She reads them, works with them, and they reward her daily. They reward us both.

I watch her muscles undulate, her long arms taut as she reaches for the right angle, her body twisting as she adjusts the blades to make each cut. There are gentle lines: her now-tanned arms stretching from her body, her torso arched, her neck gently curved. She is connected to these bushes, feeling them, moulding them, remaking them, even as she remakes herself.

But just as it holds me, entranced, day after day, so does it appal me. I stand at the fence. Silent, invisible, an ill-defined grey blotch against it. The dirty gutters, the strewn rubbish, the loose gravel, the potholes - I fit right in. A perfect match. At least until now. But while the fence divides us, it's more than the fence. Of course I know that. It's a life that divides us. I had seen what I had allowed myself to see, what my imagination was capable of seeing. I had prevented anything of consequence from entering. Like a petrified log, I had turned to stone. I had become impervious.

I have avoided the sun and the light, kept to my cave, hidden, horizons foreclosed, shutters down. Like a bug in a shed I have kept to the darkened corners of this world. I need light, I need

colour, I need contrast in my life. I need I need I need. I never saw it before. Now I do. I am not okay. Black and white to grey. I have settled for little, blamed the world for my own inadequacies. There is more. I must open myself up to it, expose myself, at all costs. From behind a fence I have seen love and light, now I need to live it. Life or death.

It looks different from this side. It is different. The road wide, traffic buzzing ceaselessly, cracked sidewalk, non-existent front yards. Ugly low brick fences, thigh high. A slab of concrete, then the small set of worn tiled stairs to the front door. Old, bland, a faceless bulwark against the harshness of the world. The house itself has turned its back on the street, the traffic, the world around it, determined to locate its own beauty within.

And it's there. I have seen it.

There is a doorbell, and old style buzzer. I push the white button, hear the discordant ring inside the house. It has taken me weeks. Lonely nights sinking into the hole in the sofa, imagining, playing out one scenario after another, never getting beyond this point. The doorbell, the door slowly swinging back, before the pictures in my mind dissolve, colours bleeding into one, swirls of lights and darks refusing to coalesce into anything, refusing to show me the next steps. I am left blank, bereft.

But I am here. It was not planned. Well, at least not for today. But leaving home this morning, a Sunday, walking to the road, under the row of poplars planted years ago, the sun had pierced me. From between the branches a ray of light had caught me unawares. It had blinded me momentarily, left me floundering. A sign? I don't believe in such things. But here I am, addled but determined. This is my day.

"Yes," she says. It is not a question.

"I..."

"Yes." A small nod, a half smile. Then she repeats: "Yes."

I am pulled inside. She is the moon and the stars, the sun itself. I am drawn to her. She takes my hand, leads me on.

"I'm sorry. I..."

I am sorry for so many things, for my grubby grey pants, faded on the thighs, worn around the crutch. For this old checked shirt, sleeves rolled up haphazardly, so badly in need of an iron. I am sorry for my hair, uncut, uncombed. I need a shave, a make-over. I am sorry for who I have become, a bumbling idiot, a lost soul, a dead man. I am sorry that I have allowed myself to become like this, to go to seed.

"I'm sorry," I say again.

She doesn't hear my words, or doesn't acknowledge them.

"Finally," she says, as much to herself as to me. "I was starting to wonder if..."

We are moving through her house. It's not what I imagined. Drapes hang across the windows, dangle in doorways, cling to lightshades, flop over chairs and sofas. Light shawls, sarongs, cotton sheets and linen fabrics cover every surface. It's a mismatch of fluttering colours and patterns, all flapping in the breeze running through the house. I try to block it out, focus on her, her movements, her agile body swaying through the obstacles. She has on a tank top, olive

green today. But her skirt, light cotton swirls of green and yellow and red, sequins sparkling through it. It mesmerizes me, another kaleidoscopic fabric caught in the breeze.

“I see you outside,” I say, without a thought to how the words are coming out.

“Yes. That’s why I was starting to wonder. What’s it been? A month? Six weeks?”

“Oh, well, I…”

“Mornings, afternoons. You stand so still, so quiet. You know how to slow yourself. You’re almost invisible. Except for the weight you carry.”

I don’t know what she’s talking about. It’s another language, foreign words that mean nothing. She has led me to a lounge. There’s a purple and orange sarong thrown over it. Glowing white suns pulse from its centre. Leading me down onto it, her skirt settles around her, the colours abrasive against those of the sarong. It’s too much, too discordant. An overwhelming mess. I have come for colour, but this is something else. It’s an assault, colour chaos, devoid of restraint, of order.

But her scent brings me back.

“It’s sandalwood,” she says.

“Yes.”

“But with a hint of jasmine. It’s one of the more carnal scents.”

I smile, close my eyes for a moment to escape the cacophony of drapes, and shawls, and cloths. With eyes closed, her scent invades me, hitting the back of my nostrils, slamming into my sinuses, my head suddenly full to bursting.

She reaches out, a hand on my cheek, my jaw, leading my mouth to hers. I sigh. I have come home, arrived, pulled into port. My body softens. She moves closer, leans into me. I curse my own scent: dried sweat and stale tobacco. I curse my calloused hands now running down her bare arms.

“Breathe,” she says. “Breathe it out, breathe us in.”

I am disconnected from her words but realize I have been holding my breath all the same. So I breathe. And there it is again: the sweet sticky jasmine, the chemical hit of her scent. Eyes open, I see hers. They are beautiful, brown and deep, molten liquid. But something is missing. They do not glow. Her skin, her forehead, her cheeks, her arms. The smooth caramel, the healthy sheen. It’s then I notice it. I realize what is missing.

“It’s dark in here,” I say.

“It’s cool.”

“But the light…”

“It’s soothing, away from the harsh sun.” Her hand is on my chest. “Away from the glare of…” She doesn’t finish. She kisses me, passion washing over me, her passion.

I stand up abruptly. I know it now. I’ve known it all this time. Only now do I acknowledge it. It’s not what I want that matters; it’s what I need.

“What is it?” she says, concerned.

“Can we go outside? To the garden?”

“Now?”

I nod hesitantly. It doesn't make sense. It's ridiculous. I'm making a fool of myself. For a moment I think of the guys at work - Billy with his huge gut and even larger voice, Ron with his swagger despite his small stature, Marco with his romantic dreams and crude sexual tales. I imagine their jokes, their ridicule, their disgust, their disbelief. But then their images are gone. I ceased talking to them weeks ago, lost to them, them lost to me. They are darkness; I am pushing for the light.

"Please," I say. "If I could just..."

She stands in front of me, close, invading my space, her body inches from mine, looking up at me, her hands taking mine, then sliding to my hips. "You sure?"

I am not sure. It's illogical. After all this time, here I am. Here she is. I have found her. She has already provided so much and now she is offering so much more. I know this could be it. Lean forward, into her arms, mouth on hers, bodies merging. Yet I cannot quieten that voice within.

The darkness, the claustrophobic room, the sheets and drapes leaving me disoriented, fractured. I need to get out - despite her, because of her.

"Please. The light..."

I surge past her, desperate now, through the mess of dangling, fluttering sarongs and sheets, to the back door. I push through it, hear the rusty creak that has been part of my imagination for weeks now. Down the steps, onto the grass. And I stop. Head up, the bright spring day seizes me. My eyes are closed but still the light penetrates. I smile. I am light. Levitating, rising higher. Now I can breathe. It is not sandalwood or jasmine. It is something indefinable. The earth, the air, the smell of the sun itself, of fresh new leaves and grass and weeds.

Coming back down to earth I take my first steps. I reach out, touch the azaleas, the small curved leaves, the rough twigs exposed from her pruning. I place both hands on the willow, the trunk rough, gnarly, the bark thick. Solid browns and greys, it is cool to the touch. Turning, I avoid her eye. I bend down, driven by a force I don't understand. The seeds she has planted, sprouting now, vegetables - onions, chillies, tomatoes, carrots. I touch their young leaves, stroke the long stalks of the onions, gently squeeze the bushy, ragged tops of the carrots, so soft and fragile. Slowly, I let my fingers fall from the plants to the soil, lay my hand flat, then with fingers and thumb push into the rich dark soil. The vibrant green of the plants against the solid brown of the soil - it soothes me, all of it.

Her shadow comes over me. Embarrassed, I stand.

"Here is fine too," she says, taking my dirt covered hand, pulling it to her.

I am confused.

"Come on. Come to me."

Clarity arrives at last. I know it more surely than I have ever known anything. "I need to start a garden," I say.

She laughs quietly. "Sure. Why not? But first..."

"No. I need to start a garden."

“Yes, but...” She stops mid-sentence. She’s looking at me, the seductive grin gone. Something has changed, in her, in me. Slowly, she nods. She is serious, her gaze direct, enquiring. “Yes. I see.”

“I...”

“Go,” she says.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that...”

“No. Please.” She is nodding now. The light has returned to her eyes. They shine. Then she looks from me to the garden. Her eyes scan across it - her vegetables, the verdant green shrubs, the stately apple trees, the azaleas, the rhododendrons now in bloom, their pastel pink flowers lustrous in the morning sun. At last her eyes return to mine. She nods, that’s all.

It’s all I need. I have been understood. And now I know. I know I can, I will.

It’s time to start a garden.

It’s time to start.

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