

The Garden by Heidi Harrison



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I WANTED TO FIND A GARDEN THAT WOULD take me away, *really* take me away. I wanted to find a garden that transcended the simple act of putting plants in the ground. The world around me had gone mad, my country no longer made sense to me, and I craved being transported into a domain that bordered on magical. I had a vision in my head—a juxtaposition of wildness and order, a testament to the living and the dead, life perpetuating life, interdependence, and the beautiful rich earth sustaining all.

My patience waned. I couldn't stand to be home anymore, hearing the news every day, my heart sinking into its own abyss.

I boarded a plane to Paris.

Upon arriving, I took the subway to the Metro Hotel de Ville on the outskirts of the Marais, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Paris. From there I walked to 68, rue Vieille du Temple, the home of one my oldest and dearest friends, Odile. I walked through the cobblestone streets, made worn by tourists, artists, the queer community,

and Jews mingling with Muslims. The smells of strudel, fresh challah, and falafel overwhelmed me. I think I cried. I was so happy. I arrived at a green door that was big enough for a giant to enter, made of wood that was two hundred years old with ornate lattice work done by a master craftsman. I smelled it before I saw it, as Odile answered the ring, her sweet smile welcoming me, the three kisses on the cheeks. Without a word, she knew why I had come. She took my hand and led me to the side of her house, her fairy tale cottage. There it was, waiting for me: Odile's garden.

The smell of blooming wisteria almost made me drop to my knees. Indeed, a large wooden trellis that extended along the entire walkway had purple wisteria interwoven with tiny pink tea roses, all in bloom. Lilac bushes surrounded the entire house, their buds bursting open. Patches of lily of the valley sprouted everywhere from the velvety grass. Hyacinths and daffodils of all shades of yellow, white, and orange bloomed everywhere, as hundreds of irises

and tulips spread out their petals, gulping at the sun. A one-hundred-year-old oak tree blessed the garden with its regal nature, providing shade for a luscious assortment of ferns, rhododendrons, azaleas, forget-me-nots, hostas in variegated hues, and foxgloves getting ready for their early summer dance. The rest of the garden held onto a magnificent sun, allowing for the healthy growth of lavender, roses, jasmine, penstemons, salvias, daisies, poppies, micromeria, primroses, dianthus, petunias, sweet briar rose, and dozens of plant species I didn't recognize. There was even an apple tree at the far end of the garden with tiny buds, and a sweet young cedar close by; I looked up, thinking that one day she would tower over this beautiful realm, protecting it.

As I stood in the middle of her garden, it happened. I was transported to a magical domain, a botanical forest that never stops blooming, that made me feel far away, so insanely far away from not just my country's problems, but my own, the world's, my family's, even my dog's.

Odile stood next to me, holding my hand. She had planted it all from seeds. It was her world. She had always told me, ever since I was a little girl, that whenever I wanted to, her home was mine. I gripped her knuckles so hard, I think the whites in them became luminescent. My gaze turned to her magic, to the garden, to the place beyond the garden where life emboldens life and the world is but the beautiful mystery that beholds it.

Her garden was far from impeccable; in fact, imperfection guarded the entire domain, like a sentry, a talisman, allowing my mind to roam, to dream, to invent anything I wanted. I closed my eyes, breathing in the mélange of tantalizing

scents around me. My ears picked up a chorus of bird song, the breathing of trees, their conversations wrapped and held in the wisps of the breeze. I felt my heartbeat become slower as I received this gift, tears flowing from my eyes freely as I sat and became more than just the observer, but the participant in a world that made sense to me, that held me, that implied survival with compassion, the earth and the sun like bookends, framing this perfect world.

I looked at Odile, her face like a charm in an enchanted world. Somehow, though, she had gotten old, and her generous wrinkles took the form of enlightened beings on her skin. She moved through her garden with a slow deliberate motion, no longer with the spry agility that once had reigned her body.

"You know, I could use some help," she said, her voice quiet. I wondered if she made that statement not for herself, but for me. She was that way, always giving, always knowing just where and how much to offer.

I looked at her, at the smile that exuded from her dimples that had never disappeared in all her years.

"Oh, I don't need much, just a little pruning now and then." She paused. "And you know there is that little bedroom that you adored as a child. It's still there." In her subtle ways, I detected a wink.

If ever there was a moment that a hand fits a glove, that the parts fit the whole, it was then. In that garden, with the aromas of spring and the burgeoning of summer flitting through the air like magical lace, like fairies that could defy anything, that could give and receive, that could create life out of a simple seed, it was there, as I felt my feet sink into the soft porous earth, that I found my eternal home. ❖