

Memory Gardens

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“When you increase the number of gardens, you increase the number of heavens too!”

— Mehmet Murat ildan

1.

Our new home, on Freeman Avenue in the town of Stratford, was ten minutes from the General Electric Company in Bridgeport where my father worked and where my mother had grown up. The house—a peaked, white bungalow of clapboard siding—was already fifty years old. I was four. We moved in the middle of the worst winter in years, a ride I experienced in the cab of a borrowed pickup truck, bed springs and bureaus bouncing around behind us, my eyes fixed wide as I looked out the rear window. Snowdrifts blocked the front porch when we arrived, and we had to shovel our way in. Later, having unloaded the pickup, we stood in the little mudroom at the rear of the kitchen, and my father lifted me up to look through the diamond-shaped window of the storm door, beyond which the snow lay in drifts the entire length of the backyard.

The yard was narrow, fifty yards deep, and seemed miles long. The near half, thick with lank grass come spring, boasted every kind of fruit tree imaginable—a small cherry closest to the house, a larger peach behind the detached

garage, an enormous apple beyond the peach, and twin pear trees, like goal posts, just short of the garden. In the fall, when the ripened fruit would fall to the ground and turn to mush beneath my black-and-white Keds, I had to watch out for low-flying yellow jackets.

Beyond the grass lay the garden. It was turned under each spring by an old man who came to Freeman Avenue with a horse and plow. We grew everything there—corn, radishes, potatoes, peas, squash, cucumbers, lettuce, tomatoes, onions, rhubarb, pumpkins, even watermelons.

I remember helping my father plant potatoes, sticking slices of raw spuds into hillocks of soft dirt, surprised to dig them out months later as large and lopsided as softballs, their strange green eyes protruding. Beyond the farthest furrow of that garden, a tangle of broad-leafed grapevines hid a rotting fence of wooden slats that was draped, cornucopia-like, with clusters of grapes. Those grapes, though, were more sour than sweet.

In winter we lived off canned vegetables

from the garden, put up in glass jars with wire-capped lids and red rubber rings. My mother labeled them by hand and lined them up in rows on the narrow wooden shelves my father constructed for her in our cool, damp fieldstone cellar. But these vegetables tasted

2.

In my single years after college, I purchased a brand new townhouse in a rather rural development just north of Washington, D. C. In contrast to the large yard I'd enjoyed while growing up in Stratford, this yard measured but a few hundred square feet. It was in the shape of a block letter C at the left end of a row of similar townhouses. Only the end units, of course, had side yards. Mine was very narrow, bounded by a brick wall that extended from the sidewalk out front to an alternate-board privacy fence out back. A large sign announcing Rockshire Green was bolted to the outside of that brick wall.

It was early summer when I moved in, and the first thing I did was to build a birdhouse and affix it to the brick wall where it joined the privacy fence out back. I wanted bluebirds, and the surrounding terrain—former farmland that was quite open to the elements—seemed perfect for bluebirds. I wanted to look out the sliding glass doors of my dining room, across my little cement patio, and see the bluebird of happiness perched on my birdhouse, blessing my brand new bachelor townhouse with its song.

Following instructions from a library book, I made certain that the entrance to that birdhouse was cut exactly to specifications

no better than the grapes from our vines. What vegetables I did eat, I ate raw.

We'd moved to Stratford from a place in the country my father called Blue Heaven. But if we had once lived in Blue Heaven, we now lived in the Garden of Eden.

so I wouldn't get purple martins or flickers or other interlopers. But it was early summer, as I've said, and since birds nest in the spring, my little plywood birdhouse stood tenantless. Then I went off to Europe for a few weeks, and when I returned, the birdhouse was occupied. Hornets had commandeered it, filling it with a large papery nest, and hornets now ruled the little backyard.

Mitch, my elderly next-door neighbor, shook his head when I told him what had happened. "Oh, well," he laughed, peering over the privacy fence that separated our backyards. "Birds of a feather buzz together!" I didn't find his comment as funny as he did.

The following spring I cleaned out the hornet's nest from my birdhouse in hopes of bluebirds once again. (I got sparrows.) Then I planted a garden beside my little cement patio. First, however, I built a gate in the side yard between the brick wall and the front of the house to prevent any critters from entering the yard to nibble my produce.

My garden plot was six feet long and four feet wide. It resembled a fresh grave of the sort you might find in the backyard of a serial killer. But there was no body in there, just seeds for loose-leaf lettuce and beefsteak tomatoes.

Using a round-pointed shovel, I turned under

the rich topsoil, tilled it to a depth of six inches, and raked it smooth. Many of my neighbors, Mitch's wife Willa among them, were putting in flower gardens. Willa favored posies and pansies. But I wanted salad for my supper all summer long. So I put in lettuce and tomatoes.

I dug the garden in late April and planted the seeds in early May. And the soil, fallow for years, cooperated, bringing forth abundant loose-leaf lettuce in June and a cornucopia of juicy tomatoes in August, but never any salad in the interim. Nature, it seems, yields its bounty in its own sweet time, not necessarily in sync with one's menu.

Tiring of loose-leaf lettuce à la carte at the beginning of summer and juicy tomatoes à la carte at the end of summer, I discarded the remaining lettuce and gave away the tomatoes.

"You shoulda planted more lettuce after your first crop," Mitch advised, as I handed him a

3.

A few years later, after I married Elaine, we moved from the townhouse to a ranch house with two acres of land in the Blue Ridge. In short order we bore two sons, Owen and Adrian, and when Owen was in first grade we planted two gardens. With Owen in school and Adrian toddling about the house, Elaine was enjoying a modicum of freedom and wanted to do something outside the house—besides taking Adrian to play groups and nursery school.

"I want a garden," she announced one night at supper. And that did it.

"I want a garden!" Owen insisted. So it was apparent there'd be two gardens in the family.

plastic bag of beefsteak tomatoes over the fence.

"Now you tell me," was all I said.

And so the following year, after I'd harvested my first crop of lettuce, I planted more lettuce. But the initial crop wasn't as abundant as it had been the year before. The second crop was even worse—stunted and wilted. And the tomatoes, when it was their turn to flourish, were no bigger than tennis balls, hardly in need of the wooden stakes with which I'd so lovingly propped them up the year before.

"Did ya fertilize?" Mitch asked, declining my offer of a bag of tennis-ball-size tomatoes. "A garden," he said, "sucks the nutrients right out of the soil. Even Willa's flowers require fertilizer."

"Oh," was all I said, realizing I'd just learned another lesson in gardening.

As Mitch put it, "It's always wise to fertilize."

I declined to cultivate a third, but Adrian wasn't interested. He was more than happy with the sandbox I'd built him.

Elaine's concept of gardening left something to be desired. It was based on the image of herself in an out-of-the-house gardening outfit: a floppy straw hat, red-and-white-checked blouse, cut-off jeans, white sneakers, and white garden gloves. She looked quite smart, but she never got dirty. She never got dirty because she never worked in her garden, except to put on her out-in-the-yard outfit and walk down the slope of the backyard to water her crops with the plastic watering can I bought her at 84 Lumber.

It was up to me to remove a large rectangle of turf for the garden at the bottom of our rather severely sloped backyard. It lay right at the edge of a thick acre of woods we called “the jungle.” I turned and tilled the soil, raked it smooth, planted the seeds, and did the weeding, leaving the watering to Elaine, all while Owen nagged me to get started on his garden. Too pooped to attack another plot of ground, I looked around the backyard and suddenly got an idea.

A one-foot wide strip of dirt ran along the entire rear of the foundation of our house, the perfect spot for a ready-made garden. And unlike Elaine’s plot, which was shaded by the overhanging jungle in the late afternoon, it caught the sun for most of the day, right until sundown. And it required no tilling.

“Go fetch a screwdriver from my workbench,” I told Owen while turning over Elaine’s garden. “And walk down the slope on the way back, so you won’t fall and stab yourself.”

As accustomed as he was to the slope of our yard, I knew he’d never fall. I just wanted him to kill time and stop bugging me. So up the hill he scooted, leaped to the top of the stoop from which Elaine was hanging sheets on the clothesline, and entered the basement through the rear door. A few minutes later he returned carrying the screwdriver as Elaine had taught him to carry scissors, with the point wrapped in his fist.

“Good,” I said. “Now. Do you see that strip of land at the bottom of the house?”

“I was just up there!” he complained.

“That’s your garden. Go back and poke that screwdriver into the ground every six inches. That’s one-half the length of the ruler you use in school.”

Owen gave me a disgusted look. “Dad,” he said. “I’m in first grade! I know what a ruler is!”

“Good,” I said. “And once you’ve done that, put one of these in each hole.” I took a packet of seeds from my pocket and poured some kernels of corn into his free hand. “Then cover each hole with dirt, and step on it.”

Excited, Owen turned to leave. “Wait a sec,” I said. “After you’ve done that, ask your mother for her watering can, fill it with the hose, and water your garden.” And off he went, screwdriver in one fist, kernels of corn in the other. And by the time I finished with Elaine’s garden, he was finished with his.

And as it turned out, Owen won the family horticulture award. Elaine soon tired of putting on her floppy straw hat, red-and-white-checked blouse, cut-off jeans, white sneakers, and white garden gloves to hike down the slope of the backyard to water her garden, only to hike all the way back up again.

For the record, her little plot did produce a few green sprouts of lettuce and peas, which the rabbits in the jungle readily disposed of. Meanwhile, Owen’s cornfield—one long row along the back of the house—prospered. Wary of hawks, the rabbits and other garden grubbers were afraid of moving too far into the open from the safety of the jungle. This allowed Owen’s single row of corn stalks to grow unmolested to four times his height, their tassels as red and silky as his own red hair. ❖