The Garden

When I was younger, I believed my life would be divided up into neat, organized periods: infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, old age, and the twilight years. Now I know that there are more, and that I cannot give many of them names, even if I could count all of them. They are not neatly separated by distinct partitions either, but blend into each other until one period has melted and fused with another until they are inextricably connected. I know this to be true. But sometimes, a moment’s impact and clarity causes it to jut out into the memory as one such division: a mental partition from one segment of life to the next.

I can clearly recall my grandfather in the backyard of the two-story house that he shared with my grandmother. He was walking through his garden wearing a straw hat with a green visor sewn into the front brim. The garden was not very large, maybe four hundred square feet, but he strolled slowly as if it were part of an English estate. He stopped frequently, examining a leaf here or an overlooked tomato there, feeling the vines, thumping stalks, eyeing mulch, nosing the scent of vegetation, removing his hat and closing his eyes and turning his head upwards to sunlight dappled by castor plant leaves. Saying goodbye.

He brought his iron tools from the dirt basement beneath the screened back porch. The smell of parched, dusty soil rose gently through sturdy, smooth wooden beams to mix with the noble scent of oak and pine furniture. I sat in a wicker chair with my feet dangling just above the floor and watched him from the shade and cool of that porch. I worked with him sometimes in the narrow corridors of tomatoes and okra, but it was hot, and things occasionally lit n your exposed skin and bit. I didn’t like the chemical smell, although that was only the tomatoes, for I never saw any kind of pesticides. I watched from the porch and sensed this trip of his to be different than any of the countless times before: he never was casual in the garden; he always moved with purpose. I watched from the porch because he needed to be alone in it, but I didn’t know why.

His demeanor changed in the way he stood and the way that he walked when he took the scythe in his hands. He walked through the aisles gripping the wooden handle. Carefully, gingerly he cocked the blade back a few inches away from a stalk and then effortlessly sliced through the green skin. It sounded with a snap and a small, metallic tinging ring like the deburring of a turkey carving knife. The plant landed with a rustle and green, bitter juice dripped from the clean incision. He sidestepped to another and it fell like a tree. He cut another and it landed on others resting on the turned soil. The tall plants, some of them towering feet over his head, did not shake or move or shudder at all when the blade glided through them, but only fell, slowly at first, then swishing to the ground when the deed was done. The tallest ones stood for a few seconds more before they started to lurch to one side, the blade having passed through so cleanly that the stalk still perfectly aligned above and below the slit. One castor plant refused to move at all, and after waiting for it to fall for a few seconds, he reached out and pushed it over.

I knew that it had been decided to move into an assisted living home. I didn’t know whose idea it was, but everyone accepted the wisdom of the decision. My grandfather was becoming more fragile with advanced age, and both were nervous about climbing and descending the second story staircase every day. Like every other major decision in their lives, my grandparents planned well ahead so that nothing had to be done quickly or haphazardly. Their philosophy for living extended into every aspect of their lives.

I recalled past evenings on the same porch. The breeze through the pine trees always entered the screened-in porch to cool our conversations at dusk. I would sit outside and enjoy iced tea after supper with my brother and grandparents and play with the endless variety of things my grandfather had collected over his eighty years of life. He brought things in handfuls from his tinkerer’s garage with a smile in his eyes. Crickets and other night things would make soft chirping and whirring sounds from the sparse tufts of grass and pine straw of the backyard. The windows to the kitchen looked out on the porch, and the dimmed lights shone through the plain curtains like steady candlelight, suffusing the heavy, perfumed Georgia night air with a benevolent, healing magic.

Sometimes, in those dreamlike dusks, I looked through the mosquito screen to the garden fading in the hazy purple light. I had seen the chipmunks and rabbits, and one time, a deer, confound my grandfather with their incessant digging and nibbling during daylight. I wondered in those early evenings if the animals returned under the cloak of darkness to the haven of the garden’s nourishment. My child’s imagination conjured images of chipmunks opening concealed trapdoors from underground labyrinths to the garden aromas above. They balanced on their haunches and filled their cheeks with sundry tree nuts from impossibly high boughs above, while perky-eared rabbits emerged from the ether to whisker-nibble green. They bounded and skittered through rows of tender stalks, rows of tomatoes, aisles of okra, clusters of magnanimous sunflowers, castor plants for daytime shade, and the occasional, whimsical patch of tulips for color. An owl would hoot-hoot from the immortal pine branches in the sky and spy fruitlessly for a wayward chipmunk to stray from the narrow fortress aisles of the garden that barred swooping, strafing, talon flight. A ground-bound tabby cat might lurk in the shadows, but if its slit-eyed pursuit commenced, trapdoors would fling open and creatures would vanish into mist. Daylight would reveal humorously bulbous tomatoes in various states of ripeness, some clinging to vines, others plopped on the soft, cool earth as the brightening rays richened the fat reds and bashful yellows and wan jades. Hooves and a white tail might sublimate into the timeless wood line. And then, without a trace of the turquoise moonlight charades, the early maple-syrup amber rays would eavesdrop on the delicious morning songs of the dew-dripping morning glories engulfing the iron fence. And then it would be day again.

He finished and stood for a moment perspiring in the late afternoon sun. He looked around at what he had done, but if there was any expression on his face, I could not discern it. His ancient countenance, wrinkled and rough, assumed an introspective frown as a matter of course, and that made it hard to tell.

Slowly, resignedly, my grandfather carried the scythe and collected the shears that he didn’t have to use after all and walked back up the easy slope to the house, around the brick corner, and back into the open garage. I remained on the porch and noted how strangely bald that very back part of the yard next to the wood line looked without the garden. It had existed perennially in my memory of the place. It had been an integral part of the house, just as much as the porch, or the black wrought iron fence, or the white morning glories that grew on it and puckered and shriveled by noon.

I sensed a loss along with my grandfather, but nothing as profound as the sorrow that I know now when I think about that day. Shortly after my grandfather leveled his garden, my parents divorced, and my brother and I became the ping-pong ball in my parents’ game of strategy and spite. We were hurled back and forth, and as soon as we settled at one house, we were told to live with the other parent. My father was busy with his second marriage, and when his new relationship became strained at intervals, he would blame it on my brother and me, and we would move back with my mother; and when my mother felt sufficiently insulted in one phone conversation or another with my father regarding our well-being, she would tell him where to shove the support money and send up packing back to him.

When I think of the garden now, I regret I didn’t follow my grandfather down into the rows of verdant life that one last time, silently trailing the wake of his shadow. He would have pointed out each variety of plant in his soft, piping voice, describing each vegetable that he proudly raised. And before he cut it down, I would pick off a small portion of a leaf or unripe vegetable and chew it. I would follow him from aisle to aisle, sampling the vitality of each, grinding them between molars, savoring the raw plant liquor in my jaws, and then forcing the undiluted vapors up into my nose. I wanted to contain and surround this last illusion of normal home life; I needed to so that I would understand that this was his garden and not someone else’s, and that no one would walk in his garden after he was gone, and that if they wanted one, they would have to plant and grow it to make it their own.