

JACOB'S GARDEN

The laces on Jacob's hiking boots were caked with potting soil and had grown as fat as nightcrawlers. Bubblegum wrappers encircled a red maple tree while a rake dangled from the first branch. His shorts were wet from playing with the hose, trying to reach the neighbor's swimming pool in a hopeless arc over the hedgerow.

"Jacob," said his grandfather from the side yard. "You'll want to spread out those flowers. You can't have them close together like that or they'll suffer and die."

"Flowers don't die. Nothing dies unless I say so." He had an intensity in his brown eyes—like his mother—when he was trying to get away with something. It was cute, dangerous.

"Now don't get smart. Do an honest day's work and I'll pay you for it."

Jacob tried to whistle, but it came out as high-pitched clutter.

The grandfather had staked out a perfect circle, ten feet in diameter, in the middle of the backyard that sat in a halo under a break in the canopy. A great tree once stood there. During the hottest months of the year, the circle faded to brown and the grandfather couldn't justify giving it extra water considering the drought. Turning it into a garden eliminated the eyesore and gave his grandson something productive to do.

A coastal breeze made its way up the marshes, drawing ripples against the outgoing tide. It continued heading eastward and swept through the loblolly pines where the neighborhood had been cut out six decades ago. A chainlink fence and a rather sturdy padlock kept the boy from wandering out into North Carolina's alligator territory, a series of sandy trails that led to brackish water, bird watching benches and overturned canoes.

The grandfather tried a softer tone. “Those are Jacob’s ladders and they’re special. You were named after them.” He lied, of course. It was more of a coincidence.

“Will I be able to climb them?”

“No, they’re just flowers. See, they’re perennials,” he went on, picking up a plastic container. “They bloom every year.”

“Every year?” Jacob thought for a moment. “Prennals?” He started shouting, “Prennals! Prennals! Prennals!”

The grandfather couldn’t believe the boy was turning ten later that summer. In some respects, Jacob seemed older than his years while in others he was far behind. The grandfather never knew who—or what—he was dealing with. At least he was prepared—or rather fortified—this time for his grandson’s visit. From the hardware store, he’d picked up house paint, carpet stain remover, rubbing alcohol, extra vacuum cleaner bags. He’d locked up anything sharp or flammable in his cabinet and hidden the car keys. He had an assortment of lumber to repair anything, baseball-sized and beyond. He moved his precious wood carvings, mostly shorebirds and ocean fish, to the top shelves. His collection of bolts, nails and screws were safely in their jars after he’d nailed the lids to the underside of the shelf above the workbench and screwed them out of Jacob’s reach.

The boy squeezed a flower from a tray and threw it into a hole, planting it the way it fell, slightly crooked. Jacob grabbed the shovel and started dancing around, ramming it into the sandy soil, trying to get as close as he could without severing it. He misjudged and the shovel ricocheted off the dirt and flew out of his hands. He plopped down on the grass and dug for earthworms with his fingertips.

“Grandpa, I want to grow watermelons.”

The grandfather shifted into problem-solving mode and did the quick math in his head. He knew melons took months to mature.

“We’ll have to get seeds right away,” the grandfather said. “We can put the vines in the back corner. They take up a lot of space.”

“I’m going to be the watermelon king and rule the Carolinas,” Jacob said with a sinister laugh.

“That’s right. This backyard is your kingdom. And do you know what that means?”

“Um, no.”

“You have to take care of it,” the grandfather said. “If you take care of it, it will take care of you.”

The boy went back to looking for worms.

The grandfather went into the house but couldn’t sit down, not while Jacob was out there with a shovel. He expected to hear broken glass at any moment. His wife was having her second cup of tea by the bay window in the kitchen.

The grandparents had worked hard—he as an aerospace engineer and she as a pastry chef—to build a comfortable retirement, intending to live out their lives in this house, perched high enough above sea level and far enough from the coast to escape the full brunt of hurricanes.

Seeing the high winds as an exercise in aerodynamics, he’d recently installed storm windows and

a metal roof. In ten years, they never had to evacuate. After making numerous corporate moves, they both wanted something permanent. It felt good to put down roots here. She was on the Azalea Festival board while he made the paper twice for shattering fishing records.

The grandfather had automated everything in the house with timers, sensors and touchscreens to run itself at peak efficiency.

“Do you have to be a rocket scientist to figure this out?” she’d joked every time she struggled with something.

“No, you just have to be married to one,” he’d say.

But she wouldn’t let him install all “smart” appliances. She had to have an old-fashioned double oven, sans bells and whistles, for baking.

“What’s he doing now?” she asked.

“Throwing pine cones.”

“All that pent-up energy,” she said. “His hair needs trimming. It’s getting curly.”

“Half of those flowers aren’t going to grow. It’s a mess. He doesn’t know how to handle delicate things.”

“It’s his garden, remember?” she asked. “You have to give him a chance.”

“It’s asking a lot. He has to learn things. Solve problems. That’s how you survive in this world.”

“Don’t push him too hard or he’ll shut down.”

“We need to get him on the right path as soon as possible. One minute he’s focused on a task and the next he’s self-sabotaging.”

“I haven’t heard you use that tone of voice since Janey was a teenager,” she said.

“It’s amazing she lived beyond those years considering the people she was mixed up with. The whole idea of following that rock band to Vegas and selling leather goods was doomed to fail.”

“Don’t do anything drastic,” she said.

A couples counselor, decades ago, had told him to take deep breaths to diffuse his frustration. Sometimes it worked.

“I’m talking about nurturing things, ownership, taking pride in your work,” he continued.

“You’re wearing me out already.”

“Jacob is going to inherit this place someday and I want him to value it.”

“You can’t force him to do anything.”

“So, we give up?”

“I didn’t say that. You always go to extremes,” she said. “Maybe lower your expectations a little.”

Bickering made him thirsty. His doctor was always telling him to hydrate himself more, especially on the golf course. He filled a glass with filtered sink water, but before it touched his lips, he said, “He’s peeing in your birdbath.”

“Oh,” she said, before stumbling outside.

She always made sure her beloved birds had fresh water. He watched her from the kitchen. With one hand on her hip, she was drawing circles in the air with the other. She and the boy tipped the dish and dumped the tainted water over the side. She had Jacob refill it with the hose.

One more wrong righted, the grandfather thought. And they only had thousands more to go.

The grandfather eventually went back outside to assess his grandson's work although, more than anything, he wanted to escape his wife's kitchen racket.

By then, Jacob was wasting water by attacking a bucket with the hose. He laughed every time it tumbled. Puddles would barely last in the sandy soil.

The grandfather's first inclination was to scold Jacob, but he fought the urge. "Say, do you want to learn about centrifugal force?"

Jacob nodded.

The grandfather had Jacob fill the bucket. Then the old man started swinging it. "What do you think will happen when it goes above my head?"

"I don't know." Jacob fidgeted back and forth.

"Let's find out." As the bucket went into a full ark, the grandfather felt soreness in his shoulder from yard work and/or golf and/or fishing. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea. Out of the corner of his better eye, though, he could see that the boy was mesmerized.

After a few circuits, there was a loud pop. The handle had come off and the bucket went flying toward the back fence. It seemed to explode upon impact.

Grass clippings stuck to Jacob's back as he rolled with laughter.

“That’s what you call a design flaw,” the grandfather said, still holding the handle. “They don’t make them like they used to.”

“I guess not.”

The grandfather had to laugh. “Don’t worry. We’ll fix it. Everything can be improved.”

He then went over to inspect the garden. “Good job, Jacob. But be careful with the potting soil. It’s expensive.”

The grandfather straightened one of the boy’s early attempts at planting. “I’ll tell you what,” he went on. “Finish planting these and your grandmother will have your lunch ready. If you do a good job, she’ll give you a slice of chocolate cake.”

The boy held up his arms as if he’d scored a touchdown. He loved his grandmother’s cake. It had won first prize in the county bakeoff five years running.

The grandfather entered the screened porch where he could keep an eye on Jacob and plopped down on a lawn chair. It felt good to put his feet up. He didn’t have the stamina he once had.

Jacob was starting to look less like his mother. She was the perky little girl who loved to go hiking and fishing with her father and make pies and bread with her mother. Then she grew up and found boys—bad boys—one after another. She’d try to rescue them, but always got burned in the end. Last week, when the grandparents made the ten-hour drive to Nashville to pick up Jacob, they went by Janey’s apartment. They were greeted in the parking lot by an angry landlord in a Hawaiian shirt. The apartment itself was a mess with cockroaches in the kitchen.

Janey was taking her third swing at rehab. She said it was her idea to check herself in this time, but they found it hard to believe. Something must've triggered it. In any case, her parents didn't mind paying for treatment and wanted her to go to the best facility.

The grandfather had hoped that the family curse would end with him, but it only got passed down to Janey. His father, a tough old Russian, was an alcoholic and so was his older sister, both long deceased from liver disease. Instead of turning to the bottle, the grandfather—long before he was a grandfather—obsessed over academics, particularly math. It gave him an excuse to escape from the house and camp out at the library, eventually landing a job in the periodicals department. After college, he went on to design spacecraft and satellites, which was substantially more straightforward than dealing with human problems on Earth.

Once he got promoted a few times, he had to travel from one research park to another and tried to make up for lost time by being extra disciplined with Janey when he was home. They were opposites; he was a self-control freak while Janey was a free spirit. When she entered her teens, her mother was experiencing chronic fatigue and could only provide limited supervision. She had to sell her beloved bakery. They were relieved when Janey went off to college and left her troubled boyfriend behind. The relief was short-lived, though. That winter Janey got busted for driving while intoxicated on an icy road up north, which led to her first go at rehab. After she graduated, somewhat delayed, she traveled around and did various odd jobs. Another breakup sent her back to rehab. Then she met Jacob's future father who played in a band, refinished furniture and drifted in and out of her life. She'd get depressed every time he left her. Once she became pregnant, they both vowed to clean up their acts; her staying sober and him sticking around. They bounced around the country with Jacob in tow but managed to remain together.

Janey was always an attentive mother to Jacob, channeling her sensitivity to his every need. But then they got a call from Janey's cousin. She'd found Janey passed out drunk while Jacob was attempting to cook his dinner in the kitchen.

"He was seconds away from starting a grease fire," the cousin said. "He could've burned the place down. I went and got Jacob and demanded that she get help right away."

The grandparents were pretty sure they knew what had sent Janey into a tailspin this time. There was no sign of Jacob's father when they went by the apartment. They found out from the cousin that Jacob's father had married someone else while he was on tour. But the most shocking part was, it had happened six months ago.

"She tried to hide it. She knew how sick and tired I was of that deadbeat," the cousin said. "I got suspicious when she had trouble remembering things. That's when I dropped by her place unannounced."

The grandparents assumed the boy's teachers would want to hold him back a grade or two. As it turned out, his marks and, more surprisingly, his attendance record weren't that bad. The school was only a few blocks from the apartment and he didn't have to rely on his mother to get him there.

"Jacob is Mr. Personality," the principal said. "He knows everyone from the janitors to the superintendent. He does have some boundary issues, though. He barged into a staff meeting once. And he's been known to wander into the teachers' break room."

The grandparents made a deal with the school so that Jacob could complete his assignments remotely from North Carolina to finish out the year.

Jacob wouldn't leave without his semi-domesticated cat, a tabby named Buster. But rounding him up proved to be a tall order. The cat didn't like anyone besides his immediate family. The grandfather had to don oven mitts and trap him in a corner at the cousin's house. He hadn't experienced that kind of resistance since the Vietnam War.

It took Jacob the better part of an hour to say goodbye to everyone in the apartment complex: a mechanic, paramedic, circus performer, audio engineer, George Strait impersonator. This was his world and it was a colorful one at that. The grandfather was already worried about him getting bored in their suburban neighborhood. With Buster safely confined in a kennel in the back seat of the Cadillac, they headed east with a stopover in Asheville so Jacob could see the Biltmore House.

As the week went on, Jacob filled out the garden in a haphazard way with more flowers, ground cover and small shrubs. The grandfather walked in circles to keep his mouth shut and somehow avoided sneaking out in the middle of the night to tidy it up.

When Jacob was satisfied—or more likely losing interest—with his creation, the two made a miniature white picket fence around it and a sign that said “Jacob's Garden.” They also planted watermelon seeds in peat pots on the patio to get them started before being transferred to the yard.

“Now it's your responsibility to maintain this. Those plants are counting on you,” the grandfather said. “Remember the Biltmore gardens?”

Jacob nodded. "I'm like a god." His fingers turned into claws. "I determine their fate."

"We'll have to adjust the drip system to make sure everybody's happy. Do you remember how to test the soil?"

Jacob stuck his index finger in the dirt next to a cluster of swamp milkweed.

"Good. If you play your cards right," the grandfather said, "that one will attract butterflies."

The boy squinted up at the bright sky through the clearing.

It didn't take long for Jacob to get to know most of the neighbors the way he'd introduce himself. "Hi, I'm Jacob from Tennessee. I'm an avid gardener."

On an unseasonably hot day, the grandfather rolled the Cadillac, caked with spring pine dust, onto the driveway and summoned Jacob. Twin boys from down the street were already standing at attention in the front yard.

"I'm going to teach you boys the most efficient way to wash a Cadillac." He had them each grab a bucket, already full of soapy water, as well as a rag. "This will be like a production line. I'm the one with the hose, so I'll be management and you'll be labor. Got that?"

The boys nodded.

The grandfather rinsed the right side of the car, then assigned the first twin to the front door, the other twin to the rear door and Jacob to the rear fender. "OK, when I say 'go,' start washing your respective stations. When I say 'move,' get out of the way."

The grandfather gave the command and the boys attacked the car with suds flying.

“OK, move!”

The twins got tangled up and couldn't escape the hose water fast enough. All of the boys started laughing.

“I think you get it now,” the grandfather said. “OK, next station.”

And so it went. They were thoroughly soaked and still laughing by the time they finished. The grandfather put away the hose and handed them towels, first to dry themselves then to buff the car.

“Good job. The Caddy has never looked better.” He gave the boys some dollar bills from his pocket.

“What do you think?” the grandfather asked Jacob.

“Marvelous,” the boy said, stealing a word from his grandmother.

“Good. I'll show you how to change the oil one of these days.”

On cue, as if it were a corny TV sitcom from the 1950s, the grandmother called from the front porch, “Who wants ice cream?”

The grandfather was left alone with the spotless car. A sadness came over him. He was calculating, always calculating. After two heart attacks, how much time did he have left? Would he live long enough to teach Jacob to drive? The battery in his pacemaker was wearing out twenty-nine percent faster than normal from its almost constant firing. His doctor told him last winter that his ticker could technically go again at “any moment.” His wife wanted him to slow down, but his heart condition only made him more manic. He had too many things to wrap up, fix, automate.

There was something about the doctor's words *any moment* that took him back to the pungent jungles of Vietnam when he was a young officer, drafted to serve as an Army engineer. He soon found himself working on airfields, which seemed like the safest places to be, except at night when the potshots came ringing. Later on, he was ordered to head north and west to build bridges in the mountains. He'd run the numbers and figured his greatest threats were snakes and disease rather than sniper fire, but the math was hard to trust when the bodies kept piling up. He tried to convince himself that his problem-solving skills were helping save his own men. He left 'Nam without firing a shot and never planned to return until a short business trip took him to Ho Chi Minh City. Back at home, only careful gardening—the emergence of new life from the soil—quieted his mind.

The grandfather hadn't made any inroads with the cat as if Janey had programmed Buster to plot against him. He would hiss from his ten-foot buffer zone. The cat slept on Jacob's bed in the spare room and would guard the boy with leopard eyes. The other day, after the grandfather had fallen asleep in his reclining chair while watching golf on TV, Buster leaped up on the headrest and started taking swipes. Jacob happened to walk in when the grandfather was pushing him off.

"Don't hurt Buster," Jacob hollered before he scooped up the cat and ran to his room.

The grandfather followed the boy's trail of dirt clogs. Jacob didn't stop crying until he saw his grandfather's bleeding face.

"I'm sorry, Grandpa. He didn't mean it."

Beyond that, things were going far better with Jacob this time around. He hadn't destroyed much, so unlike the younger, antsy version.

Jacob desperately needed new clothes and his grandmother took him on a shopping spree only to find herself in a deep pit of embarrassment when he wandered into a women's dressing room.

Jacob would go on adventures with his grandfather as rewards for completing his homework and chores. They went fishing on the first one. When they arrived at the pier at dawn, Jacob spotted a syringe sticking out of the wooden rail.

"Somebody's been shooting up," the boy said, half-jokingly.

Jacob was full of unsettling details, which added to the mistrust the grandparents had toward Janey. What had he been exposed to? The more they got to know Jacob, the less they knew their daughter.

The grandfather shrugged, then called the pier manager to have the syringe removed before it washed up on the beach. He distracted Jacob by finding a new fishing spot. He showed the boy how to bait the hook with squid.

Back at the house later that afternoon, the grandfather handed Jacob a screwdriver with a wooden handle. "This belonged to my father and now it belongs to you. I have a special job for you," he said. "We're getting into hurricane season and I need you to go around the house and tighten every screw. Door hinges, patio furniture, shutters. We don't want things to blow away."

"I'm not going to let anything blow away," the boy said. "Over my dead body."

The trio fell into a rhythm as the days came and went. Jacob seemed to thrive with the structure. He'd rise early to eat breakfast while his grandfather had black coffee and read the local paper. His grandmother would sip green tea and watch the bird feeder. She was teaching Jacob how to tell the difference between male and female cardinals and whatnot. She always had a fresh batch of pastries under a glass lid in the kitchen. He and his grandfather would begin with the morning chores in the yard as the late spring heat started coming on strong. And there were special projects like soldering corroded electrical connections on the outdoor stereo speakers. The grandfather had convinced Jacob that the sounds of Beethoven were good for the yard. There was a list of other projects on the refrigerator, which included building birdhouses and repainting the canoe.

So far, the plants in Jacob's Garden were surviving, but some had shrunken under the stress of transplanting, leaving gaps. A cluster of Jacob's ladders sat slightly off-center, the purple bell shapes in full bloom. There was no order to the blues, reds and yellows, and the grandfather told his wife that the randomness almost made it look natural.

On weekdays, Jacob would download his homework assignments on the computer and he and his grandmother would work until mid-afternoon. He'd gotten straight A's so far. She'd prohibited the grandfather from helping with the boy's math problems. He used to push Janey until she cried. Instead, the grandfather would work Newtonian mechanics into everyday activities.

After finishing his schoolwork, Jacob would go down the street to play with the twins while his grandparents napped. They flinched every time the phone rang, dreading bad news

about Janey. The only calls so far came from telemarketers targeting the elderly: upgraded cable TV service, timeshares and reverse mortgages.

Jacob surprised them one morning when he asked, "Do you think Mom can come live here? I never want to leave."

"That's not a bad idea," the grandfather said. Of course, he knew it was more like an impossible idea. Janey would never want to be in a town this small and she'd resist any constraints from her parents. At the same time, there was no way they could send Jacob back to Nashville.

"How could I've been so blind?" the grandmother kept asking herself. "She looked great last winter and sounded normal on the phone."

"She's learned to ace your check-ins. Janey is perfectly fine until she's not."

"I blame myself," the grandmother said. "There were too many lost years when I was exhausted. It was a critical time for her."

"Well, I blame *myself*. Instead of an alcoholic father, she got a workaholic father. I don't know if she was any better off."

"Of course she was better off. You were an excellent provider. You gave her things your own father couldn't give to you."

"Except I wasn't around enough," the grandfather said. "I was too busy destroying my heart."

On the first Friday in May, the grandfather was expecting a thunderstorm. He showed Jacob how the air pressure was falling on the wall-mounted barometer. They were planning to go to an agricultural museum the next day. They'd already been to a Civil War battlefield. It was a good two-hour drive and they needed to get an early start. The grandfather was dozing off in his reclining chair while Jacob was on the floor with the cat watching a Disney movie. Buster had its chin on the boy's shoulder and kept a careful watch. The grandmother was on the sofa reading ahead in Jacob's textbooks.

The wind raked treetops and the grandfather stirred. Through the window, he could see his hammock rocking ghostly in the backyard. When he went outside to make sure the umbrella table was secure, Buster followed him and disappeared in shadows. He propped open the backdoor for the cat's return.

As lightning flashed and the storm picked up in ferocity, the grandfather remained confident in his fortress. The hammock started doing half loops. His wife gave him a soft-pedaled look. She, too, had seen worse.

And then the hailstorm unleashed itself on the metal roof. The grandfather immediately thought he was back in basic training when the Army drill sergeant had set off fireworks outside the barracks in the middle of the night. He wondered if there were broken windows in the front. He adjusted his glasses as he scanned the room for Jacob.

From down the hall, he heard the grandmother ask, "What are you doing in the bathtub?"

"I heard gunshots. That's what Mom told me to do."

The boy was in a fetal position. The grandparents looked at each other. East L.A.? Vegas?

The things he'd seen.

"I'm sorry," the grandfather said. "I should've warned you. Metal roofs can be loud. It was just hail."

Jacob slithered out of the tub, where his beach towel was hanging from the shower curtain rod, without saying anything more. His grandmother went to the kitchen to cut him some cake.

The grandfather was thinking he needed to teach Jacob about thunderheads. By then, the hail had dissipated and in that near-silence came Jacob's distress call from the living room.

"Where's Buster?"

The grandparents made their way to the patio and found Jacob standing there in muddy bare feet, yelling for the cat.

"I left the door open for him," the grandfather said. "I'm sure he's not far."

Jacob whipped around in tears. "You never liked him. You wanted him to run off."

"No, I didn't."

"He got eaten by an alligator. I know it. It's your fault."

"No, no. He's OK. We just need to look around."

The grandfather went to the garage for flashlights and picked up Jacob's flip-flops in the living room. They knocked on three doors by the time the grandfather's cell phone rang. Buster was back, his wife said. When they returned home, the cat was on the sofa licking himself dry.

After the celebration had calmed down, the grandfather had a sudden ill-feeling. "We better check your garden."

He could see the devastation long before the flashlight amplified it. The clearing in the treetops provided an easy target for the hail. The picket fence was down on one side and the

garden itself had been reduced to a compost pile. But the hand-painted sign, Jacob's Garden, was still standing as if it were a defiant battle flag.

Big trees released thudding potshots all around them while they remained protected in the circle. The storm moved northward and the odor of fresh mulch dominated the backyard in its wake. The grandfather's feet felt cold. In the haste to find the cat, he'd mistakenly put on his leather slippers and soaked them through.

The grandfather looked at Jacob and caught a glimpse of Janey; the younger version with bright eyes. He didn't know how many heartbeats he had left, but he vowed to dedicate as many as he could to his grandson.

"I'm sorry about your garden."

Jacob took his hand. "Don't worry, Grandpa. I can put it back together, just the way it was."

THE END