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THE GARDEN

by

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It was meant to be the most beautiful garden. Given the appropriate amounts of care, attention, and most importantly, love, it had the potential to become any type of garden it wanted to be. Earthy, lush, shade-loving moss could have covered every square inch. Vibrant, sacredly geometric chrysanthemums, which could only have been designed by some higher divine entity, could have grown right next to bountiful blueberry bushes. In the next plot over, bulbs of crisp white onions could have matured in the soil at the same time cayenne peppers ripen on their stems above.

It didn't matter the type of soil, the amount of sun, shade, or water needed; the garden could have been anything. All it needed was love.

It should have had everything it ever needed. The garden was built by a man and a woman. They both did everything within their power to ensure they could support multiple gardens with everything the gardens needed. They tilled the earth. They planted the seeds. They built decorative flower beds for each unique type of flower they intended to grow in each garden. This garden, and its sister-gardens seemed to be fortunate in their progenitors. They got water. They got sun and shade. They were fed all the food they required in order to not rot in the earth.

They did not get much more than that.

The man and the woman had troubles of their own. They didn't love each other. They didn't love themselves. Truly, they didn't know what it meant to love. Were they capable of love? Or were they so scarred from their own lives of neglect that their idea of love was a twisted and disfigured tool they could wield to form and shape their gardens into what *they* wanted them to be? How could they pour love into the gardens they built together if they had no love to give?

Nevertheless, the garden persisted, and despite the neglect it was shown, it thrived.

The garden didn't belong to the man and the woman forever. A much younger man came by after a number of years and saw something he liked. He gave the garden everything the first man and woman gave it. He gave it water. He gave it food. He might have even given it light when it needed it. And like the man and the woman, he did not give it much more than that.

And yet, the garden continued to flourish.

Whenever anyone would look at the garden, they would remark at its beauty. Passersby would stop in their tracks and admire the contents of the garden. Some would gently cup the blooming flowers in their hands, bring close their faces, and inhale the fragrant, perfumed scent.

The young man did not like for other people to enjoy *his* garden. This garden was supposed to be for *his* enjoyment and his enjoyment alone. Its flowers were meant to be coveted by *him* and him alone. Its fruits were meant to be tasted by *him* and him alone. No other man nor woman was meant see the beauty of this garden but *him*.

So, he built walls around the garden. On all four sides, he put up walls made of glass. Their frosty translucence mired the view of any potential onlooker but still allowed for the garden to get just enough sunlight so that it would survive. He covered the garden with a double-pitched roof to trap all the heat and the light of the garden within *his* limits.

And still, the garden persisted.

And still, others could see the beauty of the garden.

He sought to control the growth of the garden. The walls sectioned the garden off, not only from strangers, but its sister-gardens as well. The garden's original owners had built four other gardens on their land, each one growing an assortment of flowers and crops as unique as the last, but distinct in their own rights. These five gardens fed each other and fed off each other. They shared the same soil, the same food. Love flowed between each garden. When one needed light, the others provided. When one garden was afflicted by blight or an infestation, the others lent their energies in defense.

This all ended after the man put up his walls.

And still, the garden survived.

The man grew frustrated. The greenhouse should have kept the magnificence of his garden contained with his boundaries. The greenhouse should have suffocated it.

He began to fill the garden with hurtful things. Unnatural things. Harsh chemicals, synthesized with the sole purpose of destruction, seeped into the soil. Caustic compounds fought every occupant of the garden; flowers, grasses, shrubs, trees, and even weeds were bombarded with toxic mixtures meant to rearrange their genetic makeups. Worst of all, he whispered evil lies to the garden. He would infuse his words with spite and malice meant to wound the garden. He would tell the garden it wasn't beautiful enough and that no one truly loved its fruits but him.

These treatments were purposeful. He disguised each of them as love. Yet another in the long list of lies the garden was sold. The man wanted to accentuate only the parts of the garden he liked and kill all others.

The roses in the corner – the ones found at every farmers market in the summer – should fill the whole garden. Because that's what he wanted! Never mind the beautiful, natural biodiversity of the plant life that flourished within the garden. No, it should bend to his will and only grow what he wanted.

But the garden did not believe him. It would not believe him.

The garden's unconventional nature is what made it truly beautiful, and the garden knew this. It had had enough of the man. The garden would bear him no fruit, nor the flowers *he* wanted, so it casted him out.

The garden was left alone for a time, and still it grew.

With the hateful man gone, the greenhouse walls came down. The garden was allowed to breathe again. It outgrew the bounds that everyone had set for it, from the now-older man and woman to the younger, cruel man. From the roots buried deep in the rich soil to the sprawling, enchanting vines twining up and around the wooden flower boxes of the garden, all parts of the garden spread outwards.

It became so much more than any of its previous owners could control. Its roots extended outward endlessly. Birds and bees happily carried seeds and pollen from the garden and spread them to every corner of the world. On every patch of grass and every square of bare earth the seeds and pollen touched, plant life grew. The garden was infectious, and the earth was delighted to accept it.

Another man came along after a short time. He was a good man. He was not perfect, but he was *good*. Good in the way that a toddler's laughter is good. Good in the way standing barefoot in the grass under a full moon is good.

This new man wasn't even looking for a garden. He had always had an appreciation for the beauty of all plant life but never paid them much attention. He had no choice but to notice this specific garden after it's resurgent growth. The moment he saw how willful and contagious this garden was, he was possessed. The garden began to haunt his every thought. The man could not have been happier.

The man began to visit the garden as much as he could and the garden accepted his touch. Despite the garden's renaissance, there was still damage left by the spiteful man that needed repairs. The new man was a godsend. He was just what the garden needed.

The man mixed in healthy, nutritious soil that fed the garden. With the garden's approval, he would prune wilted flowers and wounded limbs, clearing the way for even stronger, more beautiful, and more resilient growth. He helped root out invasive, alien, and noxious weeds left by the hateful man. He allowed the garden to become whatever it wanted to be (as if anyone could ever *allow* the garden to do anything again) and let the garden shine on its own.

Most importantly, he showed the garden *love*. Unconditional love that didn't depend on what grew inside the garden, or what fruits it bore for him. Whatever grew inside the garden, the man would love it.

With no walls to contain it, a healthy foundation from which to grow, and a constant stream of love, the garden was on its way to become what it was always meant to be from the beginning. Its roots dug in even deeper. Its branches and boughs and limbs grew even stronger. It reconnected with the earth below it and its sister-gardens around it. They had always been there, but now, without the walls put up by the hurtful man, they were able to share their love again.

But, still, the garden could sense that something was wrong.

The garden had so many scars and so much remembered pain from everyone who came before the good man. Unhealed scars would burn in agony at the thought of anyone again treating the garden the way it had been treated before. Never again would anyone pour their chemicals and corrosive words on the garden's leaves. Never again would the garden allow for anyone to isolate it from the world. Never again would the garden depend solely on anyone else to provide the love and care it needed, because the garden would provide that for itself.

The garden knew the good man would never abuse it like it had been abused before. He would never pull a weed he didn't like (it was unthinkable that there existed a weed growing in the garden he didn't like), nor would he try to bend any limbs in a direction he thought best. He would never force anything on the garden that was in opposition to what it truly was or believed in. He trusted the garden to be whatever it wanted to be, and grow whatever it wanted to grow, no matter unconventional or exotic.

But, still, the garden knew it needed something else.

The garden needed to exist on its own, without anyone to guide what it grew or how it grew. The garden wanted to extend its limbs every which way and bend in every crazy direction it wanted. The garden wanted to be able to thrive like it always had, but it wanted to do it without depending on someone else for the first time since its first seeds sprouted. The garden needed to be free of anyone's expectation, vision or plan. The garden needed to discover what its own expectations were. For the first time ever, the garden wanted to figure out what vision it saw for itself.

And, so, the garden let the good man go.

Free from any outside influence for the first time in its existence, the garden began looking inward. It became aware of every leaf, flower, bulb, and fruit that grew at the end of

every limb. It conversed with the bugs that would make homes among its foliage and the worms that would feed on the soil around its roots. It went through cycles of wild, uncontrollable growth, followed by times of introspective reflection, in which it would make sure every weed, flower and critter contained within its boundaries were getting everything they needed.

It would share its resplendent beauty with the world without fear of being contained. For the first time, the garden was confident enough to display its rainbow of colors, from deep and stormy greens to bright, sunshine pinks, without fear of being judged.

And finally, the garden healed *itself*.

The garden had finally become what *it* wanted to be, not what it was designed to be, and not someone else's vision of what a garden is supposed to be.

Scars remained scored in the bark and the mind of the garden, but the garden no longer recoiled when it felt love. The garden's skin no longer boiled from the phantom chemicals left by the childish man. The garden knew what it was, and the garden loved itself.

The garden became *itself*.

The garden knew *itself*.

The good man never stopped thinking about the garden. A gentle breeze might bring the faint scent of a yellow peony, and he would know it was of the garden. It seemed to the man that the entire world was connected to and revolved around this one, central garden.

An image flashed in his mind. He saw this world and all other worlds, suspended in open space. At the center, was the garden. Beams of pure, unpolluted energy connected these worlds to the garden, and it was from these beams the garden fed the worlds. As quickly as it came, the vision left the man, but it remained clear in his mind forever more.

And so, the man sought out the garden, and he found it.

The garden had grown to become something that was indescribable. If given a thousand years to process all the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures offered by this new garden, he would still need more time. And yet he understood it completely. The garden had become what it was always meant to become. It became The Garden.

He approached The Garden, never taking his eyes from the vibrant greens contained within. They were calling to him, drawing him in at the same time as they were warning him to stay away. The man did not heed its warnings.

The man knelt by the cluster of flowers at the center of The Garden. An array of roses containing every color of the rainbow, and some not perceptible on this plane, grew from the ground. He did not know if they were roses he had planted in The Garden sometime in the past, and yet he knew they were for him. The Garden, through all time, growth, and self-discovery kept a space for the man, knowing he would be back. He would always come back to The Garden.

The man bent close, buried his face amongst the petals of the roses, and breathed in.

The End