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Collage and Photography

Digitally transferred on Wood, 24 x 36 in.



courtesy: the artist

RCA O'NEAL

What Lay Around the Bend

My grandmother had an immense garden that descended from the back of her house. It was a white Victorian with blue trim that possessed all the accoutrements of such a building: bay windows, turrets, high ceilings, wooden floors . . . But the inside was old and dusty and filled with aging things that I was forbidden to touch, so I would escape to the garden. The garden was carpeted with flowers—tulips and daffodils mostly—who would, almost magically, poke their heads out of the grass in spring. There were numerous hedges and trellises as well; blue morning glories had slowly invaded the hedges so that the dark green was covered with blue polka dots, and jasmine and honeysuckle grew on the trellises, their scent permeating the entire garden. The birds and bees of the garden filled it with their singing and buzzing, which on some days would reach cacophonous levels; all these things together produced an atmosphere so vibrant as to be almost overbearing, but which I found rather comforting.

In the middle of the garden there was a pond that contained a little island upon which there was built a white gazebo. Large rocks had been placed in the pond, forming a path above its surface that allowed one to reach the island, and when walking on these, or by the pond's edge, or when looking out from the gazebo's railings, one could see giant ornamental carp whose bright forms would slowly rise up through the water, until their heads poked out and their begging mouths opened and closed in supplication. If one humoured them—and whenever I visited the garden, I was always sure to nick some bread from the kitchen—more of them would come until they were three or four layers deep, the carp below pushing those above them in such a craze that they would literally be lifted out of the water, their lustrous bodies glittering in the sunlight and the sound of their flopping frenzy drowning out the singing of the birds.

I had a favourite carp that my grandmother called Duke Wellington. He was as long as my arm span and an iridescent white, like the inside of a shell, with patches of a deep, dirty gold. When I first started reading chapter books, I proudly illustrated my new-found prowess by taking them with me when we visited my grandmother so that I could ostracise everyone by burying myself in my book. (Photographs taken of me during this period show a boy in dutiful ignorance of his family, nose in book—sometimes even when walking—taking especial care to

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avoid the gaze of his sister, ever so keen to get to know him, whose infantile curiosity was matched by his seven years of seniority and scorn for this helpless thing that his parents had created.) I would lie by the edge of the pond, where Elizabeth was forbidden to play, reading, and Wellington would sidle up beside me, staring dolefully from beneath the surface, perhaps blowing a few bubbles, and I would dip my fingers into the water and stroke his head.

On one occasion, when I had taken a bag of bread-crumbs and dumped the entire thing into the pond, thus precipitating a massive hysteria amongst the fish, whose enthusiasm churned the water into foam, Duke Wellington found himself lifted up on the backs of his brothers and sisters to slowly suffocate in the sun. At first I failed to notice, as the chaos in the water distracted me, and so I took from my pocket the end of a baguette, ripped it into pieces, and threw these into this millrace. I had not helped my friend's plight. He began to kick and flail violently, and it was then that I noticed him. I was at first somewhat amused, but as his situation failed to change, I grew increasingly distressed, wondering what I could do to help him, for there he was, his grand old length, his gold spots shimmering in the sun, his mouth opening and closing in frantic gasps, his tail violently kicking this way and that—and then in a desperate attempt to return to the water he flicked his tail with such force that he was thrown up into the air. But he came down upon the bank.

Out of pure bad luck Wellington had fallen into a sort of gully that sloped away from the pond, so that the more he struggled, the farther away he moved. In horror I ran to him. The obvious thing to do was to pick him up and throw him back into the water, but this was not so easy, firstly because of his size, and then because he was quite slippery and was writhing about in his death throes—and there I was, only a boy of eight, attempting to wrangle

this frantic carp back into his pond. Dragging him was no good, as that would damage his scales and possibly break his fins. Eventually, after having tried a number of methods, I simply picked him up and held him with both my arms close to my chest, and then, crouching low so that he would not have far to fall if I dropped him, I scrambled toward the bank, while Wellington slowly became ever more lethargic in my arms. Arriving at the pond, leaning forward to dump him in, I tripped, and the school of carp, now somewhat less agitated, quickly fled. I still clung to him underwater, and for a moment we rested there on the bottom, where, for an instant, an odd sense of peace and tranquility seemed to flow through me. But then I started to rise, Duke Wellington twitched, and with a frightening beat of his tail he was gone. I emerged upon the bank muddy, sodden, and triumphant.

Such was my grandmother's garden: a place of peace, a place of adventure, a place of life. My sister was not yet old enough to come out by herself, so the garden was not something that I had to share. My family might picnic on the grass or at the table in the upper garden, but I would quickly escape, following the white gravel path; perhaps I would read by the pond or in the gazebo, or perhaps I would wander amongst the rose bushes, sticking my nose here and there; I might crawl about beneath the hedges, pick apples from the apple tree, or catch insects in the tall grass deep within the garden that never got mowed. But if one were to follow the gravel path farther still, after passing sundials, roses, statues, and the fountain, one would walk for a time beside a hedge of juniper, and then there would come a bend.

At this point the path was not well cared for, and one could only see a few white stones scattered amongst the weeds that had grown up in place of the gravel. Where the path bent into the hedge there was a slight gap, as though there had once been a space to walk through—and indeed the remains of an old gate lay decaying on the ground, of which a brass lock was the most discernible part—but now the hedge was much overgrown so that even I would have had to bend low. The juniper was yellowed and blackened here, and the gap was laced over by a multitude of cobwebs. I hadn't the height to see over the hedge, though it was not particularly tall, but over it grew a splendid old magnolia tree with vast twisted branches, glossy leaves, and

enormous flowers as broad as dinner plates that seemed to me to glow like light bulbs when the sunlight struck them.

When I first discovered the bend, I crouched at the gap and looked through, but could only see fallen magnolia leaves and dry grass. Perhaps on that occasion I might have suffered the cobwebs or found a stick to push them aside, but just as I was about to do one of these things, there came a sound that was something between an old door creaking, a baby gurgling, and a cat screeching, and then I heard a rustle. I had none to save but myself, and there came no hand to push me, so in a moment of stupidity, of cowardice that I would rue for years to come, the fear that beat in my young heart commanded me and I ran away.

My family continued the weekly visits to my grandmother's, and I continued to escape to the solitude of the garden, throwing food to the lackadaisical carp who liked to bask in the sunlight just beneath the water's surface, but who would suddenly show surprising vigour when a bread-crumbs or a kernel of fish feed fell from the gazebo, making tiny ripples in the water. I would try to build things out of leaves and sticks, and sometimes I would bring my Legos or other toys to explore this jungle. But now the garden had a slightly different colour for me. Before, the entire thing had been my domain and I roamed freely there—yet after I discovered the bend in the path and the gap in the juniper, a new awareness crept upon me: the fact that there was a place in my paradise I dared not go.

My play took on a more anxious nature as in the back of my mind the cobwebbed portal taunted me. Once I made my way into that deep part of the garden, but I was unable to persuade myself to actually crawl through. I stood there rocking slightly on the balls of my feet, as one who stands at a high place intending to jump off for the thrill of it might, but I was not able to push myself over the edge, and when I heard that horrible noise again, I fled for good. Yet I did not need to brave spiders and dead leaves to reach the far side of the hedge, for *it* came to me.

I had conquered and occupied the sundial that stood in a patch of grass in the middle of the rose plantings, and I was overseeing the deployment of my little Lego men, when something caught my eye. Over by one of the hedges, beyond the roses, something had moved. Now, this was hardly out of the ordinary, as the garden was much

beloved to birds, but then it moved again and I thought that I could see something *watching* me. Toys forgotten, I stood up, alert. Creeping slowly so as not to crunch the gravel, I approached the hedge and then turned suddenly. I found myself face-to-face with a girl of about my own age, who was holding a plastic velociraptor. She had dark hair, dark eyes, and tanned skin, and she wore a Lincoln green summer dress. The girl laughed at being found and turned to run, but I lunged forward, grabbing her arm, violently.

“Who are you! What are you doing here—this is *my* garden!”

Again she laughed. I was filled with a turgid jealous rage, for I was not accustomed to having to share my garden. “You shouldn't be here!” I said forcefully. “If you don't leave, I'll tell my grandmother!” She looked me up and down seriously for a moment, and then, of all things, she twisted her hand so that it was she who was holding my wrist, and with sudden force she pulled me off balance so that when she ran, I had to follow. I was a fish caught on a hook, and I flailed and protested mightily and then she stopped; she relinquished my wrist, and I jerked my hand away. Before us there was a bush adorned with a multitude of yellow flowers about the size of my thumb, arranged in globes atop long stems. The girl took one of these stalks, pulled it down toward her, and then proceeded to pluck one of the blossoms and suck on its end. She then held out the stalk to me and told me to try one. Incredulously, I reached out my hand and took a blossom, glaring at her all the while. The flower contained a surprising amount of nectar, which was light, sweet, and tasting somehow of ginger. At first I was shocked, and this must have registered on my face, for she laughed a third time, and then I felt a mixture of wonder, gratitude, and anger over the fact that this girl might know things about *my* garden that I did not.

But somehow, after years of playing alone in the garden, the idea dawned on me that it might be nice to have a playmate—after all, the sundial hardly put up much of a fight; perhaps her toy velociraptor would. So we returned to my toys, and suddenly my troops had a monster to fight off! Tiring of that, I showed her about the garden, most of which she seemed to already know; we dawdled in the gazebo, dropping crumbs for the carp. I taught her to stroke Wellington's head, and she called him her darling, and I informed her, authoritatively, “His name is Duke Wel-

lington.” “I have a pet goldfish, and her name is Mina,” she said. I told her that I thought Wellington was a better name for a fish. She said that her fish was a girl. And then I heard my father’s voice drifting down from the house, yelling that it was time to go. With that we parted; we had not even told each other our names. Being a fairly quiet child, I forgot to mention to my parents that I had met someone in the garden, and when I remembered a few days later, I decided that it would be my secret—my life in the garden and my life in the beyond were to be separated for many years.

The next week when we visited my grandmother, I escaped to the garden even more quickly than usual, hoping that the girl would once again appear. I hung about for a time around the sundial and checked the flowering bush with the sweet-tasting nectar, but she was not to be seen. Eventually, and in a state of deep apprehension, I started to make my way toward the bend. When I was in sight of the gap in the juniper, a sudden fear gripped my chest, for it seemed that the monster I had heard screaming was now coming through, but before I turned to run, I realised that it was just the girl, carelessly pushing aside branches and cobwebs. She came through, we wandered off amongst the bushes and trees, and I asked about the monster. She grew very serious, describing a beast of feathers, scales, and talons that not even I had had the imagination to fear, and which made me even more afraid of what lay around the bend, but I was also full of admiration for my friend, who was courageous enough to sneak past it. With stolen bread we fed the fish, and when my supply had been exhausted, we chased grasshoppers in the tall grass. Eventually it was again time for me to leave.

So strange, so strange how something that passes by in an instant is an eternity: I shall always remember how the drops of water falling from the fountain’s spout would split the light into a thousand colours, only to be lost in the pool at its base. On our third encounter we had decided to combine our forces in order to invade the fountain. My grandmother had been negligent and the fountain’s pool had not been cleaned recently, so there were long strands of verdant green algae in the water, their fingers waving in a leisurely manner, coated with tiny air bubbles. My friend sent a pteranodon as a scout, taking it around the fountain, stepping up onto the ledge that encircled the pool to look

into the water, stopping for a moment to sneeze. The wind blew the surface of the pond, sending up a glittering reflection upon her face, and she stood there momentarily and smiled, perhaps at me, perhaps at the dragonflies that chased each other between the fountain’s spouts.

And then she returned to our assembled armies: hers being composed of the pteranodon, the velociraptor, a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, a Barbie in a violet car, and a handsome stuffed lion, and mine being an assortment of Lego spaceships, a GI Joe, two model F-15 fighter planes, and a small plastic tank. We peered from behind a low wall that girded the path leading up to the fountain. It chattered happily on, unaware of the onslaught that was about to hit it—it was clear to us that any invasion must be carried out quickly and efficiently, that the enemy should be surprised and overrun before it had a chance to respond—but this also presented a difficulty, because it was also clear to us that not all of our vehicles could travel at the same speed. We could, of course, send our faster units first, but this would alert the enemy to our intentions before the bulk of our strength would be able to arrive, so we devised a different strategy.

Stealthily we crept up, crouching low to the ground so that our profiles and our armies were hidden from sight as we approached from behind the benches, four of which were arrayed about the fountain. By staging our attack from behind cover, we hoped to be able to move in quickly without giving the enemy time to prepare. Our armies in place, we commenced the attack, she from the other side of the fountain so as to more quickly deploy our forces. It was a glorious fight. The fountain spat its green, fetid water vehemently and was joined by an unexpected ally—the wind, who blew back at our troops and lifted glistening plasma-balls from the jets of water and threw them down upon us. One of my fighters, careening between these droplets, was hit unexpectedly, and in surprise I let the plane fall into the pool, where it promptly sank to the bottom, but I could still see it there, dimly, strands of algae clinging to it. I halted my attack, and seeing me stop, my friend came to join me. “What’s wrong?” “I dropped my plane in the water.” She looked at me with a peculiar expression, probably wondering why I did not just reach in and get it out, and I stood there, not wanting to get my arm dirty in the scummy water. After a moment she reached

in, the water coming up to just above her elbow. Having retrieved the plane, she turned it over in her hands and found my name written on the underside of one of the wings.

“What’s this?”

“My mother wrote my name on it so that it wouldn’t get lost when I took it to school.”

“I can’t read her writing.”

“Yeah.”

“My mother does that too,” she said proudly. “She wrote my name on my stuffed cat’s tag.”

She sneezed, and I handed her a tissue from my pocket.

“Where’s your stuffed cat?”

“Underneath the magnolia tree.”

“Where?”

“Around the bend.”

“That’s all right.” I turned back to the toys, she dropped the tissue on a bench, and we recommenced the battle.

* * *

Soon after, my grandmother fell ill with a high fever, so the next weekend we stayed home. I was filled with such a desperate longing and sadness as I imagined my friend, that now-welcome intruder, alone in the garden that I spent both days in my room reading children’s science fiction so that I could forget. On Monday my anticipation of the weekend was renewed, and I pestered my parents constantly about my grandmother, asking whether she was feeling better and would we be able to visit. By the end of the week, even reading did not distract me sufficiently, so I turned to my father’s computer, seeking a stronger opiate. Thus, as I was immersed in a world of explosions and spaceships where it was the lot of evil to be conquered by the good, night would fall without my noticing. On Friday, my parents told me something about my grandmother’s house, something about the garden, and at its mention my excitement could not be contained.

“Take me to the garden,” I commanded, and for the first time that I can remember, I was obeyed. Now, I think my parents were acting out of concern for my grandmother, whom they considered to be frail. Perhaps when one is shorter than someone, this is hard to understand. We arrived at my grandmother’s house, and the air was hazy, and it smelled like the entire street had been having barbecues.

Upon reaching the back porch, I stopped in my tracks.

“What happened?”

“We told you. One of the neighbours’ houses caught fire and it spread into your grandmother’s garden. Weren’t you listening?”

Of the garden and what lay beyond, nothing had been forbidden to me, and yet, almost capriciously, it had been taken away. My grandmother, who took things in stride, said that it would be fun to go out and replant—that she had, in recent years, begun to neglect the garden, and it would be nice to return to it. Limbs numb, heart heavy in my chest, and with a feeling in my stomach as though I were walking down a staircase and had missed a step, I trudged out into what had once been my paradise. The evening light sifted through the sooty air, illuminating bits of ash that slowly drifted like large dirty snowflakes to settle with hardly a ripple upon the surface of the pond so that Wellington and his compatriots, their voracious instincts aroused, would rush to gobble them up, only to spit them out. The lower portion of the garden was completely obliterated, and whatever had lain around the bend was now gone. There was nothing left but regret, and the charred remains of the magnolia tree.

RCA O’Neal is twenty-two years old. He enjoys Baroque music, fencing, travel, swing dance, and Graham Greene. He has played violin since the age of four, and composes in the Baroque style. This story is the fifth chapter from a novel titled *Moments from the Life of James Fontaine*, which is a modern retelling of *Perceval Ou le Conte Du Graal*, by Chrétien de Troyes, with elements also taken from Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*. This novel is the first of eight, which shall form a complete modern retelling of the Arthurian sequence. Although the novels are meant to evoke the mediæval romances, they form their own story. This particular chapter details Percival’s failure to heal the Fisher King, but that is only incidental. What this chapter is really about is a little boy in a garden.