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# THE GARDEN

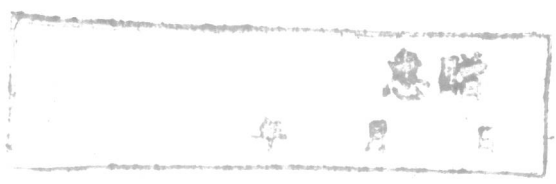
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# THE GARDEN

*For Jean Paulhan,*

*the* PATRON

But at my back I always hear  
Time's winged chariot hurrying near.

—MARVELL  
*To his Coy Mistress*

With steam-engines and electricity, the world's  
insomnia began.

—GUGLIELMO FERRERO  
*Speech to the Deaf*

You are not an American with an Indian's broad  
shoulders and slim waist, with level eyes and a skin  
tanned by the air of the prairies and the rivers that  
cross them, you have not been to the Great Lakes and  
sailed on them, wherever they may be. So, I ask you,  
what would a pretty girl like me be doing following  
you?

—FRANZ KAFKA  
*Contemplation*

**D**URING the day, it would be an understatement to say that I think about nothing, that I am like an automaton, giving orders to this person and that and attending to things here and there; the fact is that during the day it is as if I were not alive. I am neither hungry nor thirsty, and I sit down to table out of habit. I am superior to you in this respect: time. It affects and governs the world, but over me it has no power, on me it has no effect. It is rather I who command it: Come along, time, we are going to sit down to table. Time sits down with me. Then we forget each other.

My relations with time would make my father, if he came back, secretly happy. I say "secretly" because he would not show anything. It took more than satisfaction and even more than joy to make him abandon his reserve. It took torments, passions. And I remember only one occasion when he was really carried away by emotion, and that emotion finally carried him off.

My relations with time may make my sister, if she ever returns, rather concerned. She will say that I am turning out like father. But that is not true, I am not turning out like anything or anybody, and of this immobility I have a proof: time.

It is at night that my life begins. Again, then, I think of my father and how he would be happy, secretly, to know that I am dedicated to the stars. I tell myself that he must have loved them, toward the end of his life, because they never moved, never changed, stronger than the moon—which the clouds can always cut up—or the sun, which takes on different colors. He must have dreamed, in his last moments, of hanging himself on a star.

I have changed nothing in the ordering of his house, in the arrangement of his garden. It is into my father's garden that I go in the evening, together with the first stars, in my father's garden that I sit down, in his place on the green bench,



right against the lime tree, which he liked to feel beside him and, if he was speaking, to touch. Not that I spend hours there, any more than elsewhere during the day. The stars disappear and I go in to sleep. The workmen have no need of me, I gave them their orders yesterday, last year, ten years ago, an eternity ago.

I never knew the time—and already, in my father's day, it was the end, which he wanted to delay—when, once the herds had been brought in, once the smell of sheep, wool and grease had been absorbed, the night belonged to silence, to vagabond scents, and when it rose, to the wind alone, whose breath no one would have dared to take away. I grew up in the midst of noise and gasoline. My life is ravaged by the laughter of the men and youths who go to the village, into the square where the five cafés and the brothel are. All the same, my father, Virginie my sister, and others too, chose the night for me, and, in the garden, this place on the bench. Their obstinacy repairs the web in which they have imprisoned me. When the laughter dies away, it is as if it had never been.

In my memories, my mother is confused with the maidservant. Virginie has gone.

I can hear my father saying: "Come back, little nanny goat." He had read everything.

We know that he died because the mare was galloping along at breakneck speed, bolting perhaps. Some people added that a car, several cars were not keeping to the right. That may well be so. But it is not true, as people said on hearing about the accident, that my father, for some time past, had been a different man. And those who push back the moment when he changed, as if they had been close acquaintances, shrewd, knowing folk, they too deceive themselves, out of complacency and a taste for gossip. My father has always been my father. With me, before me.

I had a presentiment of his death. I came back to the village, to the house, for his sake, not to take his place, but to succeed him. All that time I spent at school, close to Virginie, far from my father, must not be given a significance which I know it did not have. My failure with my sister and that frenzied writing work which I undertook at that time, insane as I was under Virginie's influence, are things of no importance, such as happen to everybody, which reveal nothing, prove nothing. If they recounted my story, those who have heard it, or if I for my part let myself go, I know there would be people who would draw a moral from it. People with imagination. Pretentious people, mythmakers. There is nothing to get out of a dead past, a failure,

a ruin. My life is with my father, dead, alive, in the garden where every day the dying day gives place once more to the uninterrupted night. The official from the *Mairie* found me there at that time. I had to go back into the house, look for some papers, read them, then sign at the bottom of a page which he held out to me, under a date.

A date! So it was two years ago that I came home. In the morning my arrival, the accident in the evening. Yes. But I can see once more the group at the garden gate, young men, bronzed or copper-colored, whom the villagers called niggers, my father Indians. How can I have forgotten that number, 1956, which is something like a date of birth since there is nothing, in the night or the garden or my life, which does not emanate from it, and when I say my life I mean that slow mixing-up of a past, that recapitulation of violent episodes and thoughts, that fervor driving on my brain which is as compact as the earth, so that one and the same rotation, every night, brings us both back, the earth and me, to this fixed point: my father. Those men were Italians, Spaniards. A score of them around his body, which two of them were holding by the shoulders and the knees. I have been told what happened after the accident: my father was put inside a car. The road was obstructed:

those foreigners, walking at their ordinary pace, stayed around him. At the entrance to the village the driver parked his car: he knew my father. The local people, standing on their doorsteps, in their street, watched the procession. They did not move. The men at the head of the cortege knew instinctively that the dead man's house was ours, where no one was waiting. I can understand the villagers. They were too astonished to accept that twist of fate: my father escorted by men whose recruitment, from outside the country, he disapproved of, in spite of the disappearance of the local day laborers. Bringing in the wine harvest was something we should do ourselves. I think too that their attitude now was intolerable. The men had been available immediately . . . and sooner than anyone else. Their concern, their kindness, their competence deprived the villagers of a duty which should have fallen to them and of the happiness which comes from attending to a dead person, when death has struck across the way. They had been robbed of this corpse. As the foreigners entered the garden, the local people went back into their houses.

The others came forward. I went to meet them. A neckerchief had been thrown over my father's face: it was the chest which ought to have been covered. They gathered round me. I cannot under-

stand either Italian or Spanish. They realized this, and after the first excited words they tried to explain things to me in another way. I have never made the attempt, but I imagine that out of many, if not all, animal noises, that of the horse is the most difficult to reproduce. They brayed, they belled. I put up my hand to interrupt them. I knew that my father had gone off with the buggy. Then one of them, close-shaven but ill-shaven, with a dirty cap pulled down over his eyes, and a torn leather vest—I had the impression that he was the boldest and most sensitive of them all—joined his hands together and then separated them slightly, bending his fingers except for two which, pointing into the air, moved about. Suddenly he threw his head back, at the same time wagging it from side to side and shutting his eyes. I gathered that the mare too was dead. He was the boldest or the most sensitive of them all. I pointed one finger at my father, then at the door of the house. The man bowed. The others followed him.

My father spent all night and the following day in his office, where I took the foreigners. They stood there for a moment, embarrassed, their arms hanging down at their sides, and went out again without looking at me. They suddenly seemed tired. The steward arrived. I had spent part of

my childhood in his company. He had stopped coming to the house. At the age of twenty I had become the master. I told him to see about the remains of the buggy, out on the road to Avignon. The accident had occurred five miles from the village, and it is as far again from there to the town. My father's death being so recent and the memory of his interdictions still fresh, I doubt if he borrowed that car or that pickup truck which we had never had. He must have harnessed the other two mares to the landau, disregarding the plow horses, for I saw him again barely two hours after the foreigners' departure and a good while before that summer night which was the first for me. The steward stayed with me for I wanted him to receive the visitors and show them in: the parish priest, who stayed a long time talking without saying anything, then the pastor, who came out of courtesy or convention, and finally two little groups which followed one after the other, the members of the parish council who are also those of the town council. They looked at their chief churchwarden and their mayor, and I think that they welcomed the evidence of their eyes. In their attitude there was something like relief, a levity which lent a tremulous quality to their gestures, their careful, whispered words. It was late at night. We had the

doctor, and after him a few landowners, and later on a few humble folk. I said then to the steward that I was counting on him early the next morning, for from Avignon and the surrounding villages would come all the people who had been informed by their newspaper or by word of mouth of what had happened, and first of all the solicitors of the department, who had elected my father president of their disciplinary chamber. They would be wearing masks of sorrow, those crafty rogues: I guessed that their satisfaction at seeing my father—who had a poor opinion of them and made no secret of the fact—for the last time would be better concealed than the councillors' febrile joy. Not that the peasants, nowadays, are different from the people marked by the town, or that a tricksters' complicity is not being established between them, in an amalgam so rapid that it may now be complete. My father, for his part, knew that this was happening, that under his eyes which wanted and did not want to see, it was in the process of coming about. He had always known. I was left on my own.

I spent the night with the body, rummaging through the papers. I found no trace of the correspondence, copious though it was, which he carried on all over the world with men whom he had come across by chance, whom he had never seen,

in most cases, for my father did not travel and people had to come to him, obscure individuals or persons of local fame of whom the press had reported on some occasion, in lower case, a gesture, an action, an observation, and my father had recognized himself, or else they had published a book at the author's expense, memoirs, recollections, nostalgic reveries, meditative, dreamy pages, and my father's booksellers had caught them in their nets, out there in Richmond, Charleston, Niort, Capetown, Brisbane. And I remember that I said "come across by chance" just now, but no it was not by chance, for in the end my father felt such a strong, almost physical need for these people, letters failing to satisfy him any more, that it seems to me that he called them and controlled their movements, and I believe that those rare encounters in the hotels of Avignon, which they promptly left to drive out into the country in the buggy, partook more of an inner compulsion than of a miracle. He wrote a great deal to Virginians, Brazilians, Australians, Georgians although he could not read Russian, a Fuegian from the frontier of Chile, men who were all landed proprietors, and I remember the coincidence, which amused Virginie and amazed me, of a New Zealand planter who was also a solicitor, but for some reason I do



not know, I shall try to understand it another time, another night, the thing annoyed my father.

He imagined the other's estate on the outskirts of the village, like ours, its beginning and its end, so that on one side there were the houses and on the other, if not exactly the desert, the jungle, the steppes, at least their approaches and their borders—the remains of a fire, trampled soil, broken branches which a life determined to defend itself against men was already scattering, leveling, rotting—and my father would tell of the old music, the old noises to which he would go and listen every day on his own estate—the whistling of the scythes, the sound of the plowshares striking an obstacle, the exclamations which are not drowned by any machine, the gruff friendship of man for horse—and would tell of the outlying villages skirted by roads whose ruts the local people know by heart, and the trees, the flowers, a sky the sanctuary only of the birds, of real flesh and feather, and I remember my father's delight when his correspondents sent him the drawings he asked for, his anger if he received photographs and I can see him bent over those sketches in which he placed in imagination rivers and mountains, describing them far better, it seemed to me, than the pencil. No, I found nothing, I lost my way among official papers,