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In Sunlight, in a Beautiful Garden

A NOVEL

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Author of *The Book of Mercy*



IN SUNLIGHT,
IN A
BEAUTIFUL GARDEN

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For Kate and Peter

And in memory of those who died in 1889 in Johnstown

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction, but characters appear in it who actually lived through and participated in the historical events described in these pages. I have made every effort to represent the outward particulars of their lives with accuracy, but I have also taken a novelist's liberties in attributing thoughts and feelings to them, and in elaborating on incidents that are only touched upon in the biographical and historical works which are available.

I made use of a number of sources in the writing of this book. Chief among them was David McCullough's *The Johnstown Flood*. Other works which were essential include *History of the Johnstown Flood* by Willis Fletcher Johnson, *Through the Johnstown Flood* by the Reverend David J. Beale, *Johnstown the Day the Dam Broke* by Richard O'Connor, *The Life of Andrew Carnegie* by Burton J. Hendrick, *Andrew Carnegie* by Joseph Frazier Wall, *Mellon's Millions* by Harvey O'Connor, *Henry Clay Frick, The Man* by George Harvey, *Dickens* by Peter Ackroyd, *A Gift Imprisoned: The Poetic Life of Matthew Arnold* by Ian Hamilton, *The Mind of the South* by W. J. Cash, *The Insect World of J. Henri Fabre*, translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos, and *Tableaux vivants, Fantaisies photographiques victoriennees* (1840-1880), Reunion des Musees Nationaux. The remarkable documentary about the Johnstown flood by Charles Guggenheim gave me a haunting sense of life both in Johnstown and at the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club.

I'm very grateful for help received from the staffs of the New York Public Library, the Johnstown Public Library, and the library at the University of Texas, and I'm indebted as well to staff members of the Johnstown Flood Museum and the museum and park which are located at the site of the dam.

“I have been watching you; you were there, unconcerned perhaps, but with the strange distraught air of someone forever expecting a great misfortune, in sunlight, in a beautiful garden.”

—Arkel to Mélisande,

MAURICE MAETERLINCK, *Pelléas and Mélisande*

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PROLOGUE

To understand the geography was to understand the place. Three points on a Pennsylvania map connected to create a scalene triangle, an intricate and unequal geometry. From Pittsburgh it was ninety miles east to Johnstown; from Johnstown, fifteen miles northeast into the Allegheny Mountain Range to the little town of South Fork; then another few miles to the earth dam, the enormous lake contained by it, and the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, whose buildings flanked the lake's far shore. The South Fork depot was on the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad, making access to it from Pittsburgh simple and direct, a manageable two-hour train ride through the scenic countryside. The speed and ease of the trip and the comfort of the Pullman cars allowed the wealthy members of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club to take little notice of life in the varied mountain towns and cities through which they traveled on their summer sojourns. The club's need for chambermaids and stable boys and wait staff brought some of the locals into the range of the club members' vision, so it was understood that townspeople existed, and understood as well that strict rules about access to club property would have to be established, precautions taken. For the sake of privacy, fences were constructed, NO TRESPASSING signs

were posted, and fish screens were built across the dam's spillway to ensure that none of the club fish found their way over the top and down into mountain streams, and onto the fishing hooks and into the mouths of strangers. Shots were fired more than once at poachers, fishermen, or hunters who chose to ignore the signs, creating from the outset anger and tension in the minds of the valley citizenry.

Mythologies developed in Johnstown and its neighboring boroughs about life at the club. It was said that the members dressed in evening wear at dinner; that some of the young girls, daughters of members, were engaged to European noblemen; that the lake was so well stocked the fish leaped out of it, into the waiting nets of clubmen; that repairs to the old dam which the club had made were woefully inadequate, that it could fail at any time. Parents warned their children about the dam, and newspapers ran speculating editorials, especially in the springtime, when rain and mountain runoff caused valley streams to swell and overflow into the Johnstown streets and, it was supposed, also caused the level of water in the lake to rise to a dangerously high level.

Daniel J. Morrell, Johnstown patriarch, Quaker, head of the Cambria Iron Company, had been concerned enough to send his chief engineer as consultant to the contractor in charge of the dam's initial, hasty repairs. The details of that consultation were not made public, but the very idea of it, of Mr. Morrell intervening, reassured the populace enough that their anxiety about the soundness of the dam was somewhat assuaged, and the very real and present worries about families, work, untimely deaths, and plaguing illnesses elbowed aside the vague and unspecific fear about the dam and lake. An engineer had been sent, Mr. Morrell had spoken for them. Except in springtime, the club and lake were rarely thought about, and when they were, the thinking took the shape of fairy tale and legend. They have sailboats, someone said, and as unbelievable as that seemed high in the Allegheny Mountains, no one doubted it.

As to mythologies among the club members about their mountain neighbors, there were none. Mythologies require curiosity and interest, and the members felt neither. Their train trip to South Fork from Pittsburgh was direct, the landscape beautiful. The presence of the other did not impinge on them. At the lake they led an unencumbered, peaceful life. A summer idyll. The life they felt they'd earned.

The streets of Johnstown proper were laid on a grid, as if its founding fathers had a sense that order was essential, that the gods smiled on any enterprise that had

precision at its core. Main, Washington, Lincoln, Vine ran east to west. The north-to-south streets included Walnut, Union, Franklin, Park. So touchingly American, those names, so infused with a sense of home. Only Stony Creek Street had a curve and sway to it as it coursed around the southern edge of town, shadowing the river whose name it bore, street and stream both winding toward the point where the Little Conemaugh River, which bordered Johnstown on the north, joined the Stony Creek and a newer, faster, deeper river, the Conemaugh, formed. Just downstream from this juncture was a great stone railroad bridge, its six arches yawning like stone jaws, strung from shore to shore across the Conemaugh, looking to travelers on approaching trains like a kind of monument to all the things that had made the city prosper—commerce, locomotion, the willingness of men to quarry stone, carry it, and shape it.

By 1889, the city and its surrounding boroughs, East Conemaugh, Woodvale, Morrellville among them, had quivered into bright life and filled that level floodplain at the bottom of the valley, a valley that deepened steadily and quickly from the higher points along the Allegheny Mountains, from the reservoir and the South Fork Dam. It was fifteen miles from the earth dam to the stone railroad bridge. The elevation dropped by about 450 feet. Thus the hills that surrounded the city—Laurel Hill, Prospect Hill—were exceptionally high and rose with the suddenness of walls, so steep that to look at them was enough to make one breathless. To climb them required strong legs, sturdy shoes, and a willingness to rest, panting on a rock or leaning on a tree. So deeply sheltered and surrounded was the site that it was as if nature's true intent had been to hide the place, to keep men from it, to let the mountains block the light and the trees grow as thick and gnarled as the thorn-dense vines that inundated Sleeping Beauty's castle. Perhaps, some would say, years later, that was central to all that happened. That it was a city that was never meant to be.

MEMORIAL DAY, 1889

“Nature’s law is that all things change and turn, and pass away . . .”

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Book XII, Number 21

Frank Fallon lay awake after a night of dozing, waking, dozing again. A night of restlessness. A night of decisions.

Each of the two bedroom windows of his house on Vine Street was opened a crack, just enough to let in the first spring air. May nights in the mountains. Air with a freshness to it. As if, finally, it really was going to bring a change of seasons. As if it might bring rain.

Frank’s hands were clasped behind his head, his eyes long grown accustomed to the silver-blue darkness. Eight years in this house, he knew it well: the way the floorboard creaked on the third stair, the nighttime sound of brick-and-plaster sighing and settling into itself. There was a porch and parlor, three good-sized bedrooms, a bay window in the dining room. A sycamore tree stood grandly in the back yard, bringing welcome shade in the summer. Wayward branches touched the house possessively. Downstairs, Frank knew, the pies Julia made at midnight sat on the kitchen table, and fat lemons filled a glass bowl, waiting to be squeezed. The iron skillet had already been placed on the stovetop, and on its seasoned surface chicken would be fried as soon as dawn broke, so it had time

to cool before the parade and picnic. It seemed an odd thing to him, the idea of picnicking at the cemetery, an old rough blanket spread across the graves.

"But that's exactly the point," Julia always reminded him. Memorial Day, she said. A day for being with them, for remembering the dead.

As if anything about Frank's life allowed him to forget.

From downstairs he heard the sound of the piano. Julia, restless too, trying to ease herself, to pass the night by playing. It was one of the first things he had given her, four years after they were married. He knew that she had had one as a girl in Illinois, a rosewood Chickering, a stylish square piano with intricately carved legs and scrolled lyres. So for four years he'd saved money in a sock. Three days a week he gave up his stop at California Tom's on Market Street, gave up the shot of whiskey that cut so cleanly through the phlegm and grit that always clogged his throat at the end of his shift. For four years, three days a week, he gave up the quick camaraderie with friends, the talk that was impossible on the mill floor, where your very life depended on concentration, focus, where the screech of the Bessemer blow, the wild vibration of machinery drowned out every other sound. Finally, \$137 accumulated in the sock. In 1869 it had felt like a small fortune.

The piano was a Fischer upright, used, old already when he bought it. The ivory of the keys had aged to a linen yellow, and spidery cracks marred most of them, as if a small, light-footed bird had left its footprints as it practiced avian scales. But what they found was that the instrument's age, its years of use, had given it an organic, mellow tone. John Schrader, who sold furniture on Clinton Street, came once a year with his pitch pipe and his small felt sack of tools to keep it tuned. The sound of it, and the image that came to Frank's mind as he lay abed and listened—of Julia sitting on the round stool, leaning earnestly into the keys, eyes closed to better feel the melody—still had a power over him. After all this time. After everything that had happened.

Frank Fallon was fifty-one years old. And he planned to march, as he did every year, with the Grand Army Veterans. His uniform from the war was folded on a chair beside the bed. The 113th Pennsylvania. He'd retrieved it from the attic trunk the night before, and when he'd taken the jacket by its shoulders and let the careful folds fall from it, he'd thought he could smell Virginia mud on it. Still. Twenty-six years later. There was a tear in the threadbare right pant leg where a Rebel shell had grazed him.

They would begin gathering for the parade at noon. Stores would be closed today, school canceled. Even the iron works was shut down. It cost a lot to let those furnaces sit idle, a rarely heard-of thing.

He did not think much about the war, except on mornings like this when some ritual holiday required it. It had been foggy at Fredericksburg the night before the battle. The picket lines of the Union troops and the Confederates were so close to one another that conversations could be held between sentinels standing guard. It had snowed throughout December, and Frank remembered how cold his ears were, how he kept rubbing at them with his worn wool gloves as he tried to ward off numbness; how he feared the cold, the dimming of cognition and sensation that came with it. At first he thought that the freezing temperature and exhaustion were going to his head, that he was hearing things, when someone with a harmonica started playing "Dixie."

They'd been camped for days, waiting for pontoon bridges to arrive, so they could be placed across the Rappahannock. Around the campfires loose talk flowed easily, full of bravado. Talk about how quickly Fredericksburg would be taken, bets placed on how many weeks would pass before the war ended. Youth and the rightness of their cause had stirred in Frank and in all his Pennsylvania regiment some ennobled sense that God was on their side, a belief that sound planning and foresight had been part of the strategy that had brought them to this place.

As the Union troops moved toward Fredericksburg in mid-December, the townspeople moved out; several thousand Virginians trudged, with the few belongings they had rushed to gather—plucked chickens, bags of flour, Bibles—past the enemy marching to displace them. A child had broken rank that day and run from his mother's side to hurl himself at Frank. Yankee filth, his mother screamed.

Behind his closed eyes, in his dark bedroom, Frank imagined flags flying from every house and shop in Johnstown in the late morning. The swoop and drape of buntings hung, the flowers spilling from second-story windows all along the parade route. The columbines and buttercups and piney buds shaped into wreaths by the Women's Relief Corps to be placed on Union soldiers' graves. The Odd Fellows would march this year, as they always did, along with the Hornerstown Drum Corps and the Hussar Band in gold and scarlet. Train after train would bring visitors from Altoona and Somerset with baskets full of flowers. Bonnets would protect pale faces

from the sun. He imagined Grace McIntyre among the celebrants, without a hat's protection because she tended not to like the fussiness of hats, or any of the strict and arbitrary demands of women's fashion. He imagined how she'd look—her thin hand arched across her forehead, deflecting the sun's rays. He would have to check himself to keep from going to her.

The parade would begin on Main Street, as it did every year, then continue past Mr. Morrell's house, the Presbyterian church, and Central Park, its cinder paths and benches packed with people. The arched necks of the four stone swans that formed the center fountain of the park would be encircled with apple-blossom garlands. Then the parade would turn south at Bedford and press on toward the Sandy Vale Cemetery to pay tribute to the dead. Heads would be bent and prayers said. Guns would be fired by Union veterans. The shots would echo eerily from hill to hill, as if a distant war were still being waged.

At Fredericksburg, Frank had plugged his fingers in his ears when the Union cannons fired. Two hundred of them, aimed at that unlikely small Virginia town. When he raised his head that day, after the firing ended, all he could see was smoke, as if the world he knew had vanished and smoke had arrived to take its place. His eyes teared and he pressed his kerchief in the wet snow, then held it to his mouth to ease the sting and cut the ashy taste.

A squat stone wall where Lee had massed his artillery to cover all approaches stood at Marye's Heights, at the bottom of a sloped plain. When orders were issued, line after line of Union soldiers advanced across the field, falling in waves, until the snow mixed with grass and mud and became a bloody porridge, black with bodies. Waiting for his turn to go, Frank felt the muck suck at his boots. "Lead with your shoulder," Bill Jones had warned. "It makes for a narrower target. You'll take it in the shoulder instead of the chest." Frank had nodded thanks, the chill of the day drained out of him by then, replaced by a sick, hot fear. The smoke had cleared enough for him to see bayonets flash in the distance, behind the wall, what looked like thousands of them, the wall itself appearing to rise out of the smoke as if produced by the artifice of some magician. We're going to die like dogs charging that wall with all those men and muskets massed behind it, he thought. He bit his lip so hard it bled.

There was a time when Frank would have gotten out of bed, gone down the stairs, Julia's music growing more distinct the closer he got to it.

He would have moved behind her, gathered her loose hair from around her shoulders, arranged it neatly, with his big hands, down her back.

Frank heard the squeak of the bedroom door just next to his, the sound of footsteps. "Daniel?" he called out.

The footsteps halted, then changed direction. The door to the bedroom opened. Music, hall light entered as his son did.

"Yes. It's me."

"It's early yet. A day off like this. You should be sleeping."

Daniel shrugged. "And you, too."

Frank swung his legs out from beneath the covers. Sat on the edge of the bed, watching Daniel, lit by the lamp he held, his long shadow wavering at the door frame. Shirtless. Pants riding loosely on his hips. Frank noticed how broad those shoulders had become, the mass and sinew of the muscles in his upper arms.

"Will you march with me today?" Frank asked. "With the Sons of the Grand Army Veterans?"

"Sure I will. I always do. But I don't think I'll go on to the picnic."

"Have you plans, then?"

Daniel hesitated. "Yes, you could say that. I have plans."

Hands on his knees, Frank brought himself to his feet. The moon shone a patch of light on the cool plank floor.

"I was going to miss the picnic, too, but then thought better of it," he said.

Daniel, who'd seemed about to turn and descend the stairs, took a step into the room.

"I'm glad you did. She'd be disappointed," he said.

"She'll be disappointed either way," Frank countered. "I..." He wanted to tell Daniel something. "I just thought that this year I might want to do things differently." He wished he could say something that would make Daniel understand.

"What is it, Da?" Daniel took another step into the room. He had Frank's curly hair, a sound of worry in his voice. "If it's about the marching, you know I won't miss that. I'll march with you."

He was close enough then for Frank to move toward him, to reach his arm around his shoulder. Frank admired that about himself. The easy way he had of loving. The boy was twenty-three years old, and Frank never tired of touching him.

His only son. He wondered what the day was going to bring. Sorrow, he supposed. Betrayal. He hoped that when it was done, Daniel would find some way to forgive him.

"Yes," he said. "I know you'll march with me."

At Fredericksburg, Frank had heard a hiss and then a fleshy rip before he knew that he had been hit, before the pain seared through his brain, threatening to blind him. Which would have been a better thing, he thought later as he lay through the long night in a field of dead men, taking what warmth their stiffening bodies had to offer, hearing the moans of the wounded as they cried out for their mothers or their wives or water. He remembered how quickly all that blood had spread its color through the mud. The smell of it.

His knee was shattered. But he lived to go on fighting. At Chancellorsville he lost part of an ear and was finally sent home, to the Pennsylvania mountains, to make steel again.

Some would say that it was awful work. That the pay was poor and every day was a danger, but it was, God help him, the world of making, and because of what Frank did, buildings were built, rail was laid, and a son of his could go to a university in Philadelphia. Working night and day, four thousand men had turned a little mountain town into a small metropolis. He defied anyone to tell him he should not be proud of it. He was fifty-one years old, a foreman, and still, after twenty-nine years at it, he and his men dressed for payday. They wore their Sunday clothes on Saturday. Clean shirts, buttoned jackets, starched collars. They'd grown used to 120-degree temperatures on the steel mill floor, used to sweat, but they never grew used to the way those collars grooved their necks. They wore them anyway. And bowler hats, their hair slicked back and clean. As a sign of respect for who they were and what they did. When Daniel goaded him as he sometimes did, about the money and the hours and what he called the exploitation, Frank stopped him, raised his hand against all criticism. Daniel meant well, Frank knew. He'd been radicalized by his time away and only wanted change. But this was his work and Frank would not let his son speak against it. He would not be made ashamed.

Sometimes Frank hated what he did. But the truth was, it was more than he ever thought he'd be. And there was a strange seductive power to it. Those giant furnaces. That liquid iron flowing into molds, which held a