EXCERPTS

GARDENING without GLOVES

Stories

Roger Ladd Memmott

A Gemstone Book

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COVER ART
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Often, we eat what we plant; often, we don't.

—from *Gardening without Gloves*

"No art comes from the conscious mind."

—David Mamet

Minutemen

"KIDS REBEL AGAINST all the wrong things," said Joe. He was eating breakfast for lunch.

"You got it," said Al. He eyed the waitress and screwed the lid off the salt, his mouth like a wound.

"Careful," said Joe.

They were a couple of old guys sitting in an empty café remembering a buddy who died in the war.

Pittons

I

MRS. WILSON WAS clearing away the breakfast dishes when she heard Peter's voice beyond the screen. It was not intelligible at first and she wondered at herself, listening like this. For a moment she stood transfixed, her breath caught at the top of her lungs, a plate of half-eaten scrambled eggs in one hand and a cup of cocoa, cold and scummed, in the other. Then—breathing lightly, lighter than breath itself—she heard him say in his grown-up voice, distinctly, the name she'd thought she heard.

"Peter?" She let the dishes clatter dangerously in the sink and hurried to the door. "Peter?"

In the middle of the patio the child hunkered above a contraption of belligerent angles and bewildering curves: wood scraps, sawed and nailed into a seemingly indiscriminate shape that taxed even Mrs. Wilson's imaginative skill. He was intent on fastening a new blade of wood to a rudderlike extension near the tail of the thing.

She placed the flat of her hand against the lattice and started to push—caught herself, let the screen fall back: *flies.* "Peter?"

She watched him beyond the screen. “Did Mommy hear you call?”

He twisted the wire around the blade and wound the strands in and out, like thin periwinkle shells glistening in the sun—up and over the rudder—then wrapped the surplus around some sort of switchthing. He rocked on the balls of his feet, to and fro.

“Peter, *please!”*

He turned then, his round beatific face slightly pink from too much sun, his dark, narrowed eyes searching through the intense light toward the screen. Around him sunlight shot and wavered, assaulting the yard.

“See? The wing is here—like this. Pittons strapped up the flap.”

“You’ve worked so hard on that thing.”

“It’s very much like a rocket Pittons says.”

He turned abruptly, toward the shed, and she wondered if she too hadn’t heard his name resounding softly near the base of her skull. Like tinsel, the tips of his hair shone in the sun. He stood up, stooped. “Pittons says to show you—see?” He gripped some sort of handle, shoved it forward, and the rudder actually moved. “I sit here. Like this.” His face was smooth and empty but his eyes were blue and sad and fixed to the screen. He strapped himself in. “Pittons sits up front.”

Either sunlight was playing tricks on her—or the wing generated a faint iridescent glow. Shadows strayed into the yard—clouds—and with them an odd silence pinching away sound. She wondered for a moment if he wasn’t addressing her, his words irretrievable in the suddenly flat light. He had worked so hard on the thing and, for some reason she failed to understand, it meant so much to him. She felt as if he had somehow been informed of priorities beyond her grasp yet easily within his, and the thought raised goose flesh on her upper arms as when she had once been startled by a spot of blood on fresh

linen sheets. She closed her eyes momentarily, the squint, the sorrow, the tedium a fairy's wings fluttering in her head...the beat of her heart.

When she opened her eyes, light again was intense (like those long fumbling nights after Mama was asleep and she would close her eyes to see, whimpering softly and listening to the hush of her name in the dark, the light so cruel and divine in the shut of her eyes, and there in her legs and stomach and head), and how it confused her, the way it played around Peter and grew thick at the edge of that...*thing*. She watched him kneeling beside the cockpit, driving a very large nail into the seat, and the repeated hammerstrokes drove it close to her heart. She watched him quietly for some time, the fingertips of one hand just touching the screen, and standing there—still in her housecoat and the old flimsy slippers the dog had chewed—she felt something go out of her profound as the affliction of God; yet *out* of her, and struggling to contain herself swallowed three or four times in a row.

II

IT HAD BEEN FUNNY at first, and like his father she had encouraged him.

"Pittons, Dear? I don't know any little boy named Pittons. Climb in now. Does he have a first—another—name?"

"Just Pittons. Horton Pittons."

"Horton Pittons?"

"Just...Horton Pittons."

He turned on his stomach, exhaling, his face toward the wall, breathing deeply almost before she had a chance to go on, the

thin blades of his shoulders like the sprouting of wings beneath her hand.

Often, moving through the house with a dust cloth or stirring gravy with the big wooden spoon—lacing and tying his shoes—she wondered whose child this was. In affection she knew: she thought she knew. It was the little things. And the unreasonable fear that so often accompanied them? Or came to her when she was least aware, so that sometimes she found herself unable even to fill a glass of water or sweep the floor, fearing she might collapse all at once in a trembling heap? Just his sharing with her one afternoon *Miracles of the Universe,* a book of photographs and diagrams he had recently taken an interest in, filled her with dread. There were pictures of hurricanes, and tornadoes, and ice storms, and one of bath water swirling down a drain. There was a picture of a supernova exploding light years away, and right next to it one of the flash from a hydrogen bomb. There were diagrams of the smallest structures in the universe, made up of happy faces labeled "molecules" and "atoms" and "quarks," and an illustration of how they related to the planetary systems and to galaxies swirling in space. A series of paneled illustrations showed how, when heated, Mr. Water Molecule bumped up against his neighbors and how, in turn, they jockeyed against others and so on in a chain reaction until a whole pot of water was angry with heat. The reverberations of the heavens and of the earth, the scope of the earth and the infinities of sky, seemed to inflict a surprised awe on him. He became for her the very diagram on page 128 that showed how ordinary, thoughtless sunlight could be split by a prism to show the whole rainbow—a child, simply, whose infant perceptions constantly amazed her.

Once—oh, it struck her so to remember the time—he had brought her a rose, and it became, as though by design, the confection of a sweetness in the air that robbed her of her senses and worried her soul. It was a revelation, as if she had never

known that roses smell sweet—yet even George, on a rare occasion or two, had brought her bunches of them (in the hospital when Peter was born, wrapped with a bit of fern in a cone of green waxed paper).

She could not help remembering how, as he held it toward her cupped in his hands, the inside of each petal was like velvet while the outside was smooth, though rigid with veins that divided and mapped like a system of arteries. A single exterior petal had been damaged, singed and torn at the edge, and when she reached down to feel it, it came away in her hand, so weak and soft and curling back different from the others, so separate and alone. She held it, fingering the sad, velvety flesh. She understood why it looked as it did, but her own sense of loss overwhelmed her and now, as she exchanged the petal for the rose, its smell remained a secret, an extra revelation that spoke more to the heart than the head. A delinquent thorn at the stem of it nicked her, and it pained her to think how she had kissed the rose and kept it sacred in the window above the sink. But time, she knew—and this salved most—time would put an end to it: her suffering, her grief, her ineffable guilt. For time was a factor she couldn't discount, found herself even relying upon—ambivalent toward the elusive nature of each intervening day, ambivalent toward the rose on her sill. When it began to wither, she pressed it first in the large unabridged Webster's and then in the King James Version of II Peter where it was less likely to be disturbed.

III

AFTER CLEARING AWAY and rinsing the breakfast dishes, she closed the door of the washer and adjusted the dial. For a minute

or two she listened to the sudsing and churning sounds and wondered what she might fix him for lunch. She could no longer hear his hammering, nor his voice, above the racket of the machine.

Lunch.

Her clothes reeked of bacon-smells now. And it was so hot! Her flesh pricked and boiled with heat. She hurried to the bathroom, disrobed, and beneath a cool shower scrubbed herself, her legs and thighs, her loins and chest and arms, until her skin was nearly raw. When she had dried herself she stood in front of the full-length mirror and looked at her body. Although her breasts were beginning to sag, her stomach was good, her hips, her thighs.

In then, deciding against the bra, she reached with both hands again to the middle of her spine and unfastened the hooks. She slipped the straps from her shoulders the bedroom she slipped on fresh underthings—and admired in the bureau mirror the shape of her breasts. She sniffed at herself for bacon-smells, cocoa and eggs—where was it? She sprayed deodorant beneath her arms, scented her breasts with Chanel. She went again to the bathroom where she worked carefully on her hair, spraying it again and again with Adorn, penciled her eyebrows, and made-up her lips. Then, applying mascara in the cabinet mirror, leaning toward herself above the sink, she caught, thought she caught, catching her breath, the fleeting image of someone—a face—in the just-raised window reflected behind.

"George!"

She whirled, crossing her arms before her, each breast heavy as stone, surprised more by her own outburst than by the possibility of someone spying on her; that, and the absurd notion of her husband to the rescue. Of course, it should have occurred to her that she was being watched—ever since he started building that...*thing!* "All right," she said. *"You!"* And she threw

wide her arms, about fed up with such nonsense, her own unreachable guilt. “See! Don’t you think I love my boy? See!” She shrugged her arms downward, emphatically, so that her breasts swung with it. “What do you want?” She knew, of course. She stepped to the window and heaved it shut.

By then the walls were going round and round, and she leaned against the sink for support. In time she made her way down the hall and into the bedroom, seating herself carefully, then lying supine, on the bed. The ceiling, the room itself, revolved—and she closed her eyes tight. How was it that such darkness seemed to intensify the heat? Silence possessed her, and a faint odor of bacon drew her toward the past where she saw herself as a young girl wiping sweat from her face with her wrist—or was it the rain?

She opened her eyes and lay there wide awake in the room at the top of the stairs, listening to the rain. Bacon-smells floated up to her from the kitchen below and voices, unintelligible above the sound of the rain, roamed in her ears. A quick, guilty doubt shot through her. She threw the covers away from her legs and sat up. Her nightgown was sticking to her skin. Something inside her felt small and tight. She threw her head back, feeling its weight as the sweat popped out on her face and began to roll down her neck and breasts. She wanted to understand something, but the heat confused her, the rain. She tried to connect herself to the voices below.

“I am sixteen,” she said out loud.

There was a sound of footfall on the stairs, uncommonly light, rising slowly toward her door, and the solemnity of rain fell like a weight on her heart.

“Daddy?”

The footsteps paused beyond the door, shifted, and then the door swung inward; but she could not see his face for the light of

the window at the far end of the hall. He stood like a block of chiseled stone, black almost, against the light.

"Daddy?" Her own voice startled her, and she attempted to rise.

He was coming toward her now, away from the light, his features delineating step by slowing step. And then he was beside her, her shoulders trembling beneath his powerful hands. "O, Daddy," she said. He held her like that for a long time, her face nuzzling the slightly acrid odor of deodorant and starch in his freshly laundered shirt. And then she felt his hands wander down and across her back, down to her hips, as they had so many times before. They were big and powerful hands, and his voice was soft and firm in every touch, something to lose herself in.

"Daddy?" She lifted her face, the perspiration, tears, and rain all mixed and stinging her eyes.

He touched a finger to her lip. And didn't he smooth back her hair and touch her in a way that reaffirmed his tone? She tried to see him through the blur of it and he touched a finger to her lip and brushed back her hair and brushed his thumbs beneath her eyes and held her there and assured her that time had a way of sorting things out and told her how much he loved her. "You know that, at least, how much a Daddy loves his girl." And then he said, with gravel in his throat, something about seeing the doctor, not him but her, "this afternoon, the one I told you about, and he'll take care of it, make everything right, and we won't let it happen again." Didn't he smooth back her hair and touch her in that precious way? "Not a word, now. Your mama's got breakfast on; so come now, my sweet." As he spoke, he leaned his face into hers and hushed his wearisome voice, "while there's still strength in my bones."

He moved back then, away from that bludgeon, away from all possible trace of abuse, for it was the cruelest blow of all,

perfectly timed—and though she knew it was coming, she wasn't prepared, *his weakening bones.* A disease so deep in the marrow not even radiation or chemo could cure. And most horrible thought: Would *she* pass it on?

Stupidly, she watched him moving toward the light, blotting it away, absorbing it, she thought, like sponge, the lingering taste of his breath in her mouth—and then she was looking at the door.

"Daddy?" She could barely hear her voice above the sound of the rain. She waited, listening. "Daddy?" She lay back on the bed, her arms and legs extended on the rumpled sheet, and wiped her face and mouth with the back of her hand. Something felt very small and tight inside of her. She was rigid with longing and the rain would not stop.

"Daddy? I hate you," she said.

She lay there, feverish with anxiety, throbbing with unused energy, and saturated in mysterious guilt, wondering how she might take revenge on her own miserable heart and the dying.

"George?"

Sleep lay heavily upon her and she turned her face to the window, away from her thoughts. A scattering of sparrows, like large burnished grains, pecked for food near the garden, and the sky was a deep, immense blue.

"What time is it?"

There was a stirring in her ears, a beating as if the tympanum would burst. She closed her eyes so tightly she saw lightning and waves of purple and red.

The next time was less than a year after her father promised it wouldn't happen again, a week after his death, in the backseat of the quarterback's car, with only her skirt huddled above her hips. *Don't,* she had said. *Please, don't.* It was somehow the way she said it, and he fumbled for a moment before she received him in defiance, abject—her own desperation altogether

unnecessary—his mouth upon her ears, her hair, her eyes, her neck, her suddenly impatient breasts.

"What time is it, George?"

"You've been asleep," he said. "Why aren't you dressed?"

"I've got to get Peter some lunch." She tried to get up.

"Lunch? I'm home from work and you're going to get lunch? Where you been today? The moon?"

He was standing in front of the closet, unknotting his tie.

"What time is it? Have I been asleep?"

"You're a fast one," he said.

"I've been dreaming."

"Sure you have. Supper's a dream." Then, turning from the tie rack inside the closet, he said, "You just lie there. Maybe tomorrow night we can eat."

"I'm awake," she said, threatening him with the tone, at the same time grateful for the passing of time. "I'll slip something on and rustle up dinner right now."

"You better believe it," he said. "It's almost six."

But she lay there watching him change; there was no desire in him, she knew. She remembered how once she had blushed for him, cast down her eyes. "Love," she said to herself.

"What?"

"Don't you want me? George?"

"What's got into you? I want something to eat."

She sat up then, running her hands through her hair, crusty with spray. "You're getting old, George." But he was already gone, and she could hear him in the kitchen, opening and closing cupboard doors and cursing beneath his breath.

"Peter!"

She dressed quickly then, stabbing her feet into the chewed and ragged slippers and throwing the sleeves of the housecoat over her arms. Before she made it to the kitchen, she heard the screen door to the patio open and slam.

"See, it's almost finished, Dad. A moonship, see? Look at this."

"I see. I also see where the concrete's chipped from your misplaced hammerblows and chiseling the wood."

"—like a rocket," he said.

"Like a mess, and if you don't clean it up first thing in the morning, I'll know the reason why. Look at that, for hell's sake!"

She stood in the kitchen, listening, surprised that it meant so little to her now. After all, what could she do but hope for the best?

It surprised her even less—the idea that something was terribly wrong—when, at supper, George turned on him for no discernible cause. "Do you want your bones to grow?"

His eyebrows drooped and almost touched.

She rasped back in her chair. "I'll get the chocolate."

"No. He'll drink it straight—or sit here until he does."

She was tining a bite of meat when the glimpse of an extended arm yanked her face around, and she saw his glass go spinning through air. When it struck the floor it did not break. Still spinning, it spewed milk over the newly waxed linoleum until it struck the wall. That is when it broke. Instinctively, his father lunged from his chair in a futile attempt to catch the glass and stepped in the milk. His feet went from under him, and before he could reclaim himself, he sat down in it—hard.

"By gawd!" He was already undoing his belt.

"George!"

"Side with him then. I'll see to you in a minute. C'mon you little bugger!" He was up now and had Peter by the wrist, threatening him with the unloosened belt.

"Pittons did it!" the child shrieked.

"Oh-ho! Well, there's one in this for Pittons."

She hurried after them, down the darkened hallway and into Peter's room.

"Pull down your pants and get onto the bed." He looked at her.

"George, you're crazy! What're you doing to the child! What's got into you? It was an accident."

But the strap smacked down. Again. He looked at her. Her flesh went prickly and something beneath it so angry and filled with astonishment and desire she thought she would explode into a universe of stars.

"Hit him," she said. "George, stop! Hit him again."

Peter was howling.

"George! George!"

"And one for Pittons!" George said. He started to put his belt on again, backing her through the door.

"Please! *Not now!*"

He let go of her. Whether for fear of the tone in her voice, sudden shame, or because his rage had achieved satisfaction, he let go of her, and she rushed to help the sobbing child pull up his pants. "My poor baby! My baby! What did Daddy do to you! Oh, my baby!" She wept, embraced him, and tried pathetically to explain.

IV

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, she awoke to her flesh gathering about her like flesh on the bones of the redeemed. She recalled how George had taken her in the night, his powerful hands so sure and abrupt, whispering such naughty and pleasurable things, but it was the remnant of guilt more than any desire that made her blush like a school girl. Outside she heard the lawnmower going, and the bedroom was scented with newly mown grass. A light breeze from the open window brushed past the curtains and

caused them to sway. Then, while she was lying there, the lawnmower sputtered and stopped. There was a faint odor of gasoline on the breeze and a brief crescendoing, like the sound of a jet on takeoff, the scream of turbines diminishing against the sun. She waited for the mower to start up again, but instead she heard the car door slam, the engine grind and roar, and the tires ticking fast past the window and down the drive.

Peter will be starved, she thought, scooting out of bed and throwing on her robe. She hurried down the hall, tying the sash, and then something compelled her to continue through the kitchen, the linoleum cool beneath the bare soles of her feet, and go quickly to the patio door. The door stood open, and she placed her hand against the screen, started to push, then let the screen fall back: *flies.*

Dust—or a fine smoky haze—hung in the air above the patio, and the concrete appeared to have been swept. She glanced around for the contraption, instead saw in its place the small, dark, shadowlike patch, the concrete seemingly charred. Blood came rushing hard and hot to the top of her head as though the veins in her temples might burst. And there—in the garden—weren't the pink and yellow blossoms, even the coarse green leaves—and where the patio ended abruptly, the grass—singed brown round the edges? She gathered the robe closer about her, a hand drawing closed the lapels high against her throat, and wondered with a dim understanding why George had chased off in such a sweat. To get gas for the mower? *Odd, though, taking the child like that.* She might have checked the garage to see if the gasoline can was there—or, summoning courage, glanced boldly toward the sun.

"Peter?"

In the living room she dialed Bobby Morgan's number. But, no, Bobby and his father had gone fishing and wouldn't be back until late afternoon. She rushed to the kitchen where she opened

cupboards and rattled the pans. She turned the water on then off, switched on the stove. From the refrigerator she took a side of bacon, the milk, and three or four eggs. She gathered utensils from the drawer, from the cupboard platters and bowls. She opened the breadbox and took out the bread. The oven was hot on her face, her hand, as she dropped several slices of bread on the shelf. She was pouring juice over the sink, rubbing her toes against the seam between squares of linoleum on the floor, when she heard the car drive up. The tires made a sticky sounding roll over the pavement. She stopped with her hand on the pitcher of juice and listened quietly. She heard the car door slam, waited. She heard him on the patio, coming toward the screen.

"Peter?"

She braced herself, prepared for the worst.

Lucky Stars

HE DID NOT DRINK, he did not smoke, he made love to only his wife; on weekends he took his children to the zoo.

"Father, father," his son pronounced.

When the house fell to the ground, his wife turned to the stars and smiled in a curious way, as though they'd somehow arrived where no one else could go.