For Маман



A garden says more than anything about a house and its inhabitants. It embodies a relationship between humans and the world surrounding them. A relationship built on trust and care, ensuring through seemingly pointless, repetitious labor a serene and beautiful little piece of nature around the house. I am a gardener and I know that. I love gardens because I respect the people living in the house. I say without haughtiness that a gardener often knows more about the inhabitants of a house than anyone else, including themselves. I rake the gravel, and with the help of the rake I can draw lines straight through the lives of my masters. I prune the bushes and the trees and I can cut through the fate of others. When planting bamboo or moss I do what few can do: I alter the lives of those hearing the sound of bamboo leaves, or those touching the sweet and sad softness of the moss. I take no pride in what I can do. This knowledge was not given to me by a priest or any higher power. Trees don't talk. Their silence is instructing those who take the time to listen.

Gardens are the bearer of happiness. And this story is about a garden, the people surrounding it, and the happiness they all long for.

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I became a gardener because a friend of my father, the bow-maker Suzuki, built a garden for himself. He asked the advice of a professional gardener and realized that the creation of a garden is the most complex of all crafts. The goal of making a bow is to produce a good bow, one that carries the arrow far and is very precise. No matter what it hits, it first has to fly away. Although he never admitted it, it became clear to me later, when I worked in his garden, that he was happy not to have a son and thus not to be able to pass on his craft. He detached himself from his venerable profession, which had been in his family for at least four hundred years, exactly as the finest arrows detach themselves from the string of the bows he built, bows so strong only a fully grown man can bend them.

Suzuki had no son, but he liked my father and me enough to share the experience he had had with this gardener. Takahashi-san, the gardener, was a small man with a strange look in his eyes. His smile never vanished, but it never fully developed either; it was a half-smile I learned to read like the poems in my schoolbook. He became my first true teacher, and the only one to teach me about trees and stones and how to grow bushes.

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To be Takahashi-san's pupil was a rewarding experience. He was a patient man, but not in the way someone would expect. It wasn't the patience of a man who gets his sense of calm through a constant interaction with nature. People misunderstand this. They think gardeners are well-tempered, soft-spoken individuals with a sort of acquired nobility. This is not true. Most gardeners are very regular in their temper, and this can cause problems as stones are a demanding material to work with, and there is never enough patience to see the trees grow. The most beautiful gardens in Kyoto are all at least three hundred years old. I will never see the garden I planted grow to be even a hundred years old. And I will never see the black pine I prune every year at the Nakamura residence reach the type of beauty it is most praised for. But I can make sure the Nakamuras learn to appreciate it. It is the people who make a garden what it is, not the vegetation or the stones. A human being watching a garden is the most important element of it precisely because he or she cannot take away or give to it anything.

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Takahashi taught me the craft of gardening just as he had learned it, and just as it had been learned before him. He made it clear that it is not a special, spiritual knowledge he seeks to transmit. "I am no priest," he used to say, and I was quite surprised to learn later that some of the earliest gardeners were just that: ishi-tate-so, or rock-setting priests. Takahashi simply had me by his side when tending the gardens he cared for. The chores were always simple, as indeed every task in the garden is simple: there is not a single thing a seven-year-old child couldn't do when it comes to maintaining a garden, even the most elaborate ones. Most of what I do is so straightforward that I don't understand why people hire anyone to do it. Raking gravel, cleaning moss, pruning azaleas–these are all simple and repetitious tasks. One must learn the movements only once, and after that the hardest part is finding the patience to do it over and over again. Luckily, most gardens are small, and they easily reward the gardener with a feeling of accomplishment.

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There is, of course, a very important element in every garden that makes the life of the gardener so special and complex. I was trained to care for plants and rocks, but my real strength is in dealing with people. In most gardens, I meet the wives, and they all tell me their worries, their little problems, and what they really wish for. Nobody in the entire city knows more about the worries and dreams of middle-aged women than I do. Their husbands I tend to meet only occasionally, usually when a major undertaking, the construction or reconstruction of a site is commissioned. This always happens before or after a wedding or a funeral, when change is best accepted. But the wives talk to me every day. And through them I know everything about their families. A gardener can become one of the most important figures in the life of a woman, especially when she has problems. I am not a friend. Friends easily make things worse. I am not part of the family, which is very important when it comes to family matters. I am just the gardener who rakes the gravel and prunes whatever needs to be pruned. And yet I can help like nobody else can. Like I did with the Nakamura family.

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I met Nakamura Kazuya after the Cherry Blossom festival. He made it clear that he would like someone to care for his garden because he had no time to do it himself, and, for the same reason, he would like the gardener to be as independent as possible. I gladly accepted his offer, since of all people I know best that anyone caring for a garden has to be self-reliant. It was a backyard garden, bigger than the usual gardens in the city, but still small enough that no other helping hand was necessary. It had three trees: a kuromatsu, or black pine, a little ume, or plum tree, and a sakura, or cherry tree. This cherry was planted seventeen years ago, the same week when Ai, their daughter, was born. It had fully blossomed when I first entered the garden: around the tree thousands and thousands of little white petals covered the ground. This flower carpet was thick around the trunk, but with the wind it reached everywhere, and even the furthest end of the garden was spotted with white blossoms. I have since then spent many days in this garden, and I have seen it in every possible weather and every possible condition. It is, however, in this state, right after the Cherry Blossom festival, that it will remain in my mind forever. The garden still remembers the white of the snow when the white of the flowers starts to cover its grounds. The mysteries of the garden are the moods it can convey: all the straightforward feelings that are impossible to bear when encountered in humans are most welcome when they present themselves through the beauties of a garden. This is a disadvantage that humans can never overcome.

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Nakamura Kazuya's daughter was a wonderful young lady. As the only child in the house she had been brought up with a lot of care, and it was clear that all the love and attention she got was not in vain. Her father was unexpectedly caring, and throughout the years she developed a relationship with him that was quite unlike any other father-daughter relationship in her neighborhood. The main difference was that Kazuya was not afraid to interact with his daughter, he would squeeze and tickle her, even well after her tenth birthday. Ai would display the sort of respect that was expected from a young lady turning towards her father, especially when they were in public. At home, however, they were quite relaxed and happy, joking and teasing each other all the time and also being relatively open about their feelings. And it all happened in the garden or, I should rather say, because of the garden. If that garden had not been there as it was, I don't think their relationship would have evolved the same way. Usually they sat on the wooden veranda that ran all around the house, at the spot closest to the cherry tree, on two simple pillows, with a shiny black metal teapot full of kukicha at their side. Kazuya liked to sit in his garden after an early dinner, and Ai soon followed him with the teapot and the teacups. They talked about what had happened during the day, and they talked a lot about past events, about memories from times they lived through, or heard about. They knew that memories have to be maintained like a garden: if not cared for they will grow with an unpredictable effect.

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Most of the time when I visited their garden it was early in the morning, and only Ai's mother was home. She was my favorite master, because she never ever made me feel unworthy. She was a petite woman, with beautiful hands and strong eyes. I could understand her well, because she was always speaking indirectly, as if not to me, and as a gardener I was used to that–rocks and trees never talk into your face. I know that she liked me too, it was clear from the way she came out to greet me in the little moss-covered front garden. In the first two months or so we spoke very little with each other. Later we developed an intricate way of communicating, and although we mostly spoke about the garden, she would still tell me a lot about herself and her family. The three trees in the garden represented the three humans in the household: Kazuya was the pine, Ai's mother the plum, and Ai the cherry. If she asked me to make sure the black pine was in good health, I knew she was concerned about her husband. And then there was the cherry–it had a very special place in this garden. Everyone in this country loves the cherry trees, and Kazuya and his wife just adored the tree they planted when their daughter was born. My toughest assignment in this garden came when I had to prune that tree. It clearly needed to be done, but anyone who touched the sakura better make sure the job was perfect, because that tree and Ai were the center of their garden and their universe. I have never since witnessed a bond so strong between humans and a tree. Trees are mysterious for people because they are animate, full of life, and often with a commanding presence and beauty, and yet, they are static, lacking movement, the common bond in the world of men and beasts. Trees don't move, only the wind moves them.

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My favorite plant is bamboo. In many gardens it cannot be used, because the character of the garden does not allow it, and even where it is used, it has to be confined to a certain area, as it grows so fast and abundantly that it can easily ruin the most delicately thought out plan. Bamboo is the most human of all plants. That is because it is the plant that moves the most. It sways with a certain grace, and a cluster of good bamboo can evoke the image of a group of dancers. I have seen bamboo actually run away from my shears.

When outside of the city I like the groves with very tall bamboo best. They are magical, because they are like tall trees, like a big forest, yet they never shed their strange feature of juvenile buoyancy. Bamboo never really grows old. It will remain in between ages, and this is never as obvious, as when walking underneath giant stems. Bamboo can mature in a year, and no other plant can do that. But it never becomes aged, like a pine or a camphor. It pertains to a different domain of time than the rest of the garden. There are other plants that develop relatively fast, like moss and some shrubs, but none of those have a vertical presence. It is a unique feature of bamboo that it has a certain height without the usual time needed to reach it. It is almost like cheating, and I am sure this is the reason why some gardeners shy away from the use of bamboo. Great care is needed to harmonize the time of growth in a garden: even a rock will change its appearance over time, and certainly everything else will too. As a gardener I have to think about the effect of time when planting something, but that in itself is not enough. I have to ensure that the time gathered and shared among the trees and stones and shrubs stay in harmony. The elements of the garden should not interfere with each other.

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The Nakamura family was famous in Kyoto for their lacquer-ware, and for their connections to the Senke school of tea ceremony. For generations they have been the only suppliers of the lacquered utensil used during the tea ceremony. Making lacquerware is the art of layering: simple materials are layered on top of each other with delicate care to produce straightforward but refined beauty. Good lacquer-ware is highly valued, just like all the crafts. Kyoto is not just a city of gardens, but even more so a city of craftsmen. The emperor himself appears to be a mere craftsman of ceremony here, a messenger of divine will.

Kazuya was the nephew of the head of the Nakamura family. His father learned the craft and passed it on to his son, but rather then producing lacquerware themselves, his part of the family was involved only in the trade. With his father's early death Kazuya became the right hand to his uncle. It was his duty to negotiate the deals with the suppliers and with the clients; he had to make sure there were always plenty of materials and plenty of orders. He did all this with great care, and with amazing effectiveness, as he had the ability to convince people to follow his suggestions without them ever noticing. When sitting alone in his garden, he would try not to think about that. The comfort of the natural world comes from its independence, from the fact that plants and trees do not react to emotions displayed by humans. If people could be as thoroughly independent from each other as a rock and a tree is, gardens would not be built.

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