

A Family Garden

(Excerpt)

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*Los Angeles, CA
2018*

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First Edition

ISBN: 9781728771595

Printed in the United States of America.

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CHAPTER 1

When I got home, I poured a shot of tequila to revive the margarita's I'd had at lunch. I sipped it as I replayed Virginia's last message. Her third one.

The machine chirped the date, *April 10, 2009*, and then Virginia's strained voice said again she'd gotten my number and email address from the college website, and that she sent me an email over three weeks ago. I'm sure she did, but I probably deleted it by mistake. I'm not exactly what they call *tech-savvy* these days. I have a cell phone, sure, not that anyone calls me on it, but at least it keeps accurate time. Satellites I guess.

I wrote her number down this time, grabbed the kitchen phone and dialed quickly before I lost my nerve again. As her phone rang on and on, I nearly hung up. Then she answered.

Her voice was shaky, and beneath it I could still detect the bristling edge of anger. It's funny how bitterness lasts through the years, a sharp razor when everything else dulls.

I apologized for not getting back to her sooner, saying I was out of town, which I'm sure she knew was a lie since the college website clearly shows school is in session. My suspicions, or fears, about why she was calling were right. Dave was dying. Lung cancer. "End-stage," she called it.

“I’m so sorry,” I heard myself saying, sounding shallow and feeling empty while an ugliness gathered in the hum of the phone connection.

“He needs to talk to you.”

Her tone made me feel as if I were being sent to the principal’s office. I wanted to ask her what he had in mind, but instead I asked when I should get there.

“As soon as possible, Chris.” She said the words slowly to rein in her emotions, which gave my name a nasty little hiss, Chriss. She took a breath, softened a little, “Dave has missed you a lot through the years.”

I hope she said that to suggest we could start somewhere other than where we’d left off; yet even if that were true, it was heart crushing to think it might take the end of Dave’s life for us to begin again.

He was once my best friend. But what were we now? Acquaintances? Strangers? Yeah, okay, strangers who’d once been as close as brothers. Too close in fact.

I wrote down their address. They’d moved a couple times since the old days, but never out of the Valley, the San Fernando Valley. I told her I’d drive down on Saturday, a couple days away.

“Fine,” she said, hanging up without a good-bye.

I poured another tequila and shot this one back fast.

CHAPTER 2

The perfect sweep of Rincon Beach along Pacific Coast Highway hasn't changed since the first time I saw it in 1969, that is if you ignore the rusty RVs clotted along the shoreline with their noisy American flags flapping against an onshore breeze. The RVs are filled with Boomers who are over sixty now themselves, troubled with clotted arteries of their own, many of them here because of the last collapsed economy of the Bush years, spending their retirement by the side of the road, not exactly the golden years they'd dreamed about.

In the spring air, the Saturday morning mist blows across the highway and I have to flip on my lights. By the time I head inland, passing the Oxnard turn-off at the remnants of the Wagon Wheel Restaurant, the fog gets patchy and I speed up, crossing into Camarillo where a few straggly strawberry farms are like chunky weeds in the fertile fields of ready-made suburbia.

I don't take this drive often. Since I moved to Santa Barbara in the early eighties, my few friends have either moved away from the Valley like I did, or we've lost contact. I was assigned a couple classes a week at City College when I first got here, which I thought was my path to getting a tenured position. But I didn't get along with some of the old-timer faculty members, long story, and the rare full-time positions that opened up over the years never materialized

for me.

I should've quit and found a new career, a new life. I thought about going back and restarting my Ph.D. at UCLA. That's what Sally, my wife at the time, kept urging me to do when I met her in 1986. She was probably right. Maybe I should have. Instead, I kept in my part-time teaching role, never fully accepted as staff.

My teaching didn't pay all the bills and most of the shortfall used to be made up by Sally's job as a librarian for the Santa Barbara Library where I met her. Now that we're divorced I fill in the bank account with occasional copywriting for a couple of ad agencies on State Street.

When I look back on Sally and me, I know we stayed together too long, just shy of ten years. The truth is, we were more like friends than lovers from the beginning, an emotional compact I'm apparently comfortable with. To be fair, how often does anyone have enough love to last a lifetime? That great passion writers write about that will carry them to the brink of doom and beyond...Romeo and Juliet? Madame Bovary? Anna Karenina? John and Yoko for Chrissakes. Does it exist anymore? Doubtful.

I miss Sally, though, especially when the fog drifts in from the Channel Islands and the horizon disappears and the streets get solemn and damp, dripping meaning from every damn traffic light. I say I like that kind of weather, that it makes me think of tragic England, the land of writers. But it's better with someone by your side, a fire in the hearth.

I've missed Dave, too, through the years. I miss the friendship we had, the crazy times we shared in the Age Of Aquarius. The bright future before us, the sunny peaceful world we would create from the corrupt and war-ravaged planet we lived on. Youth. All that hope in our heads, the precarious innocence inside. Wouldn't we all go back if we could? Some days, yes. Most days, no. It's the disappoint-

ments in life that are harder to face the older you get.

I'm entering Thousand Oaks now, the mist long gone and the hillsides hanging onto their lush green before summer burns them into the "Golden California" of tourist brochures. Thousand Oaks seemed like an African savannah when I first drove through here on a two-lane road to a small zoo called Jungleland with my mom and dad and my sister, Amy, for a family outing when we still pretended we were a family.

Finally, I crest the freeway into the San Fernando Valley and my past spreads out before me marked by exit signs I tick off in my mind, sweeping the memories to the outer lanes like parting an ocean of regret. I tell myself again to forget the past, stay in the moment.

I put on my blinker, exit at White Oak Boulevard, make a left and head North... past Victory Boulevard...past Gilmore Avenue. I turn right onto Haynes Street.

I know this flat center of the Valley very well, where endless tracts of two-bedroom, one-bathroom homes were built for the thousands of WWII aerospace workers like my father who came to Southern California to churn out the materiel of war at Hughes Aircraft or McDonnell Douglas. He was from Indiana and met my mom on an assembly line. He was deaf in one ear from a farming accident blasting rock out of the hard Indiana dirt. I was disappointed in him because that injury kept him out of the war so there were no tales of glory I could trade with my school friends whose dads all saw some kind of action in the Big One.

He went back to Indiana to die many years ago. A brother of his, an uncle I never met, sent me a card of condolence or I wouldn't have even known he died.

I shake my head to clear these kind of thoughts.

Be...Here...Now...I say out loud, burping up a bit of Baba Ram Das.

I spot Dave's address. Pull to the curb and shut off

the engine.

I look in the rearview. Inhale. Exhale. Get out of the car.