

Finding the Way to the Garden

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(For Natalia)

The garden has been there for a long time, but it's impossible to reach, and that is what makes people so unhappy.

These words seemed to flash into my memory suddenly, but I knew very well why and that made them all the more painful. The pain was even more intense because of the place and time when these words seemed to take me by surprise. This old garden was on the outskirts of town (it was an unusual garden that had come to mind). It was late autumn, warm as could be, and I was gathering ripe apples in a faded army rucksack. The ground was white under the trees—all covered with apples. As the sun shone on them, their skin looked ever so thin and transparent. I recall that I couldn't resist the temptation to pick the fruit from the branches, even though I had promised the old woman who owned the garden that I wouldn't. I plucked them gently but still my fingers left impressions that quickly became discolored blotches. As I ate the apples, their frothy white juice squirted all over my hands which made them sticky, so I wiped them on the grass where it was moist, close to the ground. They must have been summer apples, apparently a cultivated variety, though I had never seen summer apples still on the trees so late in autumn, when brown snow-clouds darken the evening sky and the cold penetrates your bones as if snow were about to start at any moment and cover the fruit on the trees and the ground.

The old woman who owned the garden had no one to gather the apples. She was in poor health, hardly able to walk, so she let people have the apples cheaply. Yet she stubbornly refused to allow them to pick the fruit off the branches, despite offers of additional pay.

That old garden on the outskirts of town where I picked apples was a painful reminder of my sister and the tales about her garden.

As a small boy I was alarmed by my sister's stories. Frequently I found them implausible but was afraid to say so, for fear of angering her. You see, she was the only friend I had. Besides, to be honest, I really enjoyed listening to her.

My sister's garden was on the shore of a small lake. The apple trees there weren't very tall but they had wide-spreading branches which always bore abundant fruit—though not all at once but by turns. As some of the apples ripened, others were still green, and some trees were only just

beginning to blossom. When I protested that all trees blossom simultaneously, my sister interrupted me: would I kindly refrain from making stupid remarks, she said. After all, this was no ordinary garden. So I kept quiet. But what surprised me most was that every apple tree in my sister's garden bore fruit of many colors. White, red, yellow, and green apples all grew on a single branch. At this point I usually told my sister that she was lying: I couldn't believe that different sorts of apples could grow on the same tree, let alone on the same branch. No, that was just too much! When my sister, in turn, would take offense and leave my room, I would begin to regret what I had said. I would run after her, pestering her to forgive me. She would always be magnanimous, forgive me, and continue the tale about her garden.

There was a tiny cottage in the middle of her garden, which was difficult to pick out among the spreading branches of so many trees. (The old woman in my garden had a cottage by the gate—it was tiny, too, and a branch of an apple tree nearly as big as a church hung directly above it. But why do I bother to compare these cottages?)

I remember sitting in the old woman's cottage. She kept a mangy dog on a chain, and it always trembled from the cold, even in the corridor. When it whined the woman let it off the chain and allowed it into the kitchen. (Oh dear, what's this mangy dog doing in my story? I don't want to write about a dog! I want to recount the story of my sister, her garden, and her love).

There were no mangy dogs in my sister's garden. Only flowers grew there, and the sun always shone. I often feel that what my sister described was the Garden of Eden. Though the Garden of Eden is a probably just an invention. Nobody can return there any more.

My sister also told me that only two people could live there. No matter how insistently I asked, she would not tell me who they were.

I finally came to believe in her garden when she started seeing Todos, a boy who lived in our neighborhood. That is when it occurred to me that there were two of them now and they could enter the garden but I would never see it. My sadness soon vanished, though, when my sister started to talk about it.

The path to the garden began in an old cave on the mountain.

Of course, I always swore to my sister that I would not reveal her secret to a living soul. Since she could trust me to keep my mouth shut—mother questioned me about her secret persistently, but I remained silent even more persistently—she confided her innermost thoughts and dreams in me with even deeper trust.

I knew why mother was so interested in my sister's secret. She had seen her with Todos once and for some reason had taken an instant dislike to him. She called him the fish, saying that his face, eyes, nose—absolutely everything about him—reminded her of a fish. I never saw anything like that in Todos. He reminded me, instead, of a kindly crab. When he walked

quickly, he swung his right arm forward and drew it in like a claw, and that made me laugh.

At first, my mother told my sister not to see him—she never actually referred to Todos by name. When my sister disobeyed, Mother had words with Todos and made unpleasant threats, telling him to keep well away from our house. But he was never far off—my sister would sense his presence and dash out into the street. Then mother started locking her in the house. My sister was beside herself with anger, and at night she had terrible dreams. They frightened her and she told me about them. Perhaps they weren't dreams at all but things she actually experienced? It's difficult for me to say, because in my child's imagination, reality and dreams have been confused.

One day, she was wandering with Todos in Kyiv at night. It started to rain and the rain became a downpour. Todos asked whether they should take shelter somewhere and wait for the rain to stop. She merely laughed. They so rarely had the opportunity to get out into the city, so surely they wouldn't let the rain deprive them of the pleasure of a walk down the Andriivskiy Uzviz and along the Podil. Todos agreed.

They walked on, but the rain kept getting heavier and heavier. Their coats were soaked, and water sloshed in their shoes. They laughed as they walked along in the pouring rain.

A bubbling stream flowed down the street. It was enthralling—my sister had never seen anything like it before. "If we had a boat, we could sail down the Uzviz in it," said Todos, and suddenly he turned into a big fish, lifted my sister, and carried her off on his back. Taken by surprise, she gave a shriek, and woke up. It had been a dream.

But they really did walk down the Uzviz in a downpour. And then, when Todos mentioned a boat, he lifted my sister up and said he would gladly carry her to the end of the world. Far away from all people, so there would be just the two of them. My sister embraced him tightly. As she did so, she sensed that somebody was creeping up behind them, and that this unknown person wanted to cause Todos's death. In the pouring rain it was hard to make anybody out clearly, but my sister distinctly saw a human figure. It was a man, dressed all in black and barefoot. And a mouse was running after him. My sister thought: "Good heavens, there's enough water to wash a person away, yet a mouse is freely running about, with no fear of the water." She told Todos somebody was following them, but he laughed: "Surely only crazy people go out walking in such foul weather."

"He *is* crazy," replied my sister as a cold shiver went down her spine. "Don't worry, my love. Nothing can harm you while I'm with you," Todos replied. She saw the stranger give a rapacious smile, and then turn away unhurriedly and depart. The mouse ran after him. My sister understood everything. She realized that he was not leaving for good and that he might re-appear. For the moment, however, she was grateful to him for leaving them alone together, at least for a while.

One day Todos and my sister decided to make their way to the garden. I clearly remember that day, because that morning my mother had been angry with my sister and ordered her not to set foot outside the house. But my sister replied:

"You can't stop me going anywhere I want."

At that my mother lost her temper and struck my sister in the face. Her nose started to bleed. Mother burst into tears and said in a subdued voice:

"I don't want you to see him."

"Why not? Please explain," my sister asked calmly—I was surprised how subdued and determined she was. Blood ran down her face, but she did not wipe it away. I could hardly believe what my mother said then:

"Because his mother's heart is on the right side¹ and all the members of her family are unhappy."

My sister laughed at this, then she asked: "How do you know?"

"I've been to their home."

My sister blanched at these words and rushed out of the house.

On that day Todos and my sister first attempted to reach the garden. They took nothing with them, apart from a small flashlight. They walked for ages and ages, but felt no fatigue, because ahead of them was the garden, pulling them and renewing their strength. They lost track of time and discovered that the walls of the cave were beginning to close in—the further my sister and Todos went, the narrower the path became and the lower they had to stoop to avoid hitting their heads against the sharp rocks. They proceeded in complete silence, but without any fear.

In some places the path was of stone, and their footsteps rang out, but mostly it was covered by soft earth. Here and there they came across small, boggy patches, into which water dripped from above in loud splashes. They cupped their hands below where the water dripped the most, collected it, and drank. After quenching their thirst, they moved on.

It seemed that they had been walking more than a day. They were exhausted, but did not want to stop. Then the way became so narrow and low that they had to crawl.

My sister injured her knee on a sharp rock, drawing blood. She was on the brink of tears. Todos tore a strip off his shirt and bandaged the wound.

"Perhaps we should turn back?" he asked my sister. Without waiting for her reply, he continued: "Tomorrow we'll dress warmly, take some food with us, and try again."

Mother prohibited my sister from seeing Todos, but my sister kept disobeying and mother often beat her. After one of these punishments, my sister ran away from home. I saw her with Todos in town. They were walking along the pavement, holding hands, and everyone was looking at

¹ Indicating a superstition that someone might be a servant of the devil (translators' note).

them in astonishment because my sister and Todos had both shaved their heads. I was truly alarmed by what my sister had done, thinking that she would never dare return home. But she did, and without anger. Mother, however, became hysterical. She locked my sister in her room and it was painful to hear the loud slaps of the belt as she beat her mercilessly. But I heard no crying.

After that, everything happened as though in a dream. My sister disappeared from the house, and Todos disappeared, too. My mother searched a long time, but in vain. I kept quiet—I was certain my sister had reached her garden.

Some time later, fishermen pulled the bodies of two young people from the lake. Both had been so gnawed by fish that it was difficult to recognize the bodies of my sister and Todos—but it was them. It wasn't appropriate to bury them in such condition, so they were covered with masks and wigs.

I remember that both masks were sorrowful, with eyes closed. The bodies were covered by a thick white shroud right up to their chins.

The same day that the fishermen discovered the lovers, my mother turned gray. At the funeral she was taciturn, and afterwards she kept wandering through our rooms looking for somebody. One day she went to the same lake where the lovers were found. Next day mother was discovered wandering on the shore. She had lost her memory—she didn't know her own name. Fortunately, some kind people brought her home.

Many years have passed since then. Much rain has washed down the Andriivskyi Uzviz. I am an adult now. Yet even today, it still seems to me that none of this happened, that it was all just a bad dream. And every time I find myself in a garden, I intuitively look for a tiny cottage beneath a white flower or under branches laden with fruit—and I imagine my sister, full of laughter, running out with Todos.

Translated by Patrick Corness and Natalia Pomirko

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