

from the book of Gardener

-A FOGGY MEMOIR-

HUGH SHURLEY

For you

I'm writing down everything I can remember.

I had to learn to walk three times in my life.

The first was long ago, back in the time of my parents' baited bribery, hard gravity, and the simple act of me awkwardly balancing on my two feet moving forward.

I really have no memory of the actual event, but I do have photographic proof that I was there, and that it really happened.

Photos of my father's extended arms bravely letting go, me stumbling and confused, and of course there was my mother desperately reaching out to save me.

I can only imagine it was in those first brave steps that I decided I would never stop walking. And I didn't, I just kept putting one foot in front of the other with no thought to where I was going or where I'd been. And as the years went by, from childish stumble to youthful trot, I found myself as an adult in an all-out run towards busy.

It was a crazy, frantic life in motion, desperately trying to keep up with my head and a heart that was always ten days in front of me.



Learning to walk with a dog was a whole new education unto itself. It would call on skills that I had no possession of
selflessness,
and patience.

I spent a lifetime functioning with only two legs, and now I was cluelessly walking with six. It took me quite a while to get use to this new curious way.

Anyone who's ever accompanied a dog on their daily outings understands that there is no rush or planned destination to a dog walk. To them, one city block is an endless CSI crime scene that always demands the most thorough and serious investigation. Around every corner, in every sidewalk crack was another mystery to be solved.

The City wasn't new to me but walking aimlessly around it was.

Everyday tethered together by a long leather leash we would head out on one of our journeys of discovery. Not one of them was ever boring or ordinary, but this particular day's walk would turn out to be the most unbelievable and unforgettable of all.



Sometimes it feels as if life has you aimlessly walking in circles, only to discover, that you are really being directed towards the exact place you need to be.

We leisurely meandered back and forth a maze of city streets. Some were familiar; most were not. I hadn't payed any attention to how far we'd walked or where we were, until I realized that we were now standing at the end of an unfamiliar dead end street. With nowhere to go, I turned to leave, but my dog didn't want to. Something had grabbed her attention and she pulled the leash out of my hands and bolted forward.

With all the hyper-focus of chasing a feral cat, she ran up a stairway of concrete steps that appeared out of nowhere. I had no idea where those stairs had come from nor where they led.

Standing there empty handed, I realized she was now quickly shrinking in the distance. I ran after her, doing my best to keep pace, but the stairs kept coming one after another, each heavier than the next. Before I knew it, I could no longer see her or the dragging leash.

She had disappeared.

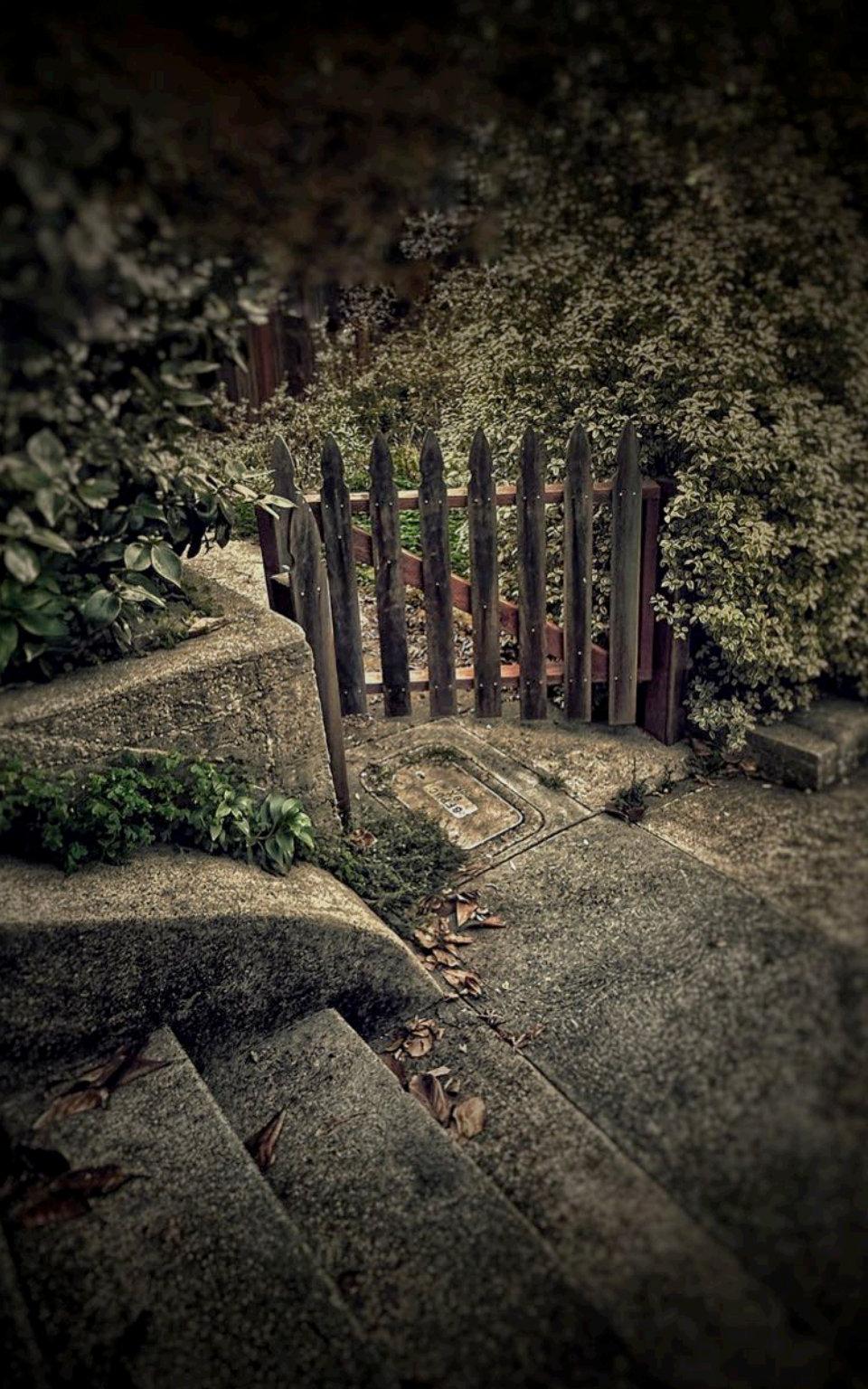


It turned out that we happened upon the base of the mysterious Vulcan Stairway. It was one of those hidden places I had heard about, but had no idea where in the City it actually was.

The Vulcan Stairway is a steep set of stairs leading up into a canopy of dense foliage and trickling filtered light. A secret passageway connecting one hillside neighborhood to another. All along are a series of camouflaged entryways, gates to the left and pathways to the right, glimpses of little houses peeking from out and in between.

It felt as if we had stepped into one of Aesop's magical fables.

Little did I know at the time,
this was where our mystical tale was about to begin.



Finally, I made my way to a street at the top of the stairway and couldn't see her anywhere. I backtracked down the stairs searching every offshoot and entryway.

When I noticed a little rickety gate standing ajar. I held onto the top of the gate and leaned in as I called for her. A voice in the distance yelled out to me, "*Back here!*"

I shouted in reply, "I'm looking for my dog!"

And someone answered, "*She's back here.*"

I followed the voice down a narrow stone pathway that paralleled the side of an old shingled bungalow. It led me straight down into a sun-drenched garden. There was a man sitting on a wooden stool in the middle of it. I couldn't see his face because he was hunched over with his back turned to me. It was obvious he was preoccupied with something.

As I reached down to retrieve her leash I began my knee-jerked apology for the intrusion.

"Sorry my dog has barged her way in here. I hope we haven't disturbed you."

"*Not at all,*" he replied from the back of his head.

"*It's nice to have visitors.*"

From the second he spoke; I felt a strange feeling flush over me. There was something about the tone and pitch of his voice that made me instantly feel relaxed. He spoke with a peculiar accent, one that I couldn't recognize. It was so unusual, yet extremely familiar.

I stood there trying to figure out where I had heard that voice before when all of a sudden something quite amazing happened.



Out of the corner of my eye came a tiny flash of light. I turned my head to catch what it was, and as I felt the horse blinders suddenly drop from my eyes, I began to focus on our surroundings.

To my surprise, we were standing in the middle of a rich, live painting of thick, lush greenery. It was a chlorophyll canvas covered with strokes and splatters of hundreds upon hundreds of beautiful flowers in every size and variety imaginable.

But this garden was like none I'd ever seen before. It was not created in the colorful palette of a Monet painting. It was obvious that the garden was painstakingly planted and planned with every bud, flower and delicate petal specially chosen for their albinotic absence of pigment. There was not one flower in the entire garden gifted with color. Every one of them was a brilliant stark white.

Its intention and beauty had me mesmerized in awe.

I was humbled and embarrassed that I didn't have adequate words to compliment the garden or the Gardener.

I could only just stand there in silence and take it all in.

It was the most beautiful place I had ever been.



I walked over towards him, curious to see what he was looking at. As I approached, I could see a rectangular wooden crate to the left of his stool. In it were dozens of tiny glass vessels with twigs sticking out of them. I peered over his shoulder to see him looking at one single flower through a magnifying glass. In the other hand, he held a thin, bent twig. I asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm writing down everything I can remember, things that I wanted to say, or should have said," he replied.

I didn't really understand what he meant by "writing down" until I leaned in a little closer to see over his shoulder and through the magnifying glass that he was holding. There, in the sunlight, lying on top of one delicate white petal, were little words. Words connected to other words, sentences written in a calligrapher's style that looked like wind-swept waves, each one placed and positioned carefully on the flower.

I looked up and began to notice that all around me were more flowers covered in words. The sight and realization of all of this made my head hurt. It throbbed in disbelief. Why was this man writing on all the flowers in his garden? And what was he writing? Were these memories of his past, poems, or letters never sent?

I had no idea nor the courage to ask him. I was speechless, grasping for some reasonable explanation. And then the sudden thought of, "Who would ever believe this?" entered my head.

I could hardly believe it myself.



I stood there and watched as he carefully painted each word with the precision and focus of threading a needle.

Without looking away from the flower, he would reach down to dip the twig brush into one of the many-colored inkwells from the little wood caddy, then bring it back up to apply the next word. It was all done in one sweeping, continual, poetic movement. It had the grace and elegance of someone in the fluidity of tai chi.

I didn't want to interrupt his concentration, but I wanted to engage him, so I asked about the inks and brushes that he was using.

He told me, solemnly, as if reciting a poem, that they were not inks, they were,
"nature's-colored tinctures, made of rainwater, pollen, and petal dust. Foraged from the droppings of a hundred exotic plants. Gifted and gathered in the grand palace of white metal and fogged glass."

It took me a moment to figure out that he was most likely talking about the beloved Conservatory of Flowers in Golden Gate Park.

I could just imagine him in there amongst all the other conservatory visitors, peacefully strolling through the different galleries, all the while he would be stealthily searching and collecting his precious bits and pieces of plant droppings. And yet no one would ever suspect a thing of this little old leaf thief as he came and went with his pockets full of a forager's bounty.



With his back still to me, he continued to explain his process of making the pigments.

He said that he would take all the specimens he collected, and separate them by different shades and hues. When they became completely dried of any life, he would crush them with mortar and pestle to a fine colored dust. Then he would siphon the dust into those tiny glass vials that he placed in his wood caddy.

On the winter's first rain, he would take the caddy out into the garden.

He explained that the little bottles' openings were exactly one raindrop wide and that they would only accept the luckiest of drops.

"One drop out of a million will ever make the journey from sky's fall to word's dust," he whispered.

"So, the inks are made of rainwater and petal dust?" I asked.

He was quick to correct me again that they were not dyes or inks. They were not meant to permeate or tattoo their delicate host, but

"to lie and sunbathe on its beautiful surface, until one day they will return back to the earth."



"And what about the brushes?" I asked,

"What are those you are painting with?"

He finally turned around and looked at me.

His eyes were big round mandalas of gray and sage, surrounded by the bushiest caterpillar eyebrows I'd ever seen. His face reminded me of a beautiful weathered oak tree. The kind of face you could just lean into, rest, and dream as you looked towards the sky.

He smiled at me, like he was about to show me something unbelievable and then he said, "*Look.*"

He handed me his brush and magnifying glass. I held them both up, but for the life of me I couldn't tell what it was I was looking at.

At the top of a twig of bamboo was a brush head. It was a funny little curved leaf of sorts, or maybe a feather I thought. It had hair-like silica, all of them graduating toward one pin-size tip, held in place by a piece of red silk thread.

"What is this brush made of?" I asked.

"*A moth*" he replied.

"*The antenna of a moth.*"



Perplexed, I asked, “Why would you use a moth’s antenna to paint with?”

He looked at me and said, “*Beauty is a trap that even a butterfly can fall into, but not a moth. A moth is only attracted to light,*” and that, “*This garden is made of light.*” he proclaimed

He continued to explain that moths have great respect and love for light, and that they know the dangers of getting too close.

“Moths would never dare touch the surface, for they would burn and perish.”

“They are here only to gift the flower with a sweet delicate kiss of pigment, and to ask for nothing more.”

His words were a riddle that made no sense to me. Quite honestly none of this did. But it really didn’t matter, because we were just guests in his garden, two intruders that had stumbled into his mysterious world.

It was then that I started to realize what an incredible stumble we had just fallen into.



SPECIAL
SHIRTS

I should have left well enough alone, but I had to ask him, “Where do you get moth’s antennas from?”

“I get them from a tea shop on the edge of Chinatown,” he replied.

Funny, I thought, there must be a hundred different tea shops in the City.

He told me that he couldn’t remember the name of the street, but that *“you can find it by following the shadow of the pyramid to its tip end as it touches the earth.”*

It made me wonder if he was referring to the cast shadow of the Transamerica Building, downtown?

How in the world would you ever find the exact tip of a building’s shadow, I thought. I guess it would all depend on the time of day, and of course on what the weather was like? It would be unpredictable. There were so many different variables to his statement of direction.

I felt as if he was testing me, or just wanted to see how far my imagination was willing to travel.

Dumbfounded, I just stood there in the garden as my head flooded with images of where that shop was, and what it must have looked like.

KEE CHEUNG
棋昌藥行

HERBS & GINSENG

I imagined a glass-windowed storefront on a narrow alleyway. It would be decorated with gold Chinese characters, with only two words that I could recognize, "Herbs & Ginseng." Inside would house an ancient wall-length wood cabinet that extended from floor to ceiling. It would have rows and rows of drawers with copper button pulls.

In front of the cabinet would be an old glass counter display, filled with stacks of weathered newspapers and books. The only light sources would be from a bare hanging bulb at one end, and the sun coming in through the window at the other.

I could see myself sheepishly entering the shop, as a bell attached to the door would announce my arrival.

I would be greeted by an elderly woman behind the counter, asking me what I wanted, "Ginseng, Newspaper, Tea? Ginseng?"

I would answer back, "I am looking for moth's antennas."

"What? What are you looking for?"
acting as if she had no idea what I was saying.

"Moth's antennas." I would repeat.

Suspicious of me, she would ask, "Who sent you?"

I would reply "The Gardener."

With that, she would abruptly turn and walk away.



After a bit, she would return with one of the pulled-out cabinet drawers and place it on the glass countertop, as if I was being shown diamonds at Tiffany's on Union Square.

But these would not be diamonds. They would be much more precious and more rare.

Pinned to a black velvet background, presented for my pleasure, would be a selection of the most beautiful and somewhat mythical moth antennas.

I would stare at them for the longest time, before proclaiming,

“I'll take them all!”



There was a moment in the garden when I began to ponder the enormity of this incredible place and of him, the Gardener.

Here we were in the presence of a man who scribes on petals of flowers with moth's antennae. It was all too unbelievable.

A feeling of urgency and panic took over as I switched from being present with him, into wanting to capture permanency of this moment, this place, him.

I wanted to run as fast as I could back home to get my camera, so that I could somehow hold on to all of this.

You see, I grew up in a time long before cameras in phones, a time when photographs were the truth. It was the consummate proof that something had really happened. And that if you could capture it on film, then it was real and it would be yours forever.



In that moment standing there next to him, I wanted forever.

So, I asked him, "Would you mind if I come back to take some pictures of your garden?"

"Of course, that would be lovely" he said. "Come back tomorrow, come back anytime. It's nice to have visitors."

Just before we left the garden, he said to me with a wink in his eyes.

"Tomorrow we'll start the lilies!"

As we headed home down the Vulcan steps, I must have repeated those words a thousand times in my head,

"Tomorrow we'll start the lilies"

Those words placed together were so extraordinary, and the fact that he said "We" somehow made me feel like I was now part of him and his garden.



I didn't sleep at all that night, playing over and over every detail of our secret discovery. I just kept lying there, watching her, wondering if some how she had known him from her silent, stray dog past?

Had this been where we were heading all along on those seemingly random dog walks towards nowhere?
It's as if she had purposely guided us there,
guided me.

There were so many things that I needed to plan in anticipation of capturing the Gardener and his garden.

Come the morning
I had it all figured out,
or so I thought.



It started out like any other day; wake up, take her for a quick walk, a cup coffee, and I was off and running to my job waiting tables across town.

After an extra busy lunch rush, my shift was close to over. I could just taste 3 pm. Fifteen minutes more, a quick bite to eat and I would be on my way to photographing the Gardener. But as anyone who has ever worked in a restaurant will tell you, "Don't count on it!"

My back was to the door as I was clearing the last abandoned table, when all of a sudden, I felt a cold rush up my spine; the city air had now entered the room.

I whipped around to see what it was. And there, larger than life, filling the entire doorway was the dreaded culinary classic, "Late Lunch Guy", that person that shows up minutes before the cafe closes and is totally unaware that, mentally, everyone who works there has already checked out.



It wasn't his huge stature or obviously broken watch that had me concerned; it was what he was carrying. In his hands, he had a bottle of wine and an unread newspaper. I quickly realized that I wasn't going anywhere.

There is a reason they call it “waiting” tables, and it looked like as if I was going to have to wait, on him.

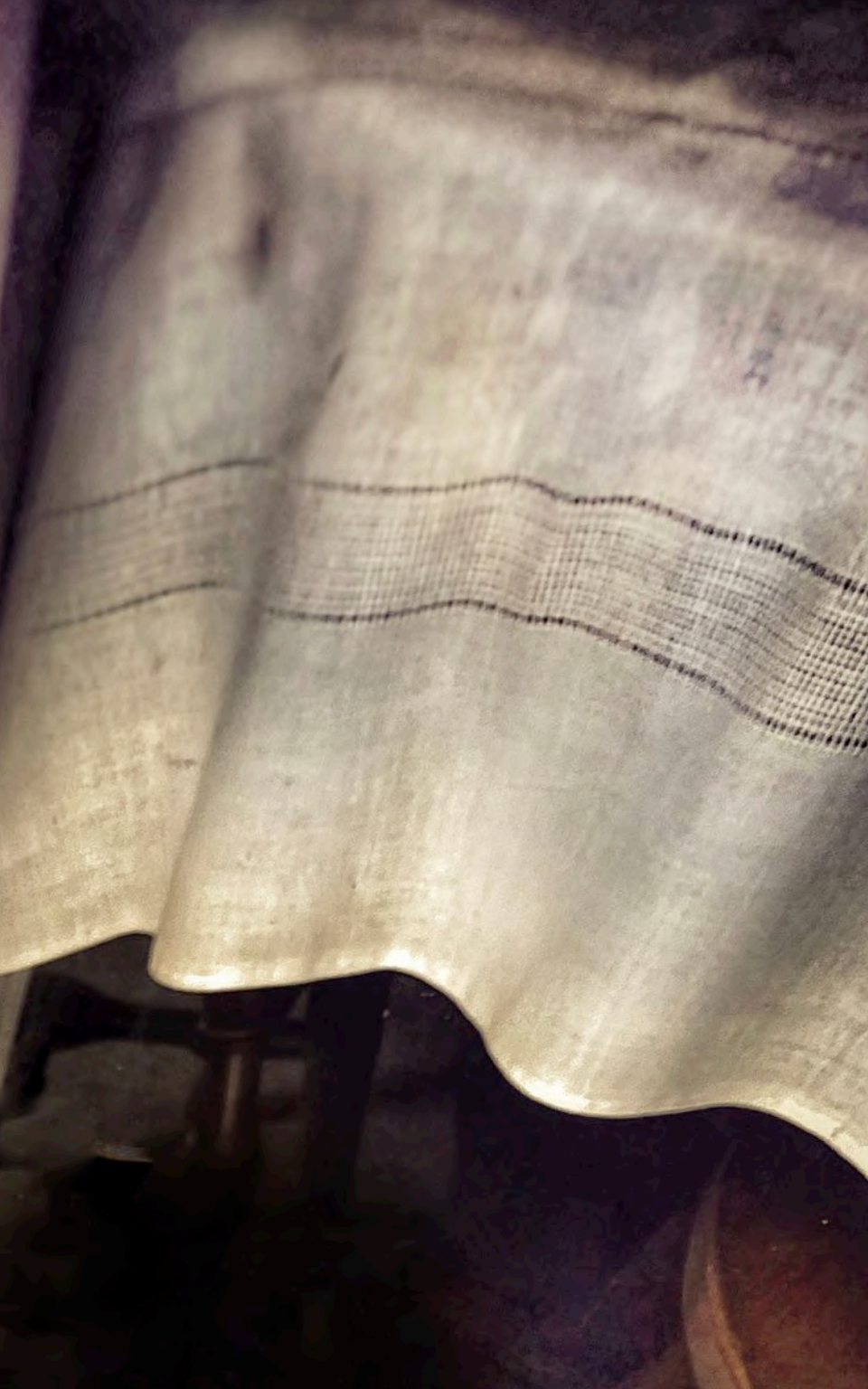
As I stood impatiently at attention, taking care of his every beck and call, I noticed that my stomach started growling, not from hunger, but from the frustration towards my captor.

I was irritated and somewhat fascinated by all of his repetitive gestures.

There he sat like a king presented with a feast for his pleasure. Instead of devouring his fare, he poked and prodded at it, as he was studying all the delicate nuances and complexities of his chicken potpie.

With each bite, he would sigh, take a sip of wine, then moan and groan. With every turn of his newspaper he'd adjust his glasses. He was driving me crazy; it was as if I was back in grade school being tortured by the clock's red second hand.

Had he known about the Gardener and his mysterious garden, I'm sure he would have set me, his prisoner, free.



A grueling hour later, and I was serving up my last plate of forced pleasantries. “Did you enjoy everything, would you like another piece of banana cream pie? Is there anything else I can get for you?”

I dropped the check and then dropped out of sight.

I don't know if he ever paid the bill because I was already urgently on my way home.

It was getting later in the day, and I was filled with worry that I was losing a photographer's most valued asset; the beauty and honesty of nature's light.

I kept telling myself that there was plenty of time to still make it there. I just needed to get to my apartment, grab the camera, my dog, and hoof it up that mountain of stairs to get back to the garden and start documenting everything that I had seen, but still could not believe.



As we were racing up the Vulcan steps, I noticed that the air's temperature had quickly changed, which isn't that rare in the City, especially during the spring and summer months.

Halfway up, I recognized a familiar cool presence in the air. I knew what it was, but I ignored the thought of it and kept climbing as quickly as I could. I was hoping to beat its arrival. But by the time I got to the garden's gate, it was already encroaching.

San Francisco fog, that lethargic and stubborn bully was now entering the garden, moving at its own pace and will.

I looked for the Gardener, but he wasn't there. I could still see all the flowers covered in his words, so I took my camera out to begin shooting, only to realize that the film wouldn't advance forward. I don't know if it was from the damp moisture in the air or because I was so panicky in the moment that I couldn't get it to work, it had jammed.

I kept trying but it wouldn't move. I didn't know what to do.

There I stood in a fog of desperation, trying to figure out how I was going to capture his garden.



As the fog continued to engulf and soak the garden,
I realized that everything was changing before my eyes.
His words on all the petals of flowers were beginning to
fade.

There are times in your life when you can't go back or
waste moments away on thinking forward. I needed to
focus on being present so that I could take it all in, hold it
close.

So that's what I did.

I put my camera down and began to look at every word
and shouted them out loud so that I could hear them,
remember them,
make them real.

Each word connected to other words were more valuable
than the next as they began to bleed back into those little
rivers of pigment, drops of rain, pollen and petal dust.

The fog had turned everything in the garden into faint
shadowy silhouettes, cleaned and cleared of any
recognition.

All the words had dissolved and melted away.

An overwhelming feeling of sadness rushed over me.

I had so desperately wanted to capture his flowers,
the Gardener's words,
those letters he never sent.



Selfishly what I really wanted that day were the photographs. The proof sheets that it was all real. And if I could have those, I could somehow have them forever.

I looked over to my right and there stood my dog next to me, peaceful in her being, as if she had no idea what we had lost.

And just beyond her, out of the fog the Gardener appeared. I looked at him without uttering a word, standing there defeated, as a mix of tears and fog rolled down my face.

I felt as if I had somehow failed him,
us.

He must have recognized my great pain and disappointment, because he stared back at me and with the most compassionate look in his eyes, he said,

*"Don't worry, we'll start again tomorrow.
Tomorrow we'll start the lilies."*

If I had only held on to those words, and understood what they really meant, I would have never left him or the garden.

But, I didn't,

I turned and walked away.



I never went back.

For the life of me and I can't remember why I never went back.

All that I know is, the next day happened, and then the next, and the next. My life, the job, the City. Then came more for the sake of more, lots more. Consecutive days, months and nights bogged in life's sticky tar. Strangers and friends were there and then they weren't. Then came the next move from here to further away. Another place, different same life.

And then she had passed and I was walking all alone.

Whole years kept piling up, one backed onto another, like a horrendous traffic jam. And I was getting so tired of trying to keep up with all the clutter of hurts, grudges and missed moments that I couldn't let go of.

It was somewhere out there, along my hurried and troubled way that I must have forgotten for just an instant, blinked,
and fell asleep.

And in that moment it was gone.

All of it,
the garden,
the Gardener,
his words,
lost into the ether of nowhere.



Thirty one years later.

Twelve miles and two bridges away I had landed in a new place, a sweet little hidden city nestled against the bay, with the most incredible panoramic views of San Francisco. A beautiful backdrop to my quieter, less hectic life.

It was there that I would learn to walk again, but this time I would be doing it on my own.

The paths I had chosen became more focused with the accumulation of my years, and with the realization of time's precious value.

Grateful for my new surroundings, I began the daily ritual of long mindful walks,

alone.



Out along the bay between two rocks was a wooden bench. It was just far enough of a walk out there, that by the time I'd arrived, I had forgotten all about the person I thought I was supposed to be and I could just sit and relax.

My favorite place - front seat, center stage to the slow motion spectacle of the Golden Gate fog weaving through the bridge and into the City. It was such a wondrous marriage of contrasts between heaven and earth, as the sharp cityscape would disappear into a pillowy curtain of white magic.

It was on one of those days at the water's edge, that a piece of San Francisco fog must have gotten lost and wandered its way to my side of the bay, because I was now surrounded by it.

As I sat there and let it cover me in its cold damp presence, this strange sense of growing melancholy began to take over. The kind of warm feeling you get when you hear a faint familiar tune, one you can't recall, but you know it belongs to you,

to your past.

I closed my eyes to awaken and remember.



And just like the miraculous revealing of a photographer's
print floating in silvered liquid and amber light, an image
slowly exposing itself,

they reappeared.

One by one.

And I began to remember all those words
connected to other words.

There they were.

I could see them again, sunbathing on the surface of the
most beautiful white-petaled flowers.

And there he was,
the Gardener.

I had found him in the place where I had lost him,

in a fog.

They all came back to me...

*"Just when you think the world is
black & white
someone comes along and adds color."*

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*"Presence takes a breath
and focus"*

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*"Only repetition and routine of thought
can keep the most important memories up front,
if not they just fade,
disappear back into little rivers of pigment,
drops of rain,
pollen, and petal dust."*

-

*"I'll work in the sun
my hands in the earth
and when I rest
it will in your shade,
next to me"*

*"Photographs
are just thin paper receipts
of actual events."*

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*"So many of life's miraculous moments
have been lost in a cool garden of fog,
disappeared because we had gotten careless
with what should have been cherished,
owed upon."*

-

*"Still life.
Wake up, look up,
this is it,
Everything
here,
now."*

_ the Gardener

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hughshurley@gmail.com

instagram@fromthebookofgardener

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