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Mrs. MacIntyre's Garden

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Ben Mitchell
Mrs. McIntyre's Garden

There is no mistaking it; Mrs. McIntyre made a habit of gardening. To support her habit, she hired college students part-time to help with her inordinate garden. That is, it was inordinately large, and she kept expanding it without heed to the consequences. For exactly two days and approximately twelve hours, I was one of those students. The first day was the Saturday of an Easter weekend during my sophomore year of college. I answered her ad in the electronic classifieds on my school's computer network, and the following week she was there to pick me up in her aging white Mercedes. She needed some yard work done, and it sounded congenial to me.

The morning I first came to her house, the lawn was doused in dew. The grass was so wet my boots were soon soaked through while I cleared her yard of winter windfall. The lower reaches of her property were lush—the grass was strikingly green, and there was actually skunk cabbage growing in her yard. Her house sat castle-like on a hill, an abrupt bulge in land that was otherwise low. One wishing to approach her house would have to come by way of a long driveway; it branched off from the main road, which dead-ended into the river and followed it for a quarter mile under old sycamores. Then, after coming between the house and the river and going a little beyond, it twisted back and scaled the bulge to the house.

One hundred years ago, it was apparently a very small house, but over the years, additions had been made, and now it looked rather like a giant had been playing with some blocks and had left his edifice unfinished. Mrs. McIntyre

explained that her husband was an architect. It struck me then for the first time that there might be a good many small-time, eccentric architects in the world without anybody knowing a thing about it. One thing I remember about the house was the door: a large, squarish block of wood with a ram's head knocker. It was foreboding—I think almost, but not quite, demonic. Shadowing the door, built over it as a sort of entryway, was what they called The Tower. It was one of Mr. McIntyre's architectural pipedreams. It had a high window, a perfect circle—everything about the tower was intriguing, but it didn't look complete. Most of the wood looked to be little more than plywood.

The interior of the house was one of those interiors infested by plants. There was a greenhouse connected directly to the house, and I ate lunch in it once, but the plants had become too numerous in the small greenhouse and had spilled over into the main living area—mainly jade plants, I think. Jades always seem to spearhead the verdant infestation of eccentric houses. I also ate lunch on another day in the kitchen, and I sat on an old chest and fought constantly with a cantankerous bambooish plant with obstinate leaves. The greenhouse must truly have been a fecund ditch, because even the dark walls of the house could not keep the plants indoors. Mrs. McIntyre cultivated them along the drive, by the office of the old architect, and beyond the shamble of outbuildings, right down the steep embankment to the small stream below. Mrs. McIntyre could not contain her plants. I am truly happy that college students are generally busy and that the American economy in these times is good, because if students had more time on their hands, or if jobs were harder to come by, I believe Mrs. McIntyre would, with an army of

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college students, spread her garden into the wild woods beyond the borders of her property. Then, likely as not, she would exhaust her and her husband's retirement, they would be admitted to some second-rate nursing home, and the forest would fall back in re-conquest on her garden plants and eventually on her house. I can see those stalwart jades within the walls, holding out against the wilderness, surviving on leaks from the ceiling, finally giving in and becoming one with a mass of foliage.

But thankfully, Mrs. McIntyre cannot and never will be able to find more than one or two college students to employ. For a time, beginning on that spring day of my Easter weekend, I was one of them. Her particular crusade was colonizing the steep bank beyond the outbuildings. We planted there together for much of the day: hosta, lunaria. Not being an expert on plants, I was delighted that the latter is also known as *money-plant*. A walk had been built on the side of the bank, with stairs over the steeper part, down to a boggy plot of ground beside the stream. Beyond the stream, the land rose brushy and farther in more wooded.

At one point in the day, some friends of Mrs. McIntyre came by, greeted her and me, descended the stairs, leaped the stream, and disappeared into the brush. It seems there were things growing about other than those things Mrs. McIntyre had planted. The family, complete with two young children, had arrived on express business: searching for morels. They emerged two hours later holding a bag gorged with the lobed mushrooms. The father, a rough-looking man, held up a morel ten inches tall and declared it was the biggest he had seen in thirty years. He had found it down among the stream rocks, nearly in the stream, inflating itself with water. There must have been a great many morels in the woods, though I didn't find one in all my

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ramblings through her yard. Despite Mrs. McIntyre's efforts to subdue the land, there were wilder gardens working their way up in silence all around.

* * *

In the fall I came back to work a second day, this time with a friend. Mrs. McIntyre armed us with a gas-powered leaf blower each and headset ear coverings to protect our hearing. We were ready to defend the McIntyres' hilltop stronghold from autumn's advancing troops. Broad sycamore leaves encrusted the hill; oak and maple piled it deeper. We started close by the house and worked out in a widening gyre, farther from the house and farther down the hill. We peeled off the hill's covering, stripped it bare as the trees, prepared it for the evening white of winter. The piles grew deeper in a ring around the hill, and we, two small Aeoluses, wielded our wind precisely, punching holes in the leaf piles, sending them in streams through the air. Of course, we worked even where the yard proper ended, where the unruly ivy sent its runners out into the wider woods. We blew leaves out of the ivy, over the ivy, not really knowing where to stop or where the yard ended and the wilderness began. We blew and raked indiscriminately. Everything of the vegetable kind had to go—the stalks and leaves of the April daffodils, the vagrant husks of corn, the leavings of all growing things from March to September. Next spring, the cycle would begin again, and if not us, there would be others to tend the garden, and in the fall to clear the hill, to tuck it all away for the big freeze.