

Clara Mundy

Gardenkeepers

The day brands itself onto my skin: the first Sunday warm enough for the clothes to stick to my back. The pastor speaks from the pulpit, his gaze resting on me more often than usual. His expression conjures former times: summer camp, the rush to the donut table. Only gradually does the look shift—a candle moving from one side of the room to the other, revealing harsh and unfamiliar shadows. The pastor becomes more animated, his voice straining at the edge of each proclamation. The congregation urges him on. They shout *amens*. The shadows lengthen, the faraway corners gleam under the sudden illumination. Whatever the others feel—God, the Spirit—I don't. The pastor's gaze holds me down, cradles an agitation I cannot place. I hate it. I must have done something wrong, I think, something to warrant the change. But I haven't, I swear. I'm just sitting there, between my mother and father, listening.

The next week, when the time comes to choose a service project, I line up with the other teenagers. The woman who hands me the clipboard wears a name tag that reads *Margaret*; I recognize her in an abstract sense, a face floating on the periphery of my baptism. I scan the list, insides knotting, knowing that the pastor will hover over every gathering.

"Are there any other options?" I ask. "Something not on the list?"

Margaret's earrings chime as she leans back. "What are you looking for?"

I shrug. "Something . . . not here."

"Hm," she says. "Have you ever kept a garden?"

The women joke about the pastor's absence the day I arrive, gloved hands clutching spades. They have not seen him there in months, years. He'd never risk ruining the shine on his shoes.

I'm meant to tend the garden every Tuesday and Thursday after school. Yet the rain begins my second week and will not stop. At first, the earth takes it greedily. A reprieve from the dry winter. Then the rain continues and the earth screams for mercy, the gift pooling at its surface, leeching more than it replenishes. I sit by the window to watch the sky and earth cry in tandem.

The destruction does not faze the women.

"Sometimes it rains," Margaret says, her gray hair frizzing from the humidity. "Sometimes it doesn't. The garden has survived

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worse things.”

We meet in a small building beside the garden. One room: a folding table, metal chairs. A coffee machine that only works half the time, tea bags brought by one of the younger women. My bike leans against one wall, dripping from the downpour. My sixteenth birthday was two months ago, but my parents still refuse access to the car.

“What will we do during the rain?” I ask Therese, who sits beside me. She is the closest to my age, though already in college.

Therese shrugs. “Wait for it to stop.” She holds her mug against her chest. I copy her, appreciating how the warmth ripples to my heart.

Surely there’s something we should do, I want to say. But the other women lean back in their chairs, chat with each other, their laughs harmonizing with the flickering fluorescent lights.

“It must be boring for you, Hannah,” Margaret calls from across the room. The other women turn. “A musty room with a group of strangers isn’t quite what you signed up for.”

“No, it’s alright,” I say, sitting up straighter. “I just wish there was some other way we could help.”

“Unfortunately, we’re governed by less predictable whims than the pastor’s groups,” Margaret replies. “If you’d like to switch your service project, there will be no hard feelings. Promise.”

The other women nod, offer smiles that expect nothing of me.

“No,” I say, a pebble catching in my throat. “Thank you, but I’d like to stay.”

Margaret shrugs. “As you prefer. In the meantime,” she reaches into her bag, pulls out a small packet wrapped in gauze. “Take this.” She crosses the room, each step resounding against the floor.

The packet whispers against my palm, its contents pink and green, their vibrance muted.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Put it in your bath,” she says. “See what thoughts it provokes.”

The other women stare: their eyes hungry, their bodies still. They make beautiful, frightening statues.

I ignore Margaret’s gift, casting it off to a dark corner of my bathroom cabinet. Something in her words slinks ink-like through my thoughts, into a depth whose bottom I cannot see. I take no baths, only showers. The minutes slip between stepping under the water and wrapping myself in the towel, haphazard. I avoid looking at my body, the gangly legs and soft stomach and awkward, lopsided breasts. I avoid looking at the showerhead as well, weary of its warped reflection.

You've hardly eaten anything, Mom says at dinner. *Are you feeling alright?* Other nights, her concerns turn to accusations. *Were you even listening to today's sermon?* She waits until Dad comes home from work to brandish her reproachments. I say nothing about the pastor, the shadows that have grown sharper with each week. I stare at my picked-over plate; I mumble about bad dreams. In the corner of my eye, Dad shrugs, returning his attention to the neighbor's outdoor TV, whose reflection illuminates our window.

One day, Mom comes into my bedroom, shuts the door behind her. She joins me on the bed, crinkling the pages of my algebra homework.

"Is there anything you'd like us to talk about?" she asks. Bits of mascara have dropped under her eyes, as if she's cried ashes.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"You've just been very . . . different, lately. Like something's on your mind."

I shake my head. "Everything's fine. I'm just tired."

"If you'd prefer, you could talk to the pastor," she says. "He takes young people's issues very seriously. I'm sure he'd be happy to help."

I shake my head. "I promise, I'm okay."

She regards me. I consider asking if a man has ever looked at her as the pastor looks at me, if she's ever been shopping or walking or going about her day and found a stray knife pointed at her side. Yet only the week before, when the news played a story about a girl who had been hurt in a nearby park, she had glanced at the photo on the screen and said, reflexive as a cough, *What was she thinking, wearing that*. When my chest started growing, she and I had gone through my closet and donated the shirts and dresses suddenly deemed immodest. My favorite fabrics and colors, gone in an afternoon. Then we had driven to the mall for new clothes, women's clothes, she called them.

I worry, then: if I tell her what I've seen, how I am seen, what would be left for me to wear? Would my father stop smiling at me, would we no longer sit at the same table, would I be forced to make penance?

Mom sighs, walks to the door.

"By the way," she says. "Therese, from the garden club—she called today. She offered to drive you to the meetings and back while the rain keeps up."

Stray drops patter messages against my window long after I try to sleep.

Therese waits for me in the parking lot beside my school. She helps put my bike in her car's trunk, tells me to pick from a variety of

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snacks: potato chips, crackers, fruit-flavored gummy bears.

"I wasn't sure what you'd like," she says, hair pulled back, droplets magnifying her face.

"You're too nice," I gush, both grateful and self-conscious.

"Not really," Therese says. "It's an excuse for me to eat these too. Please, think of this as a very ungenerous, self-serving gesture." She rips open a bag of animal crackers.

The car fills with snaps and crunches. From the radio, a girl sings about the wrongs a man has done to her. Her voice, warbled, holds the sound of a heart breaking. Therese taps her fingers to the rhythm, hums the melody under her breath. I imagine us as sisters.

"Did you like Margaret's gift?" Therese asks.

"I haven't tried it yet," I say. My voice sounds small against the girl's on the radio. I shudder at her conviction, her glorious anger.

Therese glances at me. "Why not?"

"Waiting for the right time, I guess. I don't take baths often."

The words tangle at our feet, climb between the seats.

"You should take one soon," she says. "Margaret rarely gives those out."

Therese parks beside the garden. The rain has turned its colors vibrant, shockingly so. The plants look like they have been painted rather than grown.

Margaret smiles when we enter, her wrinkles forming faces within faces.

"Thank goodness Therese got you out of that rain," she says.

The other women nod, resume their chatter.

We sit beside Margaret. Therese chooses the further chair, forcing me between them.

"How are you, Hannah?" Margaret asks.

"I'm alright. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm just fine. School is treating you well? Do you like the subjects?"

I shrug. "The teachers are nice. I don't mind it too much."

"That's good. And your friends? They don't mind that you're here with us, not with them in the youth groups?"

"Oh, no, they . . . they don't care."

Margaret looks around the room, at her lap, traces the rings that encircle her fingers. They glimmer under the lights, stones of blue and green and pink. A diamond on her left hand, though I've never heard her mention a husband. "I don't know if you've had the chance yet to use my gift . . ."

"No, I'm sorry," I say. "It's been a, uh, a busy week."

"Of course," she says. "Still, while we're all stuck in this building, I wanted to ask you a theological question, if that's alright."

“Yes,” I say, nervous. My parents might ask me for facts, information, recitations—never opinions.

“Do you think the people who preach God’s word are extensions of Him?” she asks.

“I . . . I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Think of it this way: the pastor, are we to look at him with the same reverence as we look at God? Do they hold the same authority?”

“Well, no . . .” I say. Though I know the book on my nightstand says as much, it feels blasphemous slithering off my tongue. “But he’s more of an authority than my parents, I guess. And my teachers. When it comes to spiritual things, at least.”

“Perhaps,” Margaret replies. “But does he not have his own faults to overcome?”

“He’s not perfect.” I struggle to find words, each moment like reaching into a pile of rocks, their edges scraping my knuckles. “No one is. But if God called him to spread His word, if the pastor spends so much time each week communing with Him, wouldn’t that make him in some way better than most of us?”

“Better?” Margaret asks.

“Purer,” I clarify. “Or just, I don’t know . . . I guess it’s easier for him not to sin?”

“Do you think that?” Therese asks.

“I . . . I don’t know,” I say. “I’ve never thought about it.”

“I understand your reasoning,” Margaret says. “But I’d like you to consider: if you dedicated your life to studying a book that said you were created in the image of divinity, that you were the first earthly authority to exist, would that not invite some untoward thoughts?”

The other women’s voices have evaporated, though I see their mouths continue to move. Margaret and Therese stare at me, their gazes warm and faintly glowing.

“I suppose so,” I reply. Margaret’s words burrow into my skin; they crack open, gush into the crevices, leaving a thin and shimmering resin.

Therese and I hardly speak during the drive to my house. After helping me with my bike, she hugs me, every part of her torso squeezing into every part of mine. I can feel the softness of her chest; her hair smells of roses.

In my room, I listen to the rain—heavier since the afternoon. The sound fills my ears, blots out every sensation. It beckons me, I think, to the bathroom. Turn the handle. Test the temperature. Reach for the packet, Margaret’s gift, plop it into the white expanse. Wait for the tub to fill.

The silence, when I turn off the faucet, is compromising. The

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packet, various shades of pink made darker by the water, floats along like a wound.

My skin screams, reddens, as I slip into the tub, steam rising in cursive prayers. I sit, hairs sticking to my face, waiting.

I suppose I thought it would be more magical. The scent would waft from the water, turn my bathroom into a geranium. The water would fertilize my skin. I would fall asleep, wake up with seedlings sprouting from my pores. I hold the packet to my nose, inhale. A garden, a field, an altar of divinity. I squeeze. The packet resists the pressure, as if in shock. Then it gives way: water oozes from its innards. Why is it so clear? Shouldn't it glisten? I rub the packet along my arms, across my stomach, under my chest. I press it over my heart. In the morning, I tell myself, I will have roses for fingers, lavender buds for teeth. My skin will be pink. People will see me and say, "There is a girl created by God, bestowed with His greatest delicacies."

I swirl in these thoughts until Mom calls me to dinner, rapping her knuckles on the door after I pretend not to have heard. The drain gurgles as it consumes the water. I stand in front of the mirror, gazing at my body. My body. A thing which is mine. A creature I will hold more than anyone else.

I count down the days until the next meeting. Pray for a swift weekend. School becomes interminable. The teachers drone on; my classmates' laughter scrapes against my ears.

I have only one day to go when I bike home to an unfamiliar car in the driveway. Large, black, shining despite the persistent drizzle. I discard my bike in the garage. Open the door, and there he sits. In my father's chair. Drinking coffee from my cup. He's been here long enough to dry off, his coat dangling on the chair like a victory flag.

"Hannah," my mother chimes. "Look who decided to stop in."

The pastor smiles.

"Hi, Hannah. How are you?"

"Well, thank you," I reply. I look to my mom: she pours another coffee into the cup we use for guests, pushes the drink towards me. Before I can take it, she unzips my hoodie.

"You're soaking," she mutters, peeling away the fabric. Then, brightening her voice, "The pastor came to speak specifically to you, Hannah. Isn't that wonderful?"

I nod, feeling once more a spectacle, a mewl in the dark.

"I'll leave you two to it," she says, flashing the pastor another smile.

The pastor indicates the chair next to him. "Please, let's sit down."

I take the coffee, do as he says. The steam from my cup

obscures the space between us.

“I didn’t mean to shock you,” he says, an ankle slung across the opposite knee. The chair creaks as he leans back. His wedding ring and watch are the same shade of gold; they glint as he scratches the side of his face.

“I was surprised, Hannah, at your choice of service project,” he says. “I’m curious, why the garden?”

I shrug. “I wanted to learn about plants.”

“Have you even been able to do anything, given the rain?”

“No, but we still meet. In the building beside the garden.”

The pastor nods. “And what do you talk about at these meetings?”

The kitchen lights, the outside’s gloom—it casts a gray pallor over his skin. He looks very small at my table, old and beseeching and pathetic. *Pa-the-tic*, I roll the word around my mind, each syllable like dew dropping from a leaf.

“Godliness,” I reply.

The pastor rubs his hands together, focuses on that rather than me. “A very important topic to discuss. But you see, Hannah, I’m worried about you being the only teenager in that group. If I remember correctly, the closest one to your age is . . . Therese Walker? And all the others are much older. I worry that they might not be able to meet you at your level, so to speak. That they can’t offer the same kind of support as, say, one of the small groups I lead.”

“The women have a lot of wisdom to give,” I say.

“Oh, I don’t doubt it.” The pastor squeezes his lips together, a poor semblance of a smile. “But you might feel that you can relate more in a group of kids your own age. That you can open up.”

“I don’t think so,” I say. “I like where I am.”

The pastor twists his coffee around; I can tell it’s gone cold. Each second brings greater silence. Sitting there, watching the pastor avoid his coffee, watching him search for another objection, the hush becomes a welcome beast—a confrontation, a pressure against his presence.

“Of course, it’s entirely your decision,” he says. “Yours and your parents’. But I still think you would benefit from some . . . personal counseling.”

“With who?” I ask.

“With me, Hannah. You’re at such a delicate age, I remember how confusing it all is. I’d hate to see such a bright girl go through this time unprepared.” He reaches for my hand, hesitates. His fingers curl around my wrist instead.

I drink from my cup, discarding his grasp. “I don’t think that will be necessary.”

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He nods, the movement slow, laborious. Looks at me again: the light renewed, the edge sharpened. “Pray about it, Hannah. Promise me?”

I nod, see him to the door. He places a hand on my back, requests again that I pray, listen to the Lord’s voice, act according to His will. He rushes to his car, head bowed against the thickening rain.

When I tell Therese, she asks questions I do not expect. *Where did he touch you, for how long, how did you feel.* The same singer as last week plays through the stereo, her fury tempered by the lowered volume.

When we reach the garden, Therese turns to me. “You should tell Margaret. She can help.”

I shake my head. “If she talks to the pastor, if my parents find out somehow, I don’t know what they’ll do. They’ll think I’m making it up.”

“Your parents won’t know,” Therese says. “Listen, Hannah, Margaret can help, but only if you ask her to.”

“What will she do?”

“She’ll take care of it, okay?”

Inside, the women talk with more animation than usual. One of their daughters has just given birth to her first child, a girl. The new grandmother passes around her phone, insisting everyone watch a video of the newborn curling her hand around the father’s finger. When the phone reaches Therese, I watch the clip alongside her. The baby’s hair sticks to her forehead. Her eyes and lips and nose tremble, adapting to their new purposes. I am in awe at her helplessness, her lack of awareness of it. The finger she holds is nearly the size of her arm.

When we hand over the phone, I notice Margaret standing at the outer edge of the room. She has wrapped herself in a shawl, the fabric a soft blue. She smiles at the women’s delight.

“Hello, Hannah,” she says, her voice a cloud that floats through the others’ laughter.

I walk to her; Therese does not follow.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Margaret comments. “To think, people once oohed and aahed over each of us like this.”

“Therese said I should speak to you,” I say.

Her smile does not waver, but her demeanor, when she looks at me, has sharpened: ready to carve, to gouge. “Oh, really? What about?”

“The pastor,” I whisper. The women pay us no mind; still, I fear that she will turn away, that I am being led from one lion’s den into another.

“What has he done?” Margaret asks.

“Nothing . . . not yet.”

“But he will?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” I stammer. The feeling that has plagued me since that first day recedes. Was it ever as vile as I made out? “But I think he might. It’s a . . . sense that I get . . . when he looks at me. It’s different than it used to be. He came to my house.”

“What did he want?” Margaret’s tone remains neutral, a sheet hanging on the clothesline.

“He didn’t like that I had chosen the garden for my service project. He wanted to counsel me privately.”

Margaret chuckles; the sound carries shards. “I’m sure he does. Tell me, Hannah, this feeling you get when he looks at you—you’re frightened? You think he’ll do something?”

I nod. “But he hasn’t yet.”

“Yet doesn’t mean won’t,” she says. “Will you go outside with me?”

“In the rain?”

“In the rain.”

I follow her. The women’s eyes trace our movements. No one asks where we’re going.

The rain patters against the building, splatters in the puddles that have formed atop the soil. The droplets land in my eyes, disorienting me. Margaret kneels beside one of the plots.

“Help me, will you?” she asks.

I sit beside her, follow the direction of her pointed finger.

“There’s something in the dirt that needs to be brought up,” she says.

I nod, push my sleeves up my arms. The soil, when I reach in, clings to my skin, beckoning. My hands grasp a round object. I pull, softly at first, but it does not budge. Finally, with a yank, it disentangles from the earth. I hold the mass in my hands, disappointed by its appearance—not so different from a potato in size and shape, yet so much heavier. I look at Margaret, doubt pooling under my eyes.

She hands me a trowel, edges sharp enough to glint.

“With force,” she says.

I hover the trowel over the mass, raising my hands once, twice, thrice. With a grunt, I stab, metal sinking into flesh. When I pull the trowel away, an odor exudes from the opening. It is putrid, the greatest decay, the scent of a heart gone to rot.

I look at Margaret. She nods. I return the mass to the earth. Cover it with the dirt I had displaced. Pat the soil flat with the trowel, though the ground is sludgy and therefore malleable.

When we walk back into the building, the women stop talking.

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They stare at me, mouths closed, eyes glistening. Some smile. Others frown. A few tremble. Therese steps forward, grabs my hand. It is streaked brown from the dirt, but I notice red on my skin as well. It covers my arms, my fingers, my shins. The patches are dry, though my hair is still wet, though water drips from my chin onto the floor. A body unfettered, skin that condemns. My bones crack in Therese's embrace, shudder as Margaret joins her from the opposite side. The other women, with their many expressions, join us. Arms encircling, hearts pressing. In their cocoon, I am resown.

We arrive at church the following Sunday, my parents and I. We sit in our usual row. The pastor, when he enters, looks pale, the skin under his eyes two thumb-shaped bruises. He fumbles over his words, loses track and repeats himself. My mother glances at her lap, my father's gaze drifts toward the window. Halfway through the service, he presses his elbow against mine, nods towards the glass. Sunlight streams in, blankets the world in white. The sky extends infinitely, a blue that purifies. We stare out the window, enraptured.

At the service's close, we file out of the church. I see Margaret ahead of us, Therese on the opposite side. They nod at me. By the time my parents and I step outside, once my eyes have been flooded with the sun and learned to see again, I can no longer find them.

"Not my favorite message," Mom mutters. Still, she waves the pastor over, attempts conversation. He squints in the light, never turns my way. I step aside, to the strip of grass between the sidewalk and parking lot. There, I tilt my head, unfurl myself to each magnificent ray. It is the holiest supplication.

