

A Family Garden

(excerpt)

Frank Zajackowski



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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.

CHAPTER 3

When I ring the doorbell, dogs start barking frantically inside. I hear a woman trying to quiet them, Virginia no doubt, and then she opens the door, brooming the dogs away with her foot...little shiatsus, three of them bouncing up and down like windup toys.

"Hello Chris," she smiles weakly, pushing open the screen.

"Virginia...hello. I hope Dave wasn't sleeping, sorry about that."

"He loves these damn things," she says.

She's an old woman. That's the first thing I see. Gray hair, thin lips, tired eyes in a tired face. It's terrible to have such a thought I know, given the gravity of what's going on in this house. But there it is. It's 2009. She's probably the same age as me. Sixty. Am I an old man? Sure I am. We're all old. Dave is old enough to be dying in there for God's sake.

I want to say something to her, to renew a connection. After all, we've known each other for decades though it's been years since we've spoken. She turns away, though, making any comment unnecessary, unwanted even.

"Dave's back here in the den," she says over her shoulder as the dogs dance around my feet, their toenails clicking the shiny oak floors like falling rice.

I scan the living room, framed prints on the walls, an

ocean scene, a pair of bison in the snow with the obligatory frosted forest behind them. Faded rattan furniture, two lamps on matching wobbly tables and an entertainment center sloppy with CDs.

We walk through a short hallway into the kitchen and from here I can see the den with its faux-brick fireplace. The dogs hurry ahead, excited that something is about to happen.

I hate the smell of hospitals, all that urine, vomit, and despair. I picture the months of misery Virginia endured in the corridors of hell. I'm grateful I didn't have to go through that. But the moment I walk into the den with its hospital bed in the center of the room, its crisp white sheets, its IV hanging down and some kind of breathing apparatus gawky in the corner, I know hell squats here, too.

The place is a death ward. It's the reason I'm here, to say good-bye, or so I think.

Like Virginia, Dave would've aged anyway; yet as I come up to the bedside, I see the devastation of his illness. His hair is white strands where a thick black mane once hung. His eyebrows, too, have disappeared. He looks like a baby who's dying on a professional mattress.

He's asleep, or unconscious may be a better word. Virginia lightly pats his shoulder. Nothing.

She leans in close, "Dave...Davey, hon. It's Chris. He's here."

He shifts ever so slightly. The dogs perk their ears. Virginia moves sideways and I edge in closer thinking he might open his eyes or speak. Then he does both.

"Ginny," he slurs, struggling to clear his throat.

"I'm right here, babe."

He slowly turns his head to locate the familiar voice. Instead he finds me. His eyes change. To welcome? Surprise? Relief? Yes, probably relief I've gotten here before he dies. He really does look that fragile now that life briefly

animates his skeleton.

He finds a trace of a smile, “Man, good to see you, Chris.”

“Dave...I want to say how sorry I am...” I stall, not sure how to continue and settle on, “I’m glad I’m here.”

It’s the honest truth. I am glad to be next to him this intimately in this fleeting moment. I’m generally pretty good at pretending life is our true nature, not death. But not today.

He tugs at the sheets to pull himself up. Virginia props him against a pillow.

“Hard...to talk,” he gestures to his throat.

“You don’t have to say anything. All the time that’s gone by, I should have called I know. The things that happened between us...”

“Forget all that,” he shakes his head, sputtering. “It’s the past. No time. I want to talk. Want to ask a favor.”

A favor? Is that why he called me here? For the briefest moment, my feelings are hurt. I thought he wanted to see me, Mr. Important Me. I thought he wanted to patch things up, to mend what was broken between us, as if that were even possible. Instead, he has a favor?

“Sure, anything, Dave, anything.”

I glance at Virginia for some sense of what’s coming. She offers nothing.

“It’s Max,” he says, “my son, Max. I’m asking you to release him.” He stops, corrects himself, “I mean to let the County release him to you.”

I have no idea what he means. I remember he has a son and quickly calculate that he must be in his mid-twenties. I haven’t seen him since he was a little kid.

“The County? What do you mean ‘release him?’” I ask.

Virginia says, “He’s in a detention center.”

“It’s a Rehab too,” Dave says as firmly as he can to

correct her.

She moves away to the dining table at the far side of the den. The dogs scratch over to her, imagining she'll eat soon I guess and that they'll benefit.

"He's got a drug problem. Cocaine, maybe other shit," Dave says with more clarity in his voice. "Swears he's clean now. I believe him, so does the Center." He cranes his head in Virginia's direction.

"Pitchess Detention Center in Castaic," she says with emphasis.

Dave coughs a little, then gathers his strength. "He's done a couple months, got another ten left on his sentence. His public defender says he won't make it there that long."

He starts coughing harder, a gluey shudder from deep inside. Virginia hurries back to the bed, and I move away as she rolls him onto his side, his head resting against her as she gently pats his back.

He struggles to free himself, "Come closer."

I lean in and touch his arm. The feel of brittle bone beneath his parchment skin makes me nearly flinch. His neck flesh strains as he tilts his head toward me. I could be a priest ready for a last confession.

"You don't have to take care of him. He's too old for that. Just get him to Canada, to his mom...to...Nicole."

My heart jumps at the mention of her name. Nicole.

"To a rehab place she's connected with." He stops to clear his throat.

Virginia says, "He's still a Canadian citizen through his mother of course. We've been in contact with her to work out the details with a public defender down here and a facility up there."

She speaks calmly, trying to make it all sound reasonable. But it sounds crazy to me. Take this kid, Max, to Canada? To his mom? To Nicole?

"He's gotta get there," Dave says, "It's the right

thing.” He tries not to plead with the doubt in my eyes. He looks at his broken body. “I can’t do it. Besides we don’t talk much. Never did. I owe it to him, and to Nicole.”

Then his coughing erupts and quiets him. Virginia rolls over an oxygen tank, straps the plastic see-through cup over his mouth and nose. His coughs echo into the cone, pink spittle collecting on the inside like a cotton candy swirl.

I walk into the living room, one of the dogs follows, prancing and wagging its tail.

Against the wall is a bookcase with a few paperbacks and nick-knacks on the top shelf. On the second shelf is an onyx ashtray well-used and dusty, next to it a wax-smearred menorah, and a purple geode with a felt label, ‘Happy Father’s Day’ written in kid letters.

On the lower shelf, I see an old photograph of me and Dave the day we took off hitchhiking up to San Francisco for a huge anti-Vietnam march. It’s a classic shot of long-haired kids ready for the mythic trip up the California Coast on Highway 1 to see the great north woods where naked hippie girls were rumored to gather on the shores of sunlit mountain lakes. We planned to drop a little mescaline, make a little love, and shake our fists at the War Machine.

Above the bookcase is a photo-collage of Max – a shot of a birthday at Disneyland, another at Universal Studios. A high school graduation with long hair and slouching. He could be the twin of Dave. He looks as stoned as we were when we graduated in 1969. In another photo, at six or seven I guess, he holds a large oyster shell standing on a tree-lined beach with his mother next to him.

Her name swirls in my head...Nicole...Nicole.

As I step in for a closer look, I nearly trip over the dog who nuzzles into my ankle. I bend down and scratch her behind the ear, “What the hell am I going to do, huh?”

The dog rolls onto her back, her feathery tail swishing on the hardwood floor, her pink belly round and taut,

front paws praying in the empty air.