

CHAPTER 1

Two Gardens

My first garden was a place no grown-up ever knew about, even though it was in the backyard of a quarter-acre suburban plot. Behind our house in Farmingdale, on Long Island, stood a rough hedge of lilac and forsythia that had been planted to hide the neighbor's slat wood fence. My garden, which I shared with my sister and our friends, consisted of the strip of unplanted ground between the hedge and the fence. I say that no grown-up knew about it because, in an adult's picture of this landscape, the hedge runs flush against the fence. To a four-year-old, though, the space made by the vaulting branches of a forsythia is as grand as the inside of a cathedral, and there is room enough for a world between a lilac and a wall. Whenever I needed to be out of range of adult radar, I'd crawl beneath the forsythia's arches, squeeze between two lilac bushes, and find myself safe and alone in my own green room.

I think of this place today as a garden not only because it offered an enclosed and privileged space out-of-doors but also because it was here that I first actually grew something. Most of the pictures I can retrieve from that time are sketchy and brittle, but this one unspools like a strip of celluloid. It must be September. I am by myself behind the hedge, maybe hiding from my sister or just poking around, when I catch sight of a stippled green football sitting in a tangle of vines and broad leaves. It's a watermelon. The feeling is of finding treasure—a right-angled change of fortune, an unexpected boon. Then I make the big connection between this melon and a seed I planted, or at least spit out and buried, months before: I made this happen. For a moment I'm torn between leaving the melon to ripen and the surging desire to publicize my achievement: Mom has got to see this. So I break the cord attaching the melon to the vine, cradle it in my arms and run for the house, screaming my head off the whole way. The watermelon weighs a ton, though, and just as I hit the back steps I lose my balance. The melon squirts from my arms and smashes in a pink explosion on the cement.

Watermelon perfume fills the air and then the memory stalls. I can't remember but I must have cried—to see so fine a triumph snatched away, to feel Humpty-Dumpty suddenly crash onto my four-year-old conscience. Memories of one kind or another play around the edges of every garden, giving them much of their resonance and savor. I've spent thousands of hours in the garden since that afternoon, and there is perhaps some sense in which all this time has been spent trying to recover that watermelon and the flush of pride that attended its discovery.

I can't recall whether I tried to salvage any part of the melon to show my father when he got home from work, but I can assume he would not have been greatly impressed. My father was not much for gardening, and the postage-stamp yard of our ranch house showed it. The lawn was patchy and always in need of a mowing, the hedges were unclipped and scraggly, and in summer hordes of Japanese beetles dined on our rosebushes without challenge. My father was a Bronx boy who had been swept to the suburbs in the postwar migration. Buying a house with a yard on Long Island was simply what you did then, part of how you said who you were when you were a lawyer or a dentist (he was a lawyer) just starting out in the fifties. Certainly it was no great love of fresh air that drove him from the city. I have a few memories of my father standing with his Salem and a highball glass on the concrete patio behind the house, but, with a single

exception I will come to, not one of him out in the yard mowing the lawn or pulling weeds or otherwise acting the part of a suburban dad.

I remember him as strictly an indoor dad, moving around the house in his year-round uniform of button-down shirt, black socks and tie shoes, and boxer shorts. Maybe it was the fact that he hated to wear pants that kept him indoors, or perhaps the boxers were a way to avoid having to go outside. Either way, my mother was left with the choice of her husband doing the yard work in his underwear, or not doing it at all, which in the suburbs is not much of a choice. So while the boxers kept Dad pinned to the kitchen table, the yard steadily deteriorated to the point where it became something of a neighborhood and family scandal.

My mother's father lived a few miles away in Babylon, in a big house with beautiful, manicured gardens, and the condition of our yard could be counted on to make him crazy—something it may well have been calculated to do. My grandfather was a somewhat overbearing patriarch whom my father could not stand. Grandpa, who would live to be ninety-six, had come to Long Island from Russia shortly before the First World War. Starting out with nothing, selling vegetables from a horse wagon, he eventually built a fortune, first in the produce business and later in real estate. In choosing my father, my mother had married a notch or two beneath her station, and Grandpa made it his business to minimize his eldest daughter's sacrifice—or, looked at from another angle, to highlight my father's shortcomings. This meant giving my father large quantities of unsolicited career advice, unsolicited business opportunities (invariably bum deals, according to my father), and unsolicited landscape services.

In the same way some people send flowers, Grandpa sent whole gardens. These usually arrived unexpectedly, by truck caravan. Two or three flatbeds appeared at the curb and a crew of Italian laborers fanned out across the property to execute whatever new plan Grandpa had dreamed up. One time he sent a rose garden that ran the length of our property, from curb to back fence. But it wasn't enough to send the rosebushes: Grandpa held my father's very soil in low esteem; no plant of his could be expected to grow in it. So he had his men dig a fifty-foot trench three feet wide and a foot deep, remove the soil by hand and then replace it with soil trucked in from his own garden. This way the roses (which also came from Grandpa's garden) would suffer no undue stress and my father's poor, neglected soil would be at least partly redeemed. Sometimes it seemed as if my grandfather was bent on replacing every bit of earth around our house, a square foot at a time.

Now any good gardener cares as much about soil as plants, but my grandfather's obsession with this particular patch of earth probably went deeper than that. No doubt my father, who was the first in his family to own his own house, viewed his father-in-law's desire to replace our soil with his own as a challenge to the very ground on which his independence stood. And maybe there was something to this: Grandpa had given my parents the money for the down payment (\$4,000; the house had cost \$11,000), and, like most of his gifts, this one was not unencumbered. The unsolicited landscaping services, like Grandpa's habit of occasionally pounding on the house's walls as if to check on its upkeep, suggest that his feelings about our house were more than a little proprietary. It was as a landlord that Grandpa felt most comfortable in the world, and as long as my father declined to think of himself as a tenant, they were bound not to get along.

But probably his concern for our soil was also an extension of his genuine and deeply felt love of land. I don't mean love of the land, in the nature-lover's sense. The land is abstract and in some final sense unpossessable by any individual. Grandpa loved land as a reliable if somewhat mystical source of private wealth. No matter what happened in the world, no matter what folly the government perpetrated, land could be counted on to hold and multiply its value. At the worst a plot could yield a marketable crop and, at least on Long Island for most of this century, it could almost certainly be resold for a profit. "They can print more money," he liked to say, "and they can print new stocks and bonds, but they can't print more land."

In his mind, the Old World peasant and the real estate developer existed side by side; he was both men and perceived no contradiction. Each looked at a piece of land and saw potential wealth: it made no difference that one saw a field of potatoes and the other a housing development. Grandpa could be perfectly happy spending his mornings tenderly cultivating the land and his afternoons despoiling it. Thoreau, planting his bean field, said he aimed to make the earth "speak beans." Some days my grandfather made the earth speak vegetables; other days it was shopping centers.

Grandpa started out in the teens wholesaling produce in Suffolk County, which was mostly farmland then. He would buy fruits and vegetables from the farmers and sell them to restaurants and, later, to the military bases that sprang up on Long Island during the war. He managed to make money straight through the Depression, and used his savings to buy farmland at Depression prices. When after the Second World War the suburbs started to boom, he saw his opportunity. Suffolk County was generally considered too far from the city for commuters, but Grandpa was confident that sooner or later the suburban tide would reach his shore. His faith in the area was so emphatic that (according to his obituary in *Newsday*) he was known in business circles as Mr. Suffolk.

Grandpa worked the leading edge of the suburban advance, speculating in the land that suburbanization was steadily translating from farm into tract house and shopping center. He grasped the powerful impulses that drove New Yorkers farther and farther out east because he shared them. There was the fear and contempt for city ways—the usual gloss on the suburban outlook—but there was also a nobler motive: to build a middle-class utopia, impelled by a Jeffersonian hunger for independence and a drive to create an ideal world for one's children. The suburbs, where you could keep one foot on the land and the other in the city, was without a doubt the best way to live, and Grandpa possessed an almost evangelical faith that we would all live this way eventually. Every time he bought a hundred acres of North Fork potato field, he knew it was only a matter of time before its utopian destiny would be fulfilled. Grandpa had nothing against potatoes, but who could deny that the ultimate Long Island crop was a suburban development? The fact that every home in that development could have a patch of potatoes in the backyard was proof that progress had no cost.

His own suburban utopia was a sprawling ranch house on five acres of waterfront in Babylon, on the south shore. My grandfather had enough money to live nearly anywhere, and for a time the family lived in a very grand mansion in Westbury. But he preferred to live in one of Long Island's new developments, and after his children were grown he and my grandmother moved into one where the fancy homes on their big plots nevertheless hewed to the dictates of middle-class suburban taste. The houses were set well back from the road and their massive expanses of unhedged front lawn ran together to create the

impression of a single parklike landscape. Here in front of each house was at least an acre of land on which no one but the hired gardener ever stepped, an extravagance of unused acreage that must have rubbed against Grandpa's grain. But front yards in the suburbs are supposed to contribute to a kind of visual commons, and to honor this convention, Grandpa was willing to deny himself the satisfaction of fully exploiting an entire acre of prime real estate.

At least until I was a teenager, visits to Grandma and Grandpa's were always sweet occasions. The anticipation would start to build as we turned onto Peninsula Drive and began the long, slow ride through that Great Common Lawn, a perfection of green relieved only by evergreen punctuation marks and the fine curves of driveways drawn in jet-black asphalt. Eager as we were to get there, we always made Mom slow down (Dad hardly ever made the trip) in the hope of spotting the one celebrity who lived on my grandparents' road: Bob Keeshan, known to every child of that time as Captain Kangaroo. One time we did see the Captain, dressed in his civilian clothes, digging in his garden.

There is something about a lush, fresh-cut lawn that compels children to break into a sprint, and after the long ride we couldn't wait to spill out of the station wagon and fan out across the backyard. The grass always seemed to have a fresh crew cut, and it was so springy and uniform that you wanted to run your hand across it and bring your face close. My sisters could spend the whole afternoon practicing their cartwheels on it, but sooner or later Grandma would lure them indoors, into what was emphatically her realm. Except for the garage and a small den with a TV, where Grandpa passed rainy days stretched out on the sofa, the house brimmed with grandmotheriness: glass cases full of tiny ceramic figurines, billowy pink chiffon curtains, dressing tables with crystal atomizers and silver hairbrushes, lacquered boxes stuffed with earrings, ornately framed portraits of my mother and aunt. I remember it as a very queenly place, a suburban Versailles, and it absorbed my sisters for hours at a time.

Grandpa's realm was outside, where he and his gardener, Andy, had made what I judged a paradise. Beginning at the driveway, the lawn described a broad, curving avenue that wound around the back of the house. On one side of it was the flagstone patio and rock garden, and on the other a wilder area planted with shrubs and small trees; this enclosed the backyard, screening it from the bay. A stepping-stone path conducted you through this area, passing beneath a small rose arbor and issuing with an unfailingly pleasing surprise onto the bright white beach. Plunked in the middle of the lawn was a gazebo, a silly confection of a building that was hardly ever used. Arrayed around it in a neat crescent was a collection of the latest roses: enormous blooms on spindly stems with names like Chrysler and Eisenhower and Peace. In June they looked like members of a small orchestra, performing for visitors in the gazebo.

The area between the lawn and the beach was twenty or thirty feet deep, thickly planted, and it formed a kind of wilderness we could explore out of sight of the adults on the patio. Here were mature rhododendrons and fruit trees, including a famous peach that Grandpa was said to have planted from seed. It was an impressive tree, too, weighed down in late summer with bushels of fruit. The tree was a dwarf, so we could reach the downy yellow globes ourselves. Hoping to repeat Grandpa's achievement, we carefully buried the pit of every peach we ate. (Probably it was his example that inspired my experiment with watermelon seeds.) But ripe fruit was only one of the surprises of

Grandpa's wild garden. There was another we always looked for, only sometimes found. Creeping among the rhododendrons and dwarf trees, we would on lucky days come upon a small, shaded glade where, on a low mound, a concrete statue stood. It was a boy with his hand on his penis, peeing. This scandalous little scene never failed to set off peals of laughter when we were in a group; alone, the feelings were more complicated. In one way or another Eros operates in every garden; here was where he held sway in Grandpa's.

Back out in daylight, you could continue along the avenue of lawn until you came to an area of formal hedges clipped as tall as a ten-year-old, and forming an alley perhaps ten feet wide and forty feet long. At one end was a regulation-size shuffleboard court paved in sleek, painted concrete (it felt cool to bare feet all summer), and, at the other, a pair of horseshoe pins. Some visits these games held my interest for a while, but usually I made straight for the break in the hedge that gave onto what was unquestionably my favorite and my grandfather's proudest part of the garden—indeed, the only part of the property I ever heard anybody call a garden: his vegetable garden.

Vegetables had given Grandpa his earliest success, and the older he got, the more devoted to them he became. Eventually care of the ornamental gardens fell to Andy, and Grandpa spent the better part of his days among the vegetables, each spring adding to the garden and subtracting from the lawn. It's quite possible that, had Grandpa lived another twenty years, his suburban spread would have reverted entirely to farm. As it was, Grandpa had at least a half-acre planted in vegetables—virtually a truck farm, and a totally unreasonable garden for an elderly couple. I have a photograph of him from the seventies, standing proudly among his vegetables in his double-knits, and I can count more than twenty-five tomato plants and at least a dozen zucchini plants. You can't see the corn—row upon row of sweet corn—or the string beans, cucumbers, cantaloupes, peppers, and onions, but there had to be enough here to supply a farm stand.

The garden was bordered by a curving brick kneewall that ran right along the water, a location that ensured a long growing season since the bay held heat well into the fall, forestalling frost. Grandpa could afford to be extravagant with space, and no two plants in his garden ever touched one another. I don't think a more meticulous vegetable garden ever existed; my grandfather hoed it every morning, and no weed dared raise its head above that black, loamy floor. Grandpa brought the same precision to the planting of string beans and tomatoes that Le Nôtre brought to the planting of chestnut trees in the Tuileries. The rows, which followed the curves of the garden wall, might as well have been laid out by a surveyor, and the space between each plant was uniform and exact. Taken as a whole, the garden looked like nothing so much as a scale model for one of the latest suburban developments: the rows were roads, and each freestanding vegetable plant was a single-family house. Here in the garden one of the unacknowledged contradictions of Grandpa's life was symbolically resolved: the farmer and the developer became one. But what could have possessed my grandfather to plant such a big vegetable garden? Even cooking and canning and pickling at her furious clip, there was no way my grandmother could keep up with his garden's vast daily yield. Eventually she cracked and went on strike: she refused to process any more of his harvest, and true to her word, never again pickled a cucumber or canned a tomato. But even then he would not be deterred, and the garden continued to expand.

I suspect that this crisis of overproduction suited Grandpa just fine. He was foremost a capitalist and, to borrow a pair of terms from Marx, was ultimately less interested in the use-value of his produce than in its exchange-value. I don't mean to suggest that he took no immediate pleasure in his vegetables; his tomatoes, especially, pleased him enormously. He liked to slice his beefsteaks into thick pink slabs and go at them with a knife and fork. Watching him dine on one, you understood immediately how a tomato could come to be named for a cut of meat. "Sweetasugar," he would announce between bites, his accent mashing the three words together into one incantatory sound. Of course he would say the same thing about his Bermuda onions, his corn, even his bell peppers. Grandpa's vocabulary of English superlatives was limited, and "sweetasugar" was the highest compliment you could pay a vegetable.

Eating beefsteaks was one pleasure, but calculating their market value and giving them away was even better. Having spent many years in the produce business, Grandpa had set aside a place in his mind where he maintained the current retail price of every vegetable in the supermarket; even in his nineties he would drop by the Waldbaum's produce section from time to time to update his mental price list. Harvesting alongside him, I can remember Grandpa holding a tomato aloft and, instead of exclaiming over its size or perfect color, he'd quote its market price: Thirty-nine cents a pound! (Whatever the amount, it was always an outrage.) Probably when he gazed out over his garden he could see in his mind's eye those little white placards stapled to tongue depressors listing the going per-pound price of every crop. And given the speed with which he could tally a column of figures in his head, I am sure he could mentally translate the entire garden into U.S. currency in less time than it took me to stake a tomato plant. To work in his garden was to commune with nature without ever leaving the marketplace.

By growing much more produce than he and Grandma could ever hope to consume, Grandpa transformed his vegetables into commodities. And to make sure of this elevated status, he planted exclusively those varieties sold by the supermarket chains: beefsteaks, iceberg lettuce, Blue Lake string beans, Marketmore cukes. Never mind that these were usually varieties distinguished less for their flavor than their fitness for transcontinental shipment; he preferred a (theoretically) marketable crop to a tasty one. Of course selling the vegetables wasn't a realistic option; he appreciated that an eighty-five-year-old real estate magnate couldn't very well open a farm stand, as much as he might have liked to. Still, he needed distribution channels, so he worked hard at giving the stuff away. All summer, before he got dressed for work (he never retired), Grandpa harvested the garden and loaded the trunk and backseat of his Lincoln with bushel baskets of produce. As he went on his rounds—visiting tenants, haggling with bankers and brokers, buying low and selling high—he'd give away baskets of vegetables. Now my grandfather never gave away anything that didn't have at least some slender string attached to it, and no doubt he believed that his sweet-as-sugar beefsteaks put these businessmen in his debt, gave him some slight edge. And probably this was so. At the least, the traveling produce show put the suits off their guard, making Grandpa seem more like some benign Old World bumpkin than the shark he really was.

It took a long time before I understood the satisfactions of giving away vegetables, but the pleasures of harvesting them I acquired immediately. A good visit to Grandma and Grandpa's was one on a day he hadn't already harvested. On these occasions I could barely wait for Grandpa to hand me a basket and dispatch me to the garden to start the

picking. Alone was best—when Grandpa came along, he would invariably browbeat me about some fault in my technique, so I made sure to get out there before he finished small-talking with Mom. Ripe vegetables were magic to me. Unharvested, the garden bristled with possibility. I would quicken at the sight of a ripe tomato, sounding its redness from deep amidst the undifferentiated green. To lift a bean plant's hood of heart-shaped leaves and discover a clutch of long slender pods hanging underneath could make me catch my breath. Cradling the globe of a cantaloupe warmed in the sun, or pulling orange spears straight from his sandy soil—these were the keenest of pleasures, and even today in the garden they're accessible to me, dulled only slightly by familiarity.

At the time this pleasure had nothing to do with eating. I didn't like vegetables any better than most kids do (tomatoes I considered disgusting, acceptable only in the form of ketchup), yet there it was: the vegetable sublime. Probably I had absorbed my grandfather's reverence for produce, the sense that this was precious stuff and here it was, growing, for all purposes, on trees. I may have had no use for tomatoes and cucumbers, but the fact that adults did conferred value on them in my eyes. The vegetable garden in summer made an enchanted landscape, mined with hidden surprises, dabs of unexpected color and unlikely forms that my grandfather had taught me to regard as treasures. My favorite board game as a child was Candyland, in which throws of the dice advanced your man through a stupendous landscape of lollipop trees, milk-chocolate swamps, shrubs made of gumdrops. Candyland posited a version of nature that answered to a child's every wish—a landscape hospitable in the extreme, which is one definition of a garden—and my grandfather's vegetable patch in summer offered a fair copy of that paradise.

This was Grandpa's garden. If I could look at it and see Candyland, he probably saw Monopoly; in both our eyes, this was a landscape full of meaning, one that answered to wishes and somehow spoke in a human language. As a child I could always attend more closely to gardens than to forests, probably because forests contain so little of the human information that I craved then, and gardens so much. One of the things childhood is is a process of learning about the various paths that lead out of nature and into culture, and the garden contains many of these. I can't imagine a wilderness that would have had as much to say to me as Grandpa's garden did: the floral scents that intimated something about the ways of ladies as well as flowers, the peach tree that made legible the whole idea of fruit and seed, the vegetables that had so much to say about the getting of food and money, and the summer lawns that could not have better expressed the hospitality of nature to human habitation.

My parents' yard (you would not call it a garden) had a lot to say, too, but it wasn't until I was much older that I could appreciate this. Landscapes can carry a whole other set of meanings, having to do with social or even political questions, and these are usually beyond the ken of young children. My father's unmowed front lawn was a clear message to our neighbors and his father-in-law, but at the time I was too young to comprehend it fully. I understood our yard as a source of some friction between my parents, and I knew enough to be vaguely embarrassed by it. Conformity is something children seem to grasp almost instinctively, and the fact that our front yard was different from everybody else's made me feel our family was odd. I couldn't understand why my father couldn't be more like the other dads in the neighborhood.

One summer he let the lawn go altogether. The grasses grew tall enough to flower and set seed; the lawn rippled in the breeze like a flag. There was beauty here, I'm sure, but it

was not visible in this context. Stuck in the middle of a row of tract houses on Long Island, the lawn said turpitude rather than meadow, even though that is strictly speaking what it had become. It also said, to the neighbors, fuck you.

A case could be made that the front lawn is the most characteristic institution of the American suburb, and my father's lack of respect for it probably expressed his general ambivalence about the suburban way of life. In the suburbs, the front lawn is, at least visually, a part of a collective landscape; while not exactly public land, it isn't entirely private either. In this it reflects one of the foundations of the suburban experiment, which Lewis Mumford once defined as "a collective effort to live a private life." The private part was simple enough: the suburban dream turns on the primacy of family life and private property; these being the two greatest goods in my father's moral universe, he was eager to sign up. But "owning your own home" turned out to be only half of it: a suburb is a place where you undertake to do this in concert with hundreds of other "like-minded" couples. Without reading the small print, my father had signed on for the whole middle-class utopian package, and there were heavy dues to pay.

The front lawn symbolized the collective face of suburbia, the backyard its private aspect. In the back, you could do pretty much whatever you wanted, but out front you had to take account of the community's wishes and its self-image. Fences and hedges were out of the question: they were considered antisocial, unmistakable symbols of alienation from the group. One lawn should flow unimpeded into another, obscuring the boundaries between homes and contributing to the sense of community. It was here in the front lawn that "like-mindedness" received its clearest expression. The conventional design of a suburban street is meant to forge the multitude of equal individual parcels of land into a single vista—a democratic landscape. To maintain your portion of this landscape was part of your civic duty. You voted each November, joined the PTA, and mowed the lawn every Saturday.

Of course the democratic system can cope with the nonvoter far more easily than the democratic landscape can cope with the nonmower. A single unmowed lawn ruins the whole effect, announcing to the world that all is not well here in utopia. My father couldn't have cared less. He owned the land; he could do whatever he wanted with it. As for the neighbors, he felt he owed them nothing. Ours was virtually the only Jewish family in a largely Catholic neighborhood, and with one or two exceptions, the neighbors had always treated us coolly. Why should he pretend to share their values? If they considered our lawn a dissent from the common will, that was a fair interpretation. And if it also happened to rankle his father-in-law, well, that only counted in its favor. (One should be careful, however, not to minimize the influence of laziness on my father's philosophy of lawn care.)

The summer he stopped mowing altogether, I felt the hot breath of a tyrannical majority for the first time. Nobody would say anything, but you heard it anyway: Mow your lawn. Cars would slow down as they drove by our house. Probably some of the drivers were merely curious: they saw the unmowed lawn and wondered if perhaps someone had left in a hurry, or died. But others drove by in a manner that was unmistakably expressive, slowing down as they drew near and then hitting the gas angrily as they passed—this was pithy driving, the sort of move that is second nature to a Klansman.

The message came by other media, too. George Hackett, our next-door neighbor and my father's only friend in the development, was charged by the neighbors with conveying the

sense of the community to my father. George didn't necessarily hold with the majority on this question, but he was the only conceivable intermediary and he was susceptible to pressure. George was a small, somewhat timid man—he was probably the least intimidating adult in my world at the time—and I'm sure the others twisted his arm fairly hard before he agreed to do their bidding. It was early on a summer evening that he came by to deliver the message. I don't remember it all, but I can imagine him taking a drink from my mother, squeaking out what he had been deputized to say, and then waiting for my father—who next to George was a bear—to respond.

My father's reply could not have been more eloquent. He went to the garage and cranked up the rusty old Toro for the first time since spring; it is a miracle the thing started. He pushed it out to the curb and then started back across the lawn to the house, but not in a straight line; he swerved right, then left, then right again. He had made an S in the tall grass. Then he made an M and finally a P. These were his initials, and as soon as he finished writing them, he wheeled the lawn mower back to the garage, never to start it up again.

It wasn't long after this incident that we moved out of Farmingdale. The year was 1961, I was six, and my father was by now doing well enough to afford a house on the more affluent north shore, in a town called Woodbury. We bought one of the first houses in a new development called the Gates; the development was going in on the site of an old estate, and the builder had preserved the gigantic, wrought-iron entrance gates in order to lend the new neighborhood a bit of aristocratic tone.

To the builder goes the privilege of naming the streets in his development, and the common practice then was to follow a theme. Most neighborhoods had streets named for trees and flowers, but the Gates from the start pictured itself as a different kind of development—grander, more forward-looking—so it would have a different kind of street name. Alaska had recently been made the fiftieth state, and this developer, regarding himself perhaps as a pioneer or empire builder, decided to name all his streets after places there; our house was at the corner of Juneau Boulevard and Fairbanks Drive. (The word street, with its urban connotation, is not a part of the suburban vocabulary.) The incongruity of remote, frontierish place names attached to prissy “boulevards” and “drives” and “courts” never seemed to bother anybody.

With a new development, you chose your plot of land, one of the three available house types (ranch, colonial, or split-level), and then they built it for you. We chose a wooded acre (a vast tract compared to what we had in Farmingdale) that sloped down from Juneau Boulevard into a hollow. The topography afforded some privacy, but it meant that the floor of our basement was usually under several inches of water. As for house type, there could be no question: we always lived in ranch houses. There were two reasons for this. First, a ranch was the most “modern” kind of house, and my parents regarded themselves as modern. The second reason had to do with safety: my mother believed you simply did not raise children in a house with a staircase. You might as well invite the Long Island Rail Road to lay its tracks through your backyard.

After the contract had been signed, my father would drive my sister and me to Woodbury each weekend to follow the progress of our new house. We watched as the wooded acre was partially cleared and staked out by surveyors with tripods. My parents had chosen this plot because of its deep oak forest, and we tied ribbons to the trees we wanted saved, including a great big two-trunked oak that would stand outside our front door for the rest

of my childhood. We felt like pioneers, watching as the woods gave way to bulldozers and a whole new landscape began to take shape. I remember being deeply impressed by what the heavy equipment could accomplish; who knew a forest could be turned into a yard, or a hill made to disappear? I'd never seen land change like this. The day they came to pour the foundation, my father gave us pennies to drop in the fresh concrete for good luck.

Though only twenty minutes away from Farmingdale, the Gates was a different world. Farmingdale was a blue-collar neighborhood, inhabited by electricians, engineers, and aerospace workers for whom a suburban home was the first and perhaps the only proof of membership in the American middle class. It may have been the tenuousness of our neighbors' grip on that identity that made them so touchy about lawns and Jews. The people who bought into the Gates, on the other hand, were the sons and daughters of the lower middle class, which in the fifties and sixties meant they were on their way to becoming quite affluent; they were lawyers and doctors and the owners of small businesses. This was a more confident class, and they sought a suburban home that would reflect their ascendancy and sophistication. Already in the early 1960s, the suburbs had acquired a reputation for conformity and squareness, and the Gates appealed to people who wanted to live in a suburb that didn't look like one. The streets were broad and, instead of being laid out in a tight grid, they curved in unpredictable ways. There was no practical reason for this, of course; the streets didn't curve around anything. They curved strictly to give an impression of ruralness and age. A sort of antisuburban suburban aesthetic ruled the development: the plots had been cut into irregular shapes, sidewalks had been eliminated, and roads ended in cul-de-sacs (these were the "courts").

Compared to Farmingdale, the landscaping in the Gates was wildly expressive. Not that the tyranny of the front lawn had been overturned. But even within that tight constraint, many families managed, in a phrase you were beginning to hear a lot, to do their own thing. Most of the landscaping styles were vaguely aristocratic, recalling the look of British country estates or, even more improbably, southern plantations. Circular driveways were very big. These broad crescents, scrupulously outlined in shrubbery, would curve right up to the front door. The planting served to emphasize the asphalt, which would be repainted each year with driveway sealer to restore its inky sheen. These driveways made a visitor feel he was driving up to a mansion rather than a split-level; you half expected someone in livery to open the car door for you. But the true purpose of the circular driveway was to provide a glittering setting for the family jewel, which was usually a Cadillac or Lincoln. Circular driveways make it socially acceptable to park your car right in the middle of the front yard where no one could possibly miss it.

The Rosenblums, a few doors up Juneau Boulevard from us, had two driveways, one on each side of the biggest, flattest, most pristine lawn in the development. Their aloof white colonial stood squarely in the middle of this vast green rectangle, framed by the two dead-straight black pavements. One driveway delivered family members to the garage and the other brought guests to a somewhat more formal entrance. The façade of the house was vaguely Greek Revival, but immense, with four ridiculous Doric columns and a giant wrought-iron chandelier hanging in the middle. It always reminded me of Tara. Just what kind of fantasy Mr. Rosenblum was working out here I have no idea, but I do remember he would get hopping mad whenever anyone used the wrong driveway.

It must have been obvious to my parents that the “S.M.P.” approach to lawn care and gardening would not go over in the Gates. Fortunately, they could now afford to buy a fancy landscaping job and, even more important, a maintenance contract that would help keep my father on the right side of his new neighbors. It’s important to understand that my parents were not indifferent to the landscape; even my father cared about his trees and shrubs. He simply didn’t like lawns and preferred to deal with the rest of the garden at a remove, ideally through a window. But with money came a new approach to gardening, one that replaced laborious, direct involvement with the earth and plants with practices more to his liking: supervision, deal making, shopping, technological tinkering, negotiation. One must enlarge the definition of gardening a bit before his quasi-horticultural accomplishments can be fully appreciated. Perhaps the greatest of these involved the weeping birch that stood in the middle of our backyard in Farmingdale, forming what looked like a cascading green fountain. This somewhat rare specimen was my mother’s favorite tree, and she wanted very badly to bring it with us to Woodbury. So as soon as the contract to sell the house in Farmingdale had been signed, but before the new owners moved in, my father arranged to have Walter Schikelhaus, my grandfather’s landscape man, dig it out and truck it to Woodbury. But the tree was so distinctive, and occupied such a pivotal position in the backyard, that the new owners were bound to miss it. So my father had Walter plant in its place a weeping willow. Then he instructed Walter to paint the willow’s bark white and carefully prune its branches to resemble a weeping birch. After mowing his initials in Farmingdale, this was perhaps my father’s greatest achievement as a gardener, a strikingly original synthesis of topiary and fraud.

The man my parents hired to design, plant, and maintain our yard must have been a renegade among Long Island landscapers. Taking his cues from my father, he came up with a radical, low-maintenance design that included only a slender, curving ribbon of lawn. This narrow lane of sod wound an unpredictable path among every alternative to grass then known to landscaping: broad islands of shrubbery underplanted with pachysandra; flagstone patios; substantial wooded areas; and even a Japanese section paved in imported white pebbles. It was all very modern, and though it defied the conventions of suburban landscape design, it did so with taste. Overall, the front yard had far more ground cover than grass. Instead of foundation planting, most of the shrubs (rhododendron and azalea, in the main) were planted close to the street, forming a rough, irregular hedge that obscured the house. The retaining wall along the driveway was a terraced affair made out of railroad ties, which at the time were still a novelty in landscape design. (They weren’t commercially available then, but my father arranged to buy them off trucks from LILCO and LIRR employees.) Much of the property was left wooded. And the Toro stayed behind, in Farmingdale. We may have been the only family on Long Island that didn’t own a lawn mower.

Since my father’s line on watering was more or, less the same as his line on mowing, he decided to order a state-of-the-art sprinkler system. From his command post in the garage he would be able to monitor and water every corner of his acre, one zone at a time. An elaborate timer, working in conjunction with a device that judged the moisture content of the soil, was supposed to ensure that the grass and pachysandra enjoyed optimum conditions. But it soon became clear that the sprinkler man had taken my father for an expensive ride. We had hundreds more sprinkler heads than we could possibly need; every six feet another bronze mushroom poked out of the ground. And the system never

worked properly. Often in the middle of the night, or during a rainstorm, the sprinkler heads would suddenly start hissing and spitting in unison, as if under the direction of some alien intelligence. From some heads the spray roared like Niagara, but most of them dribbled pathetically. My father would spend hours at a time in the garage, standing in his boxer shorts at the control panel, trying vainly to rein in the system's perversity. From my point of view, my father's remote-controlled landscape was sorely lacking. Once the crew finished planting the shrubs and laying down the carpet of sod, there was nothing left to do but look at it. For all its banality, the conventional suburban landscape, like the suburbs themselves, was tailored to the needs of children. As a place to play, nothing surpasses a lawn. Beautiful as it was, my parents' yard, with its sliver of lawn and masses of shade trees, was inhospitable to children; it was a spectator's landscape, its picturesque views best appreciated indoors, in boxers. You certainly couldn't play in the pachysandra.

But what it lacked most was a garden. True, considered whole, it was a garden, but to my mind (as in the common American usage) a garden was a small plot of flowers or vegetables; everything else was a "yard." A yard was just a place; a garden was somehow more specific and, best of all as far as I was concerned, it was productive: it did something. I wanted something more like my grandfather's garden, a place where I could put my hands on the land and make it do things. I'd also been spending a lot of time watching workmen revolutionize the landscape all around me as they created this new development: every day, it seemed, forests turned into lawns, fresh black roads bisected the nearby farm fields, sumps were being dug, whole hills were moving. Everywhere you looked the landscape seemed to be in flux, and I was taken with the whole idea of reshaping earth. Meanwhile our own acre had suddenly fossilized. All you could do was go to the garage and fiddle with the sprinkler controls. I wanted to dig.

Most of our yard now came under the jurisdiction of the maintenance crews that showed up every Friday, but there were still a few corners that escaped their attention. The lawn never took in the backyard, along the narrow corridor between the house and the woods; no matter what blend of seed they tried, the shade eventually defeated the grass. When the landscapers finally gave up on this patch I was allowed to dig in it. Of course the shade precluded my planting a garden, but I had another idea: to give the property a badly needed body of water. I ran a hose underground from the house and constructed a watercourse: a streambed lined with stones that passed through a complex network of pools and culminated in a spectacular waterfall, at least eight inches tall. I spent whole afternoons observing the water as it inscribed new paths in the ground on its infinitely variable yet inevitable journey toward the woods. I was learning to think like water, a knack that would serve me well in the garden later on. I experimented with various stones to produce different sounds and motions, and no doubt wasted an obscene amount of water. Though I judged it a miniature landscape of extraordinary beauty, my water garden may have really been little more than a mud patch; I'm not sure.

When I tired of my water garden, I ripped it out and built a cemetery in its place. We had lots of pets, and they were constantly dying. Not just cats and dogs, but canaries and chicks, turtles and ducklings, gerbils and hamsters. Whenever one of these animals expired, my sisters and I would organize elaborate funerals. And if all our pets happened to be in good health, there were always roadkills in need of decent burial. After we interred the shoebox-caskets, we would rake and reseed the ground and plant another

homemade wooden cross above the grave. I understood that crosses were for Christians. But a Star of David was beyond my carpentry skills, and anyway I was inclined to think of pets as gentiles. To a child growing up Jewish, the Other, in all its forms, was presumed to be Christian.

My usual partner in all these various landscaping endeavors was Jimmy Brancato, an uncannily hapless boy who lived down the street with his problematic parents. Mr. Brancato was a vaguely gangsterish character who owned a car wash in Hempstead, and who, it was rumored, had once spent time in jail in another state. Mrs. Brancato, who wore her bleach-blond hair in a monumental do and looked a lot like a gun moll, was a champion screamer and worrier. She was so steadfast in the conviction that her children were destined for trouble (jail in Jimmy's case; out-of-wedlock pregnancy in his sisters') that they must have gradually come to believe there could be no alternative. And sure enough, one of the daughters eventually did get knocked up and Jimmy had a serious run-in with the law.

But that came much later; at the time I'm writing about, Jimmy was nine or ten, merely on the cusp of delinquency. As you can imagine, we both preferred to hang out at my house. Jimmy loved my mother, probably for the simple reason that she didn't see prison stripes when she looked at him. And I was too terrified of Jimmy's parents to go near them voluntarily. I liked Jimmy because, compared to me, he was bold and fearless; he liked me because, compared to him, I had a brain. We made a good team.

We both liked to garden, though it's possible Jimmy was just following my lead here. I usually set the agenda, explaining to Jimmy where we were going to dig or what we were going to plant that day, citing my grandfather whenever I needed to bolster my authority. Our first garden, which we called a farm, was terraced: the railroad-tie retaining wall rose from the driveway in a series of four or five steps, each of which made a perfect garden bed. We'd plant strawberries on one level, watermelons on another, and on a third some cucumbers, eggplants, and peppers. But strawberries were by far our favorite crop. They had the drama of tomatoes (the brilliant red fruit), they came back every year by themselves (something we thought was very cool), and they were edible. Our goal, though, was to harvest enough strawberries to sell—this being a farm—and anytime we could get six or seven ripe ones at a time, we'd put them in a Dixie cup and sell them to my mother. Eventually we hoped to open a farm stand on Juneau Boulevard. Jimmy always worked like a dog. Even after I'd be called in for dinner, he'd stay out there digging and hoeing until his mother stuck her head out of their kitchen window and started hollering for him to come home.

As much as he seemed to enjoy it, this form of gardening didn't fully satisfy Jimmy's taste for adventure; perhaps he sensed that it would be hard to realize his destiny in the vegetable patch (though in fact he eventually would find a way to do exactly that). Jimmy held a relatively broad concept of gardening, embracing as it did such unconventional practices as the harvesting of other people's crops in their absence. Bordering our development was a pumpkin field, and several times each fall Jimmy insisted I accompany him on a mission to steal as many pumpkins as we could pile in our wagons. Going along was the price I paid for Jimmy's help on the farm.

The pumpkin field in October was a weirdly beautiful place, with its vast web of green vines blanketing the gorgeous orange orbs for as far as you could see. Here was the vegetable sublime again, but now its experience was fraught with danger. I'd been taught

that trespassing was a heinous crime, and the NO TRESPASSING sign we had to drag our wagons past choked me with fear. In the suburbs private property was such a sacrosanct institution that even young children felt its force. Jimmy claimed—probably just to scare me but you never knew for sure—that the farmers had rifles that fired bullets made of salt, and if they saw us they would be fully within their rights to shoot since we were on their property. These salt pellets were said to cause excruciating pain. (As if getting shot with steel bullets wouldn't have been bad enough.) We managed to get out alive every time, but I have to say I wasn't entirely disappointed the year the pumpkin field gave way to a new housing development.

After we'd arrived safely at home with our pumpkins (we'd always go to Jimmy's; my mother would have flipped out if we'd shown up with hot pumpkins), we'd divvy up the loot and then Jimmy would proceed methodically to smash his share. This was a pleasure I could not comprehend. But clearly the kick for Jimmy came in stealing the pumpkins, not owning them. Watching him get off bashing his pumpkins, you would think he'd been possessed. And the longer I knew him, the more I began to sense that he had an almost mystical attraction to trouble. One summer while my family was away on vacation, Jimmy was running some routine experiments with matches when he accidentally burned down most of the forest behind our house. All kids chucked snowballs at passing cars, but when Jimmy did it he would smash a windshield and then actually get caught. He wasn't a bad kid, not at all; it's just that he had some sort of tropism that bent him toward disaster as naturally as a plant bends toward sunlight.

Years after we had gone our separate ways, Jimmy figured out a way to combine what I'd taught him about gardening with his penchant for trouble. It must have been around 1970, when he was in the ninth grade, that Jimmy decided to start his own farm, one that might actually make some money. He planted a small field of marijuana. Jimmy had considered all the angles and went to great lengths to avoid detection. Growing pot on his parents' property was obviously out of the question, so he cleared a plot down by the Manor House, the abandoned mansion on whose grounds the Gates had been built. The developer had promised to turn the Manor House into a community center, but he had skipped town long ago and the place had devolved into a kind of no-man's-land, a gothic ruin surrounded by old refrigerators and derelict shopping carts. Brambles and sumac choked any spot not occupied by a stripped Impala, and clearing a patch for a garden must have been back-breaking work. Most of us didn't dare go near the Manor House during the day, let alone after dark. But each night, after midnight, Jimmy would slip out of his house, ride his bicycle down to the Manor House, and tend his precious crop by flashlight.

Getting caught wasn't going to be easy, but Jimmy managed to pull it off.

Shortly before Jimmy planned to begin his harvest, a neighborhood boy riding his bicycle around the Manor House happened upon his garden. Today, the leaf pattern and silhouette of a pot plant is as familiar as a maple's, but this was not yet the case in 1970. Unfortunately for Jimmy, this particular boy had recently attended an assembly at school where a policeman had shown the kids how to recognize marijuana. The boy raced home and told his mother what he'd seen and his mother called the police.

Jimmy had by now been in enough scrapes to be well known to the local police and I'm sure they immediately settled on him as a prime suspect. In the version of the story I heard, when the cops dropped by to question Jimmy and his mother, he kept cool,

admitting nothing. Since they had no evidence linking Jimmy to the marijuana plants, that should have been the end of it. But the police had aroused Mrs. Brancato's suspicions and she decided to conduct a search of Jimmy's room.

Of the seven deadly sins, surely it is pride that most commonly afflicts the gardener.

Jimmy was justly proud of his garden, and though he knew better than to invite anyone to visit it, he apparently couldn't resist taking a few snapshots of his eight-foot beauties in their prime. Mrs. Brancato found the incriminating photographs and, concluding it would be best for her son in the long run, turned them in to the police. No charges were brought, but Jimmy was packed off to military school, and I lost track of him.

My own gardening career remained well within the bounds of the law, if not always of propriety. Around the same time Jimmy was tending his plot down at the Manor House, I moved the farm from the cramped quarters of the retaining wall to a more spacious plot I had cajoled from my parents alongside the foundation of our house. This would be my last garden in the Gates. Even the most devoted young gardener will find that his interest fades around the time of high school, and soon mine did. But the summer before I got my driver's license I made my most ambitious garden yet. I persuaded my parents to buy me a few yards of topsoil, and in the space of a hundred square feet I crammed a dozen different crops: tomatoes (just then become edible), peppers, eggplants, strawberries, corn, squash, melons (watermelon and cantaloupe), string beans, peas. Everything but lettuce, which, since it bore no fruit, held not nearly enough drama for me. Why would anyone ever want to grow leaves?

Years later when I read about European techniques of intensive agriculture, I realized this is what I had been doing without knowing it. I enriched the soil with bags of peat moss and manure, tilled it deeply, and then planted my seedlings virtually cheek-by-jowl. Since the bed was long and narrow, I decided to dispense with rows and planted most of the seedlings no more than six inches apart, in a pattern you would have to call free-form. Everything thrived: by August, my postage-stamp garden, haphazard though it was, was yielding bushels of produce.

Even my parents took note of this garden, marveling at the peppers and tomatoes I brought to the dinner table. But the person I really wanted to impress was my grandfather. By this point, my relationship with Grandpa was badly frayed. I wore my hair long and had grown a beard, and this deeply troubled him. By the time I turned fifteen, I could do nothing right by him, and visits to Babylon, which had held some of the sweetest hours of my childhood, had become an ordeal. From the moment I arrived, he would berate me about the beard, my studiously sloppy clothes, the braided leather bracelet I wore, and any other shred of evidence that I had become one of those despised 'ippies, as he used to spit out the word. I figured that if there was one place where an elderly reactionary and an aspiring hippie could find a bit of common ground, it was in the vegetable garden. I had finally made a garden he'd be proud of, and when he and Grandma made one of their infrequent visits to our house that summer, I couldn't wait to take him around back and show him what I'd achieved.

But Grandpa never even saw the garden I had made. All he saw were weeds and disorder. You call this a garden? he barked. It's all too close together—your plants are going to choke each other out. And where are your rows? There have to be rows. This isn't a vegetable garden—what you've got here is a weed garden! The big red beefsteaks, the boxy green peppers, the watermelons now bigger than footballs: everything was invisible

to him but the weeds. He looked at my garden and saw in it everything about me—indeed, everything about America in 1970—that he could not stand. He saw the collapse of order, disrespect for authority, laziness, the unchecked march of disreputable elements. He was acting like a jerk, it's true, but he was my grandfather, an old man in a bad time to be old, and when he got down on his knees and started furiously pulling weeds, I did feel ashamed.

So I guess you could say that Jimmy and I were expelled from our gardens at around the same time. But that would be too neat. For all I know, Jimmy today tends twenty acres of the finest sinse in Humboldt County. In my case, the arrival of my driver's license did more to push me out of the garden than my grandfather's intemperate attack on my technique. If gardening is an exploration of a place close to home, being a teenager is an exploration of mobility, and these two approaches to place, or home, are bound sooner or later to come into conflict. For at least a decade I probably didn't think once about plants or even notice a landscape. Eventually, though, I came back to the garden, which is probably how it usually goes. Much of gardening is a return, an effort at recovering remembered landscapes. I was lucky that when I took up gardening again my grandfather was still alive. He was over ninety by the time I had my own house, and he never did get to see it. But I would bring him pictures, carefully culled to give an impression of neatness and order, and, after examining them closely for evidence of weeds, he would pronounce his approval. By then, his own garden consisted of a half-dozen tomatoes planted by the back door of a small condominium. I would help him weed and harvest; he still grew enough beefsteaks to give a few away. He would ask me to describe my garden, and I would, choosing my words with care, painting a picture of a place that he would find hospitable. The garden I described was largely imaginary, combining elements of my actual garden with memories of Babylon and the kind of pictures that I suppose are common to every gardener's dreams. It was one of those places that is neither exactly in the past nor in the future, but that anyone who gardens is ever moving toward. It was somewhere we could still travel to together. On one of my last visits to see him, he told me I could have his Dutch hoe, declaring it was the best tool for weeding he had ever found. Grandpa was ninety-six, three times my age exactly, and though his step by then was uncertain, he took me outside and showed me how to use it.