

Plots of Land

(And Those Who Write Them)

© *Jeff Spanke*

After the funeral they served warm drinks and stale cake and strangers talked and some cried and I sat by myself in a row that smelled like old books people lie about reading. It lasted about an hour but the clock was broken so I'm just guessing. Then the people hugged his wife and said Sorry and grabbed One Last Cookie and hoped no one saw.

But I saw.

I didn't know his wife so I didn't say anything but when I finished my lemonade I left and rode to the school. To the back corner by the science lab between the painted rain barrels and the empty bird feeders. Across the street from the iced-cream stand where the homeless man lives and the bus stop with the faded

picture of the dead lawyer peeling off the bench. I parked my bike by the maple where he first showed me his Canvas and Page and cried when I saw the pavement again.

I got my first kiss by the maple. This girl named Kimberly Maine. She had dirty blond hair and blue eyes that looked like this porcelain doll of a cat that my grandma used to have by her fireplace. I kissed her one day after school when her mom got stuck in traffic. She didn't like it when I kissed her and told me not to tell anyone. But I did. And I did.

When we were in fourth grade Tyler and me hid behind the maple till the cops drove by and we were safe. He told me not tell anyone so I didn't.

I got kicked at recess once by the maple and went over to the kid's house that night and threw eggs at his door till the neighbors saw me and called my dad who yelled Why Did You Do That and I said Because He Kicked Me and dad said That's Fine and told me to Kick Him Back Next Time. And I did. I got suspended for the first time ever that Spring. That's when I got bored one day and snuck out to the back for a smoke.

The kids didn't like him because of the gay way he called the garden his Canvas and Page and because of the limp he got from the accident they made up so they didn't have to explain Born With It. He always smelled like earth. But somehow clean. His janitor's uniform was old and the pants were too loose and didn't cover his brown socks all the way but his nametag was always shiny and he smiled when he went outside.

The school was part of the plot and not the other way around. The garden was there before any kid pretended to learn inside. Before Language Arts meant spelling tests and History was multiple choice. Before detentions and Attention Deficit Disorders. The garden was modest. Small he would say but all we need. He talked with a gritty voice that almost sounded like he was gonna laugh or cry. Or cough. His hands always had dirt on them but I could see a band of clean skin from where he would wear his wedding ring when he left for the day. She'd Kill Me If I Got It Dirty he'd say when I never asked. He didn't cuss or care that I did. Just Make Sure You Do It Right he'd tell me. You Don't Want To Sound Like An Idiot.

I met him for the first time when I skipped math class again. Geometry with Mrs. Covey. Her room looked like laziness and bored me to hate. The kind of space with Teacher-Kit-Posters with dumb math jokes and equations in neon letters and unread crumpled loose leafs papering the floor by the overflowing trash. The space where I learned to hate school.

I never liked Mrs. Covey. She had this way of making people feel dumb like they didn't count or sounded small when they did count or were never going to do anything in the Real World. As if my world was fake.

Her tests were hard and the homework was stupid. She would look at you with this face that said you didn't matter and I swear I once seen her help Brad cheat just because he played football and Mrs. Covey loved football. Everybody does.

I never learned anything in her class.

I was a tangent before I met him. Like one of those straight lines that would sometimes bump into a circle that was always too full to let me inside. Except I was never really straight.

Or like the city dog who's More Of An Outside or the kid who wears sweatshirts during the summer to hide his dad's pain. But he never cared what I wore in the garden. And his dog hated the city.

So one day I went to the rain barrels to pull out the plugs and drain the school's hope when I first saw him standing in the garden staring at the plot waiting to see what happens next.

Don't Step on the Canvas he says and I don't. I ask what he's doing and he says Getting Ready. I ask For What and he says To Start and I take another hit and he says Not Here Kid so I throw it on the grass. He doesn't see. I ask Start What and he says the Story. At first I don't know what he's talking about because I didn't see any books or anything but it doesn't matter. Today it was a Story. Some days it was a Painting. All days it was Art. Not like the art that hangs in museums and is only art because rich people call it art to make other people feel bad for not getting it. Or like when people take pictures of Nature and call the picture art and not the Nature. The space behind the school was Art. All two hundred square feet of its punctuated dirt. Inside they wore smocks and painted refrigerator covers. In the garden we painted our meals.

My grandma had a garden when I was a kid. Not much to it. Mostly cucumbers and cherry tomatoes. And I never really understood why she cared so much about it. But when Jake wanted to go down by the tracks one Sunday with those kids from Ninth Street, grandma made me help her with the watering. I loved my grandma. And his garden kind of looked like hers. Minus the gnomes and pinwheels.

When we were kids we'd go to museums on field trips to look at art. But all we did was look. We studied art in school and when I thought the scribbles were stupid or I didn't draw the tree as good as Ben and my cat had three legs they laughed. But at not with me. Dancing made me uncomfortable and drawing hurt my hand. I didn't sing and I always ate my macaroni. All the school ever had was people talking about art that wasn't there. I was always somewhere else too. Everything anyone's ever said about Real Art though I found in the garden. It gave me tenderness.

When it was a painting day the land was our Canvas. The seeds the colors still on the easel and the dirt the Canvas in which we create. Every day the painting changes. The colors and textures. Potential and loss. That Grief Lady's

stuff from Psychology. There are rules he says to the painting that first I learn then break.

We grow.

As brushes and artists and critics and fans trying to make life of space I watch the ground become. Some days the earth would add some red. Others green and yellow. Never nothing. Some days we take off the red and serve it to the kids at lunch. They sit inside and eat salsa that dripped off the Canvas. Nature's Excess he says. The lunch lady thanks us for growing their food and we thank her for making it scrumptious. The kids never say much.

On writing days the plot was our Page. Exposition he says when he lays new seeds. Rising Action a few days later. Conflict came with the rabbit antagonists and the fence formed the Story's parameters. It climaxed with the harvest. We denouement the peas. They had Daisy's Green Light and Red Badges inside. We had spinach and peppers. I learned to write in the dirt. To read the Page beneath my feet. In the garden I learned how to get my hands dirty and why clichés are hollow. Like pumpkins in October.

We never got to commas.

He retired on a Friday to spend more time Doing Whatever Not Here. On his last day the kids ate tomato slices covered with melted mozzarella sprinkled with fresh oregano and soaked in olive oil with homemade French fries and chocolate milk. They didn't say much. In the principal's office he said Thank You and shook their hands and gave them his shiny nametag and smiled when he went outside. End of story. He didn't want to make another scene.

But I did.

During the fire alarm some kids leaned on the maple while others threw balding Spauldings in the hoops with no nets. When we went back inside everyone passed the garden and Beth said What's That and This Kid said Just Some Weeds and I punched him in the back of the head and he fell in the cabbage and cut his face on the External Conflict. I had dirt in my ears and beet on my hands.

I got suspended on the Monday and hung around for three weeks before transferring to another school for the rest of the term. Artistic differences I told my probation officer. She didn't believe me but everyone lies. My new school had vending machines with nuts in plastic bags and naturally flavored lies and nets on their hoops and a janitor named Carl who hung pictures of snow-covered

mountains throughout the building. It's Called Art says Carl whenever he points to the frame. I was always careful not to bump into it.

The new school's science lab had a window that overlooked a lot where all the kids park their birthday presents and all I want to do is Whatever.

Not Here.

With my friend.

When my expulsion was over they made me go back to my old school and I got put in English Recovery and failed three vocab tests. I cheated on my Romeo and Juliet essay and found my Odyssey power point online. Jason told the teacher I tried to stab him with a pencil but the teacher didn't see so I didn't get in trouble. I never gave my speech on gun control but I sat next to this hot girl in the back of the room because that's where they put Us and mostly would just stare out the window at the maple and homeless man begging for money across the street. He had nice headphones but holy shoes. The student council took over the garden in March. I didn't get elected.

Spring came and when his heart quit they told the News he was great and wrote about the garden in the Paper and had a moment of silence during the

announcements. Then they paved over the plot to make a bike rack for the kids to smoke pot on weekends. The school buys tomatoes now, and the bikes are finally safe.