

## Death in a Garden

By Christopher Nagle

How could it have come to this, that even the crunch of his slippers on the gravel path seemed so loud and full of fury, like that last terrible meeting on the fifty second floor? He needed the escape to his gardening shed, thinking of nothing but the re-assuring smell of paint and solvents, the orderly rows of all that he needed for making and mending, and the quiet limpid light that filtered through its dusty and cobwebbed windows.

And yet in the shadows of this tin room was something so oppressive in its silence, so accusing in its demeanor, that he fidgeted and couldn't concentrate. He could feel the blood swelling and pulsing round his temples, bringing on a headache. He tried to massage them, then around the top of the bridge of his nose and into the corners of his eyes. He closed them, but instead of darkness, there was only the harsh strip lighting in the room next to his office where the board meetings were held, and the red face of the balding man in the double breasted brown buttoned pin striped suit, with a casual white kerchief draped over his breast pocket, who was standing up from his seat opposite, shouting something and pointing at him.

He sat down heavily on the stool next to the bench vice, wearily slumping over it. It still held an obstinately rusted nut and bolt he'd half-heartedly tried to prize apart some weeks before. He rested his head on it so that it indented his forehead, as if a bullet were going into it in slow motion. And that too started to hurt. It seemed so hard to pull it away.

"I am the man whose thoughts were made real in the lives of others. I put solid ground under the vulnerable, rebuilt their social commons, made passionate commitment normal, found bearings when they seemed lost, gave the fearful their courage back, forgave those who strayed..."

He shifted his weight, for the effort of staying where he was, was too great.

"I gave all and now it is I who am lost". He sighed deeply, air bubbling out of him; drowning.

Just out of vision something moved, as if it were a restless memory; a foot, coming through the curtain of a dressing gown, then scuttling back; or perhaps a mouse, about its daily business, running up and down.

'If only I were a mouse, at least I would have that business. Ah, but the cat has got me in a corner, frozen, breath forgotten, or was it just I didn't dare?' His chest felt leaden. Could he now find strength to take his air, with the assumed, casual indifference of the doomed? Could he distract the cat and bolt? Was

he altogether lost and forced to meekly meet his fate? “Just breathe man, whatever is the cost!”

The pin striped cat smiled and stared, its victim caught, double breasted with brown buttons and kerchief white, slashed across its chest, now taught.

His eyes opened. He breathed. It was vintage air boasting tang of spring, crisp on the palette, with aftertaste of pollens and manure stench. And yet there was something metallic; something that oughtn't be there, like bad olives in a cocktail. He couldn't work it out and would have to ask the barman, “Is this at all returnable?” But for comment, he was unavailable, and looked pale, in the mirror on the bench.

“I can't stay here. I feel claustrophobic. The shed isn't working and I'm over it, and it's over for me, isn't it? So a man just has to find another way”. He mustered all his energy to stand up strong, resolved and levelly, but his feet they landed heavily, as if waking from a dreamer's headlong fall. The jolt of it unsteadied him and he grabbed the nearest anything that'd hold his oddly desultory frame.

The thing was sharp and slashed 'tween thumb and fingers, laying bone and gristle bare. Shock suddenly unbent him, rigid. He felt his nemesis, cold and frigid, with such raging till it blinded, as his eyes dissolved in cataracting tears. And then there was the pain, with all its raw despair, for the staring cat was on him now, jaggig with just a single claw, smiling still, purring with satisfaction at his fear.

He staggered, grabbed the door with his good hand and swung himself through its portals like a drunk who's had his last martini. The barman watched impassively. The feet followed. The dressing gown provided useful cover. The scene was set for some overwhelming question that he had to ask. If only he'd remembered!

But perhaps he had, for his hand was wet, as if it were raining, with muddy volcanic stains running down his fingers and dripping luxuriantly onto the grass. He stared at it and wondered why the weather was so variable. And then he realized it was his fair weather friends who had brought him to this; who seemed so loyal at the time, but disappeared to terribly important appointments when cat blew in, smiling and swishing his tail like a fan, because he was a cool customer and hot supplier of new mice.

“Oh yes, the pin striped cat with the brown buttons and the white kerchief on his breast pocket was a hunter alright, for all that was game for his ambitions, which he would bring back alive as stored labor for Softwell's Great Accompt. “Softwell? That was the question, but what was it? What were its beginnings and ends; its capacity to make amends?”

He watched his five fingered waterfall cascading down the folds of his dressing gown, reddening in the setting sun and saw the plains and river of his life, sweeping down the garden path and its surrounds, until he heard a woman's voice and saw a familiar scene, which built itself around where the BBQ and

setting once had been.

At the head of a small Sofgroup sitting round the table, a woman raised her hand to get the silent attention of her guests. "Dear friends and Fellow Softies, before we eat, let us think on our fate as it is weighed between the frailty and the strength of the life force within us and without."

She picked up a glass of water and started to drip part of the contents into a large dish in front of her. "These are the tears shed for the suffering and death that we must all endure."

She put this glass down, picked up another of wine and slowly decanted part of it into the dish. "This is the blood of the life force that is sacrificed for us so that we might live."

More water was then poured over the pool of diluted wine. "These are the purifying and renewing waters that wash away wounds and loss."

Bread was then broken into the mixture. "The earth absorbs all that we do to it".

She got up and took the dish around the table, giving a piece of soaked bread to each guest and saying, "thus the earth turns suffering into a living feast."

When she had finished she added some more bread. Out of a miniature automotive oil decanter she poured over it a black mixture of vinegar and bitter herbs. She then took the plate around the table again, saying, "Whatever evil we put on or into or above the earth eventually comes back to us as a bitter harvest. Let the acridness stay on your palate as long as it lasts, for in the struggle with evil, we must endure its effects until its force is spent."

She sat down again and with all the guests and reflected on the little ceremony that had just been performed. At last one of them looked up and said, "It is over and I am free." Each guest repeated the words in their own time until everyone had spoken. Refreshed in spirit they then commenced their meal.

He watched them eat, but kept losing them, as if falling in and out of range, or was it out of field? What was his ex-wife's business here? "What are you doing in my garden traitor?" But she didn't even look at him, and besides, the meal was done and over.

Ignoring him as he crumbled to his knees, she went round the table once again, giving each a piece of fruit and said, in the slowness of time dissolving...

"Go therefore in the peace that is to be the fruit of your love's labor. Eat of it freely, for the more you partake of it, the more it grows and the better it tastes. It can never cost you too much, for its value is priceless. It will enrich all of us while you live and it will be the most substantial part of whatever you bequeath to your successors. Bless you all. May the warmth, comfort and love you and we give to each other, keep and hold us all our lives, and down the generations."

Each person ate of the fruit of goodness; face blurring into fathomless meditation.

They got up to leave, embracing each to each, squeezing out the breath, until they bleached and blanched, as cat bit down into his neck and something snapped; collapsed into the final dance, of death.

The sullen summer's day began to dart, like prey, shadowed by a predator. It twitched with each successive cloud that dulled its eye. Tree tops moved, but the breeze balked at the still overwhelming question. Once loyal servants, the now tardy armies of life, marched insolently to a beat, that would not play for him; the man now guttering, writhing, choked within, on the grass behind his house, in summer's heat.

"I got a good job that paid me a bob, but I left, left, left right left. Sound off! Sound off! One two... two left feet Private! Get into step you dozey digger, or daddy will never buy you a bow wow, bow wow."

So he danced like Binka the wind up prancing horse, although his reins broke, the studs came out and his fur went bald.

But it was Father Christmas that really made him cry and they had to carry him out screaming obscenities that were too old for him, even at his twenty-first, when his girlfriend came for him in the back seat of their marriage, which lasted for two kids and a mortgage.

He raised them like flags that were so heavy they only got to half-mast. The winds blew them away before they could climb the rest.

His aloneness grew with his girth and age that overtook him in the home straight, past the cheering crowds that had come to see Collingwood play in the Grand finale, even though the team couldn't make it.

He never passed the examination that he forgot to take, because the timetable was lost and he couldn't find the right building, even though the sign said go north young man. He grew old looking for it, but it had always been there waiting for him to forget to duck in time, when the shooting really started...

"Left, left, left right left..."

Amongst the discomfort and pain of acute organ failure, events became disconnected, as causes and effects slipped past each other in childish games of hide and seek. Yet there were moments of extreme, almost unbearable lucidity that drowned him in last minute information, as he slid under the white tide, drifting between bleaching narrowing walls towards the unanswerable.

"Don't worry," said the captain. "It is only a data storm, but under no circumstances must you ever look, no matter what the wind says."

He shut his eyes, but he heard the wind calling his name and saying, "Sorbent is the whitest and

softest of them all. All those who believe in it will be saved on our website. You can blow a gale into it with confidence and wipe away all the tears you have ever shed. No mess you have ever made is too great for its ample absorbency. No place is too sensitive for its touch. It will flutter down to you like strips of gossamer and caress your face into a baby smoothness that only Sorbent can. Take the filament that is just above your right hand now..."

He opened his eyes briefly to make the catch and saw every experience he had ever had fluttering down on him like snow. But as he saw them, the wind drove them up his nose and it was the whitest and brightest thing he had ever had, ever could have, even as it blinded him into the void.

In the last dazzling blast of energy released in shutdown, the pattern of all things was illuminated in ways only possible when irretrievably released from the burden of the now disintegrating ego, its history and the limitations of its sensibility; i.e., consciousness without walls or assumptions or language; the last vision before the neurological hardware collapses, taking the software with it.

And then the man was gone, perhaps leaving only the ever flattening ripples left by his life, his progressively diluting descendant genes and the vanishing living memories of him in the minds of those who had known him.

The technological memory of him residing in various media might keep his ghost for a little longer, until finally, it too is thrown away, becomes anonymous, subject to accident, fades, or takes residence in the mausoleums of print, picture and sound.

But most of all, whatever has been left of him becomes the property of the still living, for them to forget, remember, treasure, revile and overwrite in the ever shifting process of recontextualisation that is life.

As soon as it was still, the corpse in the grass began to seethe with all the possibilities therein. All the juices left in it would now be sucked out in the process of public mummification and a very prominent entombment.

The late Living Solutions 'Livsol', or just plain 'Sol' Do-Well, once known as Simon Garron, was entitled to a Five Star Grand Finale, for he had been a founding Grand Mentor for the Softwell Network (which is how 'Well' become incorporated into his surname).

Finales were always a major marketing opportunity to celebrate the living contribution that the late exemplar had made to the work and growth of the network. Grand ones of the five star kind were a city streets, stadia and international media event that took two to three weeks to arrange and could sometimes bring in many thousands of new Sofscribers for every franchise operation around the globe...

“Living Solutions Goodbye!” “Goodbye Mr. Do-Well.” “Thanks Livsol” “See ya Sol”, “Oh Simon.”

“Dad!”

“Softwell Lives!”

“Softwell Lives!”

“Softwell Lives!”

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