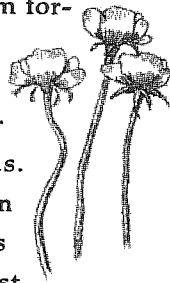


NORA



I always try to get Mr. Myles out for a walk and a taste of fresh air. I don't know about his other nurses. I expect that it's because I'm British. Back in England you'd see mothers pushing infants in prams through winter gales. I expect as well it was the sight of my own father, vegetating in his chair by the fire. We mustn't stop living before our time. So I'm forever telling Mr. Myles.

It was a midsummer morning and I was pushing his wheelchair up Gibb Street, a new route for us. The view, I'll admit, is less than uplifting. Half the storefronts seem to be empty. Mr. Myles must



remember a very different scene. His landlady says he's lived here many years. As he lost his speech with his second stroke, he can't tell me himself. He's a mystery. Lately his interest in the world had declined. I'd stop before a store window to let him see himself—he has the dignified head of an African chief—only to find that he'd fallen asleep. I realized that his time might be near. And then, that morning, rolling along the sidewalk, suddenly his arm came up.

He wanted to stop. I obliged him at once. To our left was a lot in which a few bold pioneers had planted gardens. We remained several minutes, watching two Asian women hoeing, then continued on. Immediately, back up went his arm. I came around and looked at him. He twisted and pointed toward the garden. I turned the wheelchair and headed back. I could see his nostrils taking in the smell of the soil. We reached the lot. His arm commanded me to enter. Over the narrow, bumpy path we went, his nose and eyes working. Some remembered scent was pulling him. He was a salmon traveling upstream through his past.

That first day we simply watched the

others. We might have been strolling through a miniature city. Some plots sported brick pathways and flower borders, while others looked haphazard. One had a gate that was in fact a car door. Within, beans climbed a propped-up set of bedsprings. A hummingbird feeder, a barbecue grill, a gardening hat hanging from a nail—there were many such domestic touches. I was entranced. I determined that Mr. Myles should do more than simply watch, wheel-chair or no.

I worked on the problem in my head. Two days later, driving to his apartment, I stopped at the garden and unloaded a large plastic trash barrel and a shovel. I wheeled him up an hour later, used my pocketknife to cut holes in the bottom of the barrel for drainage, and built up a fine sweat shoveling in dirt. I'd brought with me a dozen seed packets. Mr. Myles chose the flowers decisively, ignoring the vegetables. Was he recalling his mother's flower garden? His history was unknowable. I pushed him as close to the barrel as I could. Thirty minutes later he'd planted hollyhocks, poppies, and snapdragons.

Riding home afterward, he smelled the dirt on his fingers with satisfaction.

That small circle of earth became a second home to both of us. Gardening boring? Never! It has suspense, tragedy, startling developments—a soap opera growing out of the ground. I'd forgotten that tremolo of expectation produced by a tiny forest of sprouts. What a marvelous sight it was to behold Mr. Myles' furrowed black face inspecting his smooth-skinned young, just arrived in the world he'd shortly leave. His eyes gained back some of their life. He weeded and watered with great concentration. A fact bobbed up from my memory, that the ancient Egyptians prescribed walking through a garden as a cure for the mad. It was a mind-altering drug we took daily.

We were rather alone there, off to one side. Our most common visitors were the cats. They were attracted by the aroma of fish, the work of a child who'd copied the Pilgrims of old and buried sardines with her seeds. Then our solitary status ended, as a result of a downpour. When the rain came that day, the other gardeners all ran

in the same direction, as if in a fire drill. We followed and found them sheltered beneath a shoe store's overhang two doors down, apparently their customary refuge. The small dry space forced us together. In fifteen minutes we'd met them all and soon knew the whole band of regulars.

Most were old. Many grew plants from their native lands—huge Chinese melons, ginger, cilantro, a green the Jamaicans call calaloo, and many more. Pantomime was often required to get over language barriers. Yet we were all subject to the same weather and pests, the same neighborhood, and the same parental emotions toward our plants. If we happened to miss two or three days, people stopped by on our return to ask about Mr. Myles' health. We, like our seeds, were now planted in the garden.

I told all this to out-of-town guests, then took them up Terminal Tower. We got off at the observation deck on the forty-second floor to find that the garden, which loomed so large to its tenders, was hopelessly hidden from view by buildings. I looked at all the tourists, who'd no notion it

existed, who thought they were seeing all of Cleveland, and restrained myself from pointing and shouting out, "The Gibb Street garden is there!"