

# THE WONDER GARDEN

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## THE UMBRELLA BIRD

IT HAD been a touch of incredible fortune to find David one spring night at a dive on Houston Street. He'd been attending a coworker's farewell gathering, an anomalous outing for him. He was short-haired and clean against the peeling paint and graffiti. That he'd been there that night nursing a Stella Artois, and had needed the restroom at the same time as she, had upended statistical logic. He was taller than everyone, and thinner, as if streamlined for air travel. Not conventionally handsome, but with a narrow, austere face. His green irises seemed lit, like dappled leaves on a forest floor. When he looked at Madeleine, she was briefly paralyzed, a field mouse in a clearing. He bought her a vodka tonic and left a three-dollar tip for the bartender. As he handed the glass to her, turning the tiny straw in her direction, she'd felt the dizzy euphoria of a traveler who has turned onto the right road, the easy expansion of lungs as the horizon opens before her.

He was an account supervisor at a big advertising firm in midtown, he explained breezily, coordinating campaigns for sneakers and tortilla chips. But later, over a series of ardent dinner dates,

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she learned that he'd grown up in the country—on a farm, no less—and had never felt truly at peace in an apartment building. Lately he felt that he was being gradually drawn back to Nature, and now that he'd found her, he suggested with elaborate, soft-forested eyes, perhaps his quest was complete. Within six months, they were married and looking at real estate listings.

The house has been sweepingly renovated, the front door framed by columns and topped by a counterfeit balcony. It's what the real estate agent had termed a *center-hall colonial*, with the kind of timeless architecture and rigorous symmetry designed to leverage a calming effect on its inhabitants. Paired with precise, harmonious details, she implied, a house like this had the power to transform its owners' experience of the world, to render any obstacle—any boiler failure or termite siege—surmountable.

Nearly all their money has gone to the down payment, and with the little that remains, Madeleine is scrambling to furnish. With a Sharpie, she circles furniture in soft-lit catalogs: a sectional sofa, a leather armchair, a mirrored console table. Deliverymen put them in place. Still, the rooms echo.

Alone, she wanders the house on the balls of her feet. It is preternaturally quiet, the walls themselves thick with insulation, sealing out the buzz of the world. A sliding glass door displays a wide lawn tumbling to a thumb-smudge of trees. She has reached it at last: this asylum, this glorious valve. Madeleine had first glimpsed this kind of life as a girl, visiting a friend who'd moved to a verdant nook of New Jersey. Entering that house had been like entering a palace: the soaring entrance hall,

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floors that didn't sag toward the middle, bay windows looking onto wanton grass and trees, the great yawn of sky. There, she'd learned to ride a bicycle. Pedaling back and forth on that wide blacktop driveway, she'd felt the first ecstasy of flight.

She has never lived anywhere but in a gerbil cage. She has never had money. Her father was a bag-eyed jazz musician—dead in middle age—her mother a schoolteacher who supported them all. Madeleine had diligently sidestepped adulthood in her parents' lopsided brownstone on Charles Street, among the aging socialists and drag queens. Before meeting David, she had acquired the habits of every cynical city girl: shutting down dirty bars, flattering scrawny musicians, waking Sundays on ripped Naugahyde couches.

Tonight, he is out in the woods, building a tree house for their daughter who is due in a month. Although she will not use it for years, he has thrown himself into the project as if on a deadline. Each evening, when he comes home from work, he puts on old jeans, disappears into the garage, and cuts lumber with a power saw. Madeleine has agreed not to visit the tree house until it is finished. She watches David carry wooden planks over the grass to the woods, the late-summer sun casting his long shadow before him. His hands have become splintered and raw, his forearms welted from the ash tree he has selected.

This is his nature, she knows, this kind of focused work ethic. He lugs home stacks of library books about tree house architecture. At night, he comes into the house with the look of an outdoorsman, in soiled plaid shirts and patch-kneed jeans. Perhaps he has reverted to a forgotten self, his childhood on the

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farm, when he'd spent whole days in the woods hunting for turtle shells, mouse skulls, snake skins. He works on the tree house later and later each night, until he is coming indoors well after dark. Madeleine does not want to complain. She wants him to feel free in his life with her. For years he has lived as an independent man—but now, with parenthood advancing upon him, perhaps he feels invisible ropes tightening. She wants to show that she understands. He can build a tree house if he wants to.

Alone, she watches the evening news, its galloping sound track bridging one bleak segment to the next. Beyond the glass door, she sees David cross slowly over the grass, his figure becoming part of the deepening evening. At last, his silhouette melts into the dark line of trees. The glass door frames a phantasmagoric reflection of the room's interior, of Madeleine's own bulging form. The news anchor begins a dirge about home foreclosures. There is talk of a stimulus package. People will be given old-fashioned things to do with their hands. Madeleine herself is fabulously idle, having finally quit her series of temp jobs. This had been David's idea. He'd encouraged her to enjoy her pregnancy, to not feel ashamed for staying home with their child if that was what she wanted to do.

She is not accustomed to so much aloneness. Nothing in her old life had ever approached this depth of quiet, this vacuum of night. She imagines animals in the woods surrounding the house, emerging when the sun sets to carry on their dark pursuits. She does not like to think of David out there, but restrains herself from going to retrieve him, from begging him to come inside and sit with her. She does not want to be that kind of woman.