Out in Her Garden

By Erica Appleton

Mrs. Marigold had an incredible laugh, an *ah-ha-HA* that sounded like a good secret, or something exquisite on the horizon. It was hearty, full, and rounded. It wasn’t throaty. It didn’t boom like thunder, but it crescendod with passion like the swelling of a good song. She laughed about her childhood, her husband of fifty years, and her grandchildren. She laughed at my stupid jokes. Even the weather amused her. Wrinkles would collect around her lips and eyes, lapping over sunspots and exposing her beautiful age. She would lean back with a growing smile and let it bless the air with the music of elation and wisdom. She laughed like an all knowing angel, stealing my reservations and reeling me into her garden so I could absorb a glowing trace of her small bright light.

Mrs. Marigold began dropping clay pots and losing her balance and Mr. Marigold could barely walk with his cane, so she asked my mom to enlist me for help, to keep her company and help her tend the flowers. When I began working for her, I was fifteen and aching to stay outside as long as there was light in the sky.

Out in her garden, my shirt stuck like wet glue to my back, even in the later autumn months. Still, I found the work mindless and relaxing. I loved to cradle Jack-in-the-pulpits in my hands gently while I cleared the leaves around their roots and stems. I often spoke lowly to the plants, or hummed to them like they were sleepy infants.

Poison oak had a way of finding me in the cracks of the path’s wood frame or under dark dead leaves sopping with decay. Once it broke out on my hand and the blistering rash mirrored in the webbed skin between my fingers, impossible to cover with a band aid. Mrs. Marigold scolded
me for not wearing her spare pair of green nitrile lined gloves. I just wanted to feel the earth between my fingers, to smell its rich nutrient musk and see its grime caked under my fingernails just as she did.

Some afternoons, midway through my work, I stopped by the retaining wall on the bricked square that overlooked a little verdant valley and admired the English ivy that spread over everything, its coarse waxy leaves creeping up and flowing down. It reminded me of the kudzu that swallowed trees along the highway, the deep green vine that ate the south.

One day Mrs. Marigold caught me admiring the ivy and admitted that it was invasive and destructive. “It’s beautiful, but dangerous,” she said. “It strangles trees and squeezes into the cracks of walls, weakening a structure.” I nodded along and she continued, “Deceptively beautiful.”

Yet she didn’t heed her own caution, so it couldn’t divert my attention. I only admired it more, snaking up the wall and rolling over the hills, rich and dark beneath the echinacea. Nature’s reclaim. It was unstoppable.

Mrs. Marigold loathed perfection, but I felt obliged to seek it in my work for her. When I raked the paths around her garden, she came out and stopped me, wanting only a light sweeping of the top layer of leaves.

“I want it to look natural.” she always said. I never got this right. I wanted them clear and black as new soil.

Early evening, she brought out fruit tea and a plate of black cherries. This was my favorite time with her. We sat on the patio among the dozen birdhouses and long cylindrical feeders, near the sun room, the glass illuminated by the golden hour. My favorite birdhouse, the
red barn with SEE ROCK CITY on its black metal roof, always had a cardinal in it, poking its shaded crimson head in and out.

We’d sit until just past twilight, carefully working our teeth around the pits and spitting them out as bones or compost. Eventually, she always asked me about my day. With her I felt I wasn’t invisible, that the question wasn’t some small courtesy, but rather the asker had genuine interest. She didn’t pry. She asked simple questions and I gave her simple answers and that was enough. Sometimes I talked about movies I had recently watched or funny stories friends told me. I didn’t say much bout my own messy life. I wanted to be in her world, the portrait that hung on the mantle of the Marigolds in a blue flame sky and velvet green frame. Mrs. Marigold’s daughters had both moved to New York after college and never married, so it was only the two of them for nearly thirty years. I waited patiently for a chance to listen to her stories, to imagine her young with the pigment still in her hair and the curls tamed.

She told me about the town she grew up in without electricity, the icebox refrigerator, the rare chances she got as a child to buy ice cream in the summer, her father’s untimely death, and the summer she spent in Key West. She told me on several occasions about the time the garden club came to walk around the exquisite array of healthy native wildflowers, and the many different ferns and trilliums that added dimension to the trees. More and more often, she would tell a story and midway through, lose her train of thought. She’d swat a flat palm against her forehead and say she was trying to rattle the rest of the story out.

I listened, smiled, and when she laughed, I laughed too, quietly so I could hear her laugh louder.

I was partial to her, but not her husband. When I moved in across the street, I was thirteen years old. One of my cats killed a robin in their yard that first month and her husband called
animal control. When I got home from school, they were loading my calico cat and her kittens, cramped and screaming, together in one kennel, into a big white box truck. My dad narrowly saved them, but had to pay a hefty fine and called Mr. Marigold a sorry son of a bitch. I cried myself to sleep and vowed to hate Mr. Marigold, but I couldn’t bring myself to waste that kind of energy. He was a retired professor, an octogenarian whose small daily passions consumed him, so I did something far more gratifying, I pitied him. I tried hard to see his perspective, to understand the magnitude of that avian loss, but I could never allow myself any fondness on his account.

In winter, Mrs. Marigold’s garden was a graveyard, her perennials were comatose. I no longer mulched the flower beds or re-potted the ever growing patio plants, but rather I went home after school and hibernated, subdued by gray trees and gray skies and my paling complexion.

One morning after a heavy snow, I woke early to get Mrs. Marigold’s mail. She had slipped on black ice the previous spring and the image of her frail legs snapping haunted me in my broken sleep. I was often conflicted because she had expressed to me before that walking to get the mail was a small part of her day that she loved, an escape from the house and her burdens of love. She would say burdens of love, or labors of love with a quick smile that broke like a wave on her face. I wanted that freedom for her, but I valued her safety more.

The long reibling driveway had a steady slope and I took precaution as I ascended, squeezing the small stack tight under my arm and placing each boot firmly on the white dusted blacktop. Our houses were quite opposite one another’s. Hers was small, light, and airy, with cozy rooms. It rested at the crest of a small hill and had a perfect view of the private road on which we lived opposite each other. Ours was a midcentury ranch, Frank Lloyd Wright-like with
its peculiar eccentric interior. It was carved into a hill, midway down, below the road level. The living room jutted out and came to a point with two walls panelled by great sheets of glass. It was a fortress enclosed by trees, a fortress we couldn’t afford, large and bare and often dark. Not much grew in the thick woods, but a vine grew along the steps outside and Mrs. Marigold explained to me that the pretty cream and violet flowers were passion flowers, and that the seed pods could be popped like confetti with a good stomp.

When I approached the storm door, Mrs. Marigold was just buttoning up a thick lavender coat. She motioned me inside, quickly. Under her eyes were pillowy puffs of retention that looked painful. I wanted to touch them, to watch them deflate and tighten back like years in a time-lapse. They weighed her eyes down.

Her gaze was distracted. She seemed to look right through me and struggled for a moment, finding words. She explained to me that her labors of love were getting harder. While putting on her husband’s compression socks, she grew faint and had to lie down and catch her breath. She saw the worry on my face, as I had begun wearing it often, and tried to shoo it off.

“This happens,” she said. “We get older. Some days are easier than others. So embrace your youth, young lady!” I nodded and forced a smile.

“I was just heading out to get some groceries and stop by the post-office, but I misplaced my keys.” She swivelled her body left and right in an unfamiliar state of confusion.

“Surely they will show up.”

“Let’s retrace your steps.” I followed her in small loops around her home.

“The couch cushions! They must have slipped out of my pocket.” She began pulling out one floral patterned yellow cushion after the other. I caught the ones she tossed behind her and stacked them high in my arms. The growing stack of frilled fabric was thick and nearly brushed
the low ceiling fan. Mrs. Marigold frowned at the pennies and lint. We looked in her car, around the kitchen. After twenty minutes, she found them on her nightstand.

“Well everyone misplaces things from time to time. I may not know where my keys are, but I still know how to use them.” She snickered like a child and jingled them in her petite hands. Something of it wouldn’t suffice. Maybe it was the simple content in her laugh or the keys that sounded like the memory of a wind chime on a warm sunny day. The noises went cold and white in their betrayal of serenity.

A month later I passed her checking her mailbox on an unusually warm day. The dogwoods in her yard were just budding. She asked for help with some groceries in her car. When everything was in its place in the fridge and cupboard she slumped down into a chair at the kitchen table.

Mrs. Marigold carried a hunch, not severe but noticeable. Her delicate shoulders were feminine and stooped slightly. Her hips were wide and her neck craned forward with a curve like a soft question mark.

“I went to the doctor last week. I failed a preliminary memory test, but this doesn’t mean much yet.”

The question mark was more defined that day. Her head sunk lower toward her chest. She fumbled with the bottom button of her blouse. I wanted to give her beautiful words, hundreds of them. She deserved a trove full, all neatly pressed and gleaming with insight, with the perfect combination of empathy and knowledge and humor.

“Oh.” My voice fell flat and my eyes fell heavy to the floor. I didn’t know how to comfort her. Nothing felt adequate enough to say.
I waited a month, until after redbud winter to visit again. When I did, Mrs. Marigold set me to work. She had bought a hose she saw on an infomercial and was struggling with it. It was supposed to be light, easier for her to use. I unwound it and pulled the crank of the metal spigot up. The cheap fabric around the hose was busted along the seams and leaked the entire length of the hose. She laughed. I laughed. Then she laughed some more.

I was standing by the retaining wall with a wheelbarrow full of compost for the flower beds when she came to me again. She looked down at her veiny hands, the small arthritic bulges just below her fingernails.

“I guess I should tell you.” She stared down at the ground, or still at her hands.

“Tell me what?” I dropped the wooden handles to my sides. My own bare hands were sweaty, splintered, and blistered.

“The news isn’t good.”

I was breathless, as if holding my exhale could forestall time and its constant tripping speed. I asked, “What do you mean?”

“I guess I don’t know how to say it yet. I don’t want it to be true.” She shook her head and laughed. We both looked up at her small cottage. “I don’t want you to leave.”

“I still have some time.”

“How much?” I asked without a second thought. I hated myself for being so nosy.

“Months?” The inflection in her voice, the uncertainty, nauseated me. She didn’t skip a beat though. She never did.

“All that God has given me today, I trust he will give me tomorrow. And that’s enough.” Her smile was wickedly false. I despised her hope and strength, or maybe envied it.
Soon enough, He began taking things away, but she was still faithful. Maybe she didn’t know what she was losing and maybe there was some small comfort in that.

Once every week, I showed up in her garden and occasionally she’d lapse back into the Mrs. Marigold that knew me, but more often she gave me a new name, picking from the wild flowers around her yard. I would try my best to suit my given name and she always found it humorously ironic. One week I was Iris. I was vibrant and found myself carrying our conversations with an exuberance I had not known I had. Another week I was Poppy. I wore a bright red bandana and paint stained overalls. I recited *In Flanders Fields* and Mrs. Marigold told me about what she remembered of World War II.

The week I came to work and became Camellia I had decided I wanted to hear the story of her and Mr. Marigold. She said it was her favorite story, that they had been married just ten years and their daughters just started school.

“When you know, you know. And I knew the day I met Henry. We were at a school dance. It was my freshman year at the university and he had just began assistant teaching his first history class.” She held her hands softly cupped around an invisible figure and she slowly shuffled and turned, in and out of the path of a slice of sunlight cast through the tree branches. She dropped her arms and laughed. They dangled limp at her sides and her eyes lost focus.

“I saw him coming over from across the room. I hated his thin mustache but he had the kindest eyes and when he asked me to waltz I couldn’t wait another second. We danced all night. For months we drove to the next town to hold hands at the movies. The spring that I graduated, he proposed and I thought I’d die if we had to keep it a secret any longer.”

“And when did y’all get married?”
“That fall, his last semester as a graduate student. Now we dance every Friday night to the radio, then he dances with the girls. They stand on his shoes.”

Selfishly, I found some beauty in the recrudescence of her memories. They became vivid stories she shared again and again and I wanted nothing more than to keep experiencing them. They changed depending on where she stood in time. Certain pains and joys felt closer and I heard it in her voice.

Sometimes she left the back door open and from close around the corner, I heard a disappointed murmur, an enraged scream or an anguished cry. She slipped around inside her mind, stumbling back decades, and getting disoriented at her suddenly foreign surroundings. Some memories weren’t pleasant, and we caught each other in the doorway, ivy leaves stuffed in my pockets and spilling out of my hands, and her returning to me and the present world with a sigh and a confused smile.

Mr. Marigold received the brunt of her confused outrage. I occasionally heard her shouting at him, asking him who he was, telling him her husband would be home any minute. I cannot recall how many times I heard sirens and spotted their lights turning up her driveway through the thick trees beyond my bedroom window.

I would soon be losing the haven the Marigolds gave me in their garden, so I clung tight to all the moments I could collect. Mr. Marigold and I began to sit out on the front porch swing after school many days watching his birds while Mrs. Marigold took her nap, and I felt his helplessness in the way he desperately filled our silence with his own stories about academia. I still resented him, but I couldn’t pretend that I didn’t sense his pain, both physical and emotional. He too began telling me about his youth, about the poverty he grew up in. He called himself a mutt. His father left his mother before he was born and his mother died when he was young. He
freighthopped like a bandit when he was a teenager and once got lost in another state and walked for two days to get back to his grandmother’s house.

There was a glint in his eyes as they glazed over. He seemed to be shocked by the memories he hadn’t visited in years. I sat quietly, listening to him as I did with Mrs. Marigold. These stories beckoned the light, an open ear leaning in to catch a small history that would otherwise be forever lost to my generation.

One day he was telling me a lengthy story about a student he had who became an archaeologist and sent him letters and photos of his sites and finds. He had been telling me about the yearly Christmas cards his students sent him, how fast they’d all grown, how accomplished the good ones became, but then a word caught in his throat.

“It’s all going so damned fast.” he said.

I wanted to say I know. I’m losing her too. I wanted to ask What if she forgets how to laugh?

He held the small pile of photos and cards in his tremorous hands on his lap. I had never seen a grown man cry before and I hadn’t wanted to because when I looked at his reddening eyes and quivering chin, I felt the weight of his world fall on my shoulders. Suddenly I was crying too, though we never spoke another word. I imagined all the things he was saying to himself, prematurely mourning their love, the birds, the garden. I didn’t know him well, but I still believe the words that formed in his head and repeated on a loop, were I hope I die first.

Mr. Marigold’s able mind complimented Mrs. Marigold’s able body, but they could not take care of each other any more. They were complete in that they were incomplete together. Those months? went by in a flash of fake names and unanswered prayers. At the end of summer and before the maple leaves turned, a white wooden sign post went up in their yard. Their busy
daughters came down from New England for a few weeks. They organized a yard sale and gave me a few of Mrs. Marigold’s tropical patio plants. I wanted to thank her, but she knew nothing of it. Through the dense trees in my yard, I watched three tall men load boxes into a U-Haul and dolly out pieces of furniture. I had been mourning their departure for months, so when the day came I had nothing left to say or feel that was new.

I visited her once, in her new home. She was eating chocolate ice cream in the dining hall of the assisted living residence. Her short curls were tightened silver coils around the crown of her head. A small red bow pinned a few locks back.

“Mrs. Marigold?”

“Not just yet.” She flashed a youthful smile with a drop of ice cream on her nose and at the corners of her mouth. I didn’t quite catch her meaning.

“I’m here to see you, Mrs. Marigold. How are you doing?”

I was stilled once again by her laugh. “Silly, we’re not married yet.”

I wagged a finger at her. “Oh but one day…”

“Oh yes. One day very soon.” She giggled again like the young woman she was in her mind. It still tilted the world and set things right while it reigned the air.

I confessed, “Your laugh. I love it.” She flattened her palm tight on her chest. Her pale gray eyes shone with streaks of yellow like veined marbles. “Thank you, sweetie. No one has ever said that to me before.” I knelt down to untie and retie my shoe. I stared down at the waxed white tile floors and willed my eyes to swallow the tears, to revert them back from wherever they came. When I straightened back up, a nurse was at her side.

“It was nice meeting you.” She took my hand in hers, my calluses covered by the thin skin of her knuckles. She patted my hand and grinned. Then I let go.
Outside Mrs. Marigold’s old home, out in her garden, I uprooted a vine of her ivy. I planted the vine at the cornerstone of my house. It flourished in tendrils like veins crawling up the mortar and I found some small comfort in its inevitability. I invited the ivy to sprout deep roots and began praying for its strength. The potential for destruction could not outweigh or overwrite the promise of beauty.