

A Bright Patch of Dirt

by L.J. Davis

Jadie held the shovel tightly and hit the ground hard. The soil was not soft and pliable as she had expected. It was hard like earth that had never been sown. She was afraid to try again. Afraid that the hard metal handle of the spade would send sparks of electric-like pain through her wrists and arms.

It was a hot day. She could feel drops of sweat building up at the top of her hairline like the moisture that had gathered around the outside of her ice water glass which she had left lying on the remnants of a wooden sign. The sign had been tossed to the ground. The boards weathered gray with age, as old cedar will do. The once bright writing was now faded

to a dried blood red. You could barely make out the words, but she knew what they spelled out. Papa John's Garden.

Papa John's Garden. How long ago had she helped write those words? How long had it been since she had taken the old horsehair paintbrush and carefully stroked each line and curve? Papa John's Garden. For anybody else, those three words would just be words, but for her they meant hope, camaraderie, and unconditional love.

Jadie stopped shoveling and gazed lovingly at the sign lying stiff in the dirt. "What a gift you have given me, Papa John," she thought. "What a gift."

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He drove into town one fiery hot August day on the same road he had used when he left. He was surprised that there weren't that many people he recognized in town although all the same hangouts were there. He noticed that the stores didn't have the same lived-in look that they had when he left. Yes, it was the same small town but it was somehow surreal, like it had been recently fabricated for a tourist country getaway. But he didn't care. All he could think about was that he was finally back home.

During those years when he was working in the gray city, trying to amass a good size savings, all he could think about was going home. He would gaze out of his small office window at the other dull office buildings, barren of greenery or of nature, and dream forlornly of his old town. He loved his home. He hated to leave it. But, when his mother died, he had promised her that he would go to school. So, he left the rural town he had grown up in and headed off to the nearest city. He enrolled in college, earned a couple of degrees, finagled himself a fantastic job, and waited. Waited for the day when he could go home. Home to the wide green expanses of meadows. Home to the ant-infested pepper trees whose bark slipped off as you tried to climb up. Home to Johnson's pond where a kid could explore a frog's mud home or a mosquito's wriggly larvae. Home to the farms with their vast plantings of corn, squash and tomatoes. Home to the sweaty smell of horses and cows. Home to the sunshine and the blindingly bright days where friends and family would gather in the caressing shade of the willow trees to listen to old Danny Miller play a ukulele that he had picked up in a tourist shop in Hawaii. His home.

His dad had warned him that a lot of things had changed, but he thought, "I've only been gone thirteen years, how much could have changed in thirteen years?" When he

drove into town, he didn't notice anything different. The Garver's still had their small Mom and Pop store. Jimmy was still running the service station. Emily's family still owned the buffet. Everything looked the same.

He turned his rent-a-wreck turned used car onto the road leading out to his father's ranch and began to hum a quiet melody. He could feel the warmth of the sun. He was immersed in a moment of deep contentment as the wind slightly brushed at his face. He couldn't believe that he was finally going back. As he turned his eyes from the road to study the familiar landmarks, his anticipation for home turned to astonishment and horror.

The land was gone! All of the glorious plots of luscious land, the rows and rows of apple orchards, the horse ranch, the avocado groves, everything was gone. In its place were track homes and master planned communities, city developed parks, and artificial lakes. Instead of the haphazardly placed cornucopia of trees, low maintenance trees were planted primly in single rows against each side of the smartly paved roads.

Shock and disbelief gripped his heart. Where was his hometown? Where was his safe haven, his Ithica, his Bedford Falls, his salvation? As he drove farther down the road, the obscenic views of the closely packed homes were

replaced with strip malls and mammoth movie theaters and gasoline stations and fast food.

He almost missed the turnoff to the road that led to his home because he was not used to reading it on a formal street sign. He finally made the right and started towards the house. It was about two miles before things began to look like normal. By the time he got home, it was as if the previous five miles of urban sprawl were fantasy.

All his father could say was, "I told you things had changed." Yes, they had. His dad told him about his farming neighbors who had sold their land to developers. It seemed that farming was a corporate enterprise and the local farmers couldn't get their stuff into the big food chains. For that matter, even the Garvers imported their produce, eggs, and dairy products, from big business outlets miles away. The locals realized quickly that they could sell their land for small fortunes and jumped on the new development bandwagon. They were tired of farm life and coerced themselves into believing that, by selling their land, they were allowing thousands of other "city" families to enjoy country life. Country life...this town was now far from it.

His father was one of the few that hadn't sold their land, but the pressure was constant. Just that morning a group of young executives had tried to convince his father that he

could make a killing by selling his property. There was a new golf course that was breaking ground and the farm, his family's farm, would be the site for the luxury condos and onsite fitness club. His family also owned several acres of fertile soil located somewhere between the Discovery Beach Resort and the Country Living Estate Development. The development guys had been trying to get his father to "just let them take it off his hands." They had great plans to turn that property into a state-of-the-art healthcare facility.

Well, they didn't need the money and he was glad that his father had kept his wits about him. Their land had been in the family for two generations and he was going to keep a hold of it for as long as he could. "Damn the city," he thought. "I left that barrenness only to come home to a new kind of claustrophobia." He wouldn't give in. He was planning to live his life in the peace of his old hometown, making sure that his father was nurtured and cared for. He would never sell his land and he would die fighting!

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John stuck his fat dirty finger into the ground and began to squirm it around in the dirt. He dropped the teardrop-shaped cantaloupe seed into the hole and lightly brushed the

soil, firmly patting it with the pads of his fingers. He took the shiny metal watering can and kindly drizzled the water onto the slight indentation left from his rooting.

As he picked up the watering can to head back to the shed, he looked out over the large garden plot that he had just finished planting. Looking past the rows and furrows, he glanced out past the road to the hundreds of stucco encrusted houses that went on for miles and miles like gravestones in an endless cemetery. Every time he looked at it, it still made him sick. It still reminded him of his city life so long ago. If he walked to the edge of the plot, he could faintly make out the black-tinted windows of the fitness club that had claimed the old home he and his father had shared.

He had kept his vow of never selling the land but the developers knew ways to get around that. Bribes to congressman and others in high places helped developers create a government-initiated take over of his property, claiming that a road was needed to alleviate the traffic congestion. Oh, they built the road but they also snuck in the fitness club and luxury condos they had so eagerly wanted to build. But, they couldn't get his other property. Nope. After numerous court trials, and lots of money, he was able to make sure that the land would remain unspoiled for

generations to come. His high priced environmental attorneys saw to that.

A lot of people thought that they were stupid for not selling their land at a hefty price, instead of ending up with just chump change. He thought they were stupid for selling so cheap because they not only sold their land, they sold their legacies.

He had built a small house on the land overlooking the main road in which he and his father lived for several years, until his father died. Although he lived alone, he was definitely not lonely. In fact, he often thought that it was ironic that, had he not been forced from his boyhood home, he would have never received such joy from the community he loved so deeply.

After his father died, he decided to bring back some of the country to the suburban "country." Methodically, he began building horse pens and chicken coops. He planted apple trees and pear trees and orange trees and lemon trees. Each year, he would add another project such as a barn, a small pond or a potting shed. Until one year, he started the garden.

He hadn't really thought about starting a garden because he knew it was a lot of work. Horse and chicken pens had to be cleaned out and the animals fed but it really didn't take

that much time. The trees, once established, took off on their own, with very little maintenance. But a garden...well a garden was a little too much.

With a garden, you had to make sure that the ground was cultivated and fertilized properly. You had to plant the seeds and then make sure that they got enough water and sun. Even if you were successful in getting something to grow, you then had to make sure that you weeded and sprayed for bugs. No, a garden was too hard.

He changed his mind one day when he came across an old tin can that contained some pink-coated corn seeds. He couldn't understand why they were pink until he remembered that his dad had told him it was a special fertilizer which helped the seeds germinate more quickly. Resigned, he set out planting his first corn crop in forty-five years.

As the corn took shape, he began adding to his garden – tomatoes, squash, zucchini, radishes, and carrots – all the warm weather vegetables. As each green stalk burst through the soil, he felt victorious. Finally, he was home. This was what he had dreamed about all those years before as he drove to the town he had yearned to return to. No, the scale was not the same, but he had recreated his old hometown on the three acres of land he had shared with his father.

When the garden began to take shape and he could distinguish between the varying patterns and colors of each leaf, a new type of anticipation took hold over him. He couldn't wait for harvest time when he would be able to pull the plump red, orange and yellow shapes from their vines. He would prepare meals any vegetarian would be proud of. He would can tomatoes in a way that even Martha Stewart would envy. He would fill his days cultivating and hoeing and pulling and slicing...but then the children came.

He didn't notice them at first because he had his back against the road. He didn't see them but he did hear them. At first he thought that he was daydreaming of the days when he and his friends used to climb trees and tease crickets. They used to laugh until their cheeks clamped tightly with pain. As he worked in the hot sun, he suddenly realized that the laughter and murmur he heard was not a recollection nor were the children he saw, as he turned around, a mirage caused by heat exposure. They were real.

They were of varying ages, sizes and colors. They cautiously approached until they were on the verge of the garden. As he gazed at the silent troop of children, he locked eyes with one slight girl who, it seemed, had been waiting for him to look at her. "What are you doing out here," she asked with a conspiratorial look. He tenderly looked her in

the eye and said plainly, "I am tending the garden." Once his calm voice broke the stillness of that memorable day, the kids could not be held back.

He answered question after question about the garden, about the horses, about the chickens, about the pond. He told them stories about what the town used to look like and how it was when he was a child. And, they came back again and again and again. They couldn't get enough. Spending their days in the adult notion of a master planned community, where children could want for nothing, had made them bored. They yearned for something different. They wanted to climb trees that had limbs to climb, not trees that were cut to look like something you would place in a model railroad city. They wanted a real watering hole to swim in, not the properly placed lake that they were used to. He took them to old Johnson's pond, one of the few artifacts that remained after the development only because it happened to be on his property. He taught them how to identify seeds and plants and bugs and other various sorts of creepy crawlies. He talked and talked and talked, until his voice was hoarse, telling them stories of the "old" days to satiate their curious minds.

He showed them how to plant and take care of the horses. He taught them how to use a hammer and how to fix a roof. His days were filled to the brim by the children with whom he had so much in common. For it seemed that they all had a need to get back home. Not to somebody's conception of home, but the real thing. Somehow, these children had an aching need to be part of the country, to be part of the green expanses that they normally only saw as they drove through to their homes. They wanted to play in those open fields and explore outside the walls that surrounded them. Just like him, they yearned to embrace the colors, the vibrancy, the beauty that nature had to offer.

And he was happy to help them. For years they came and he was always there to help nurture and instruct. One day, as he was showing the children how to pinch the tops of the tomato plants to make them bear more fruit, a little boy and his mother walked slowly up the dirt path. As he stood up glinting into the hot sun, the little boy caught his eye and thrust himself into a wobbly run. As he ran, his little face filled with anticipation, he called out, "Papa, Papa, Papa." As the mother regained her hold on her son, she corrected him. "That's not Papa," she said. But, it was too late. The children, who had witnessed the event, began whispering, "Papa, Papa, Papa." And, the name stuck. From that day on,

all the children, and even their parents who visited the farm, called him Papa John.

Papa John was the name that they slathered on the old cedar shingles they had salvaged after helping him repair his chicken coop. They thought it was necessary to make sure that everyone knew that they were visiting a very special place. Their place. Papa John's Garden.

John watched as the little girl who he had first spoke with that pivotal afternoon laid the finishing touches on the sign and, as the others watched, he lifted her to hook it lightly on the post he had made and placed in front of the garden. That was the day he really came home.

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She laid the shovel on the ground, tossed the glass in the dirt and picked up the sign, holding it lovingly against her small frame. God, those were the days. Those were the days when we were recreated. Before that, she thought, we were just wind-up robots enjoying artificial lives.

Those were the glorious days she held onto as she embarked on her adult life. But, while she was in school or at work, she would always catch herself gazing out the window, beyond the buildings to that bright patch of dirt on

Papa John's farm. When she felt closed in and alone, she got through it because she knew one day she would return home.

Although it would never be the same without him, she knew that she had to get back to the place where she felt whole. She had to put her fingers in the soil and touch the land. The land and its beauty would reenergize her and lift her up. So, she had made the journey out to her old hometown, to Papa John's Garden, where she played long ago.

Jadie carefully laid the sign back on the ground and turned her attention back to the garden plot. She knelt down firmly in the soil. Steadily, she reached out and grabbed a trowel that was lying next to a shiny new sign which read:

### *Papa John's Garden*

A Non-Profit Organization

Dedicated to Nature's Children

She struck the pointy nose of the tool solidly at the earth and gathered up a clump. She put her trowel down and selected a small cantaloupe seed from an opened seed packet lying on the ground. As she gripped the seed tightly between the

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thumb and forefinger of her left hand, she pointed her right finger in the dirt and started digging.