

Garden of Dreams

by Barry R. Taylor

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Brendan moved into the house on the outskirts of town because it was cheap, and quiet, and secluded. It was the perfect place to embrace his solitude. The house was small, barely more than a cottage, but sitting on a large lot, at least a couple of acres. Untended for years, the grounds had become overgrown with brambles and weeds. Lawns had become pastures, gardens were thickets. Brendan didn't mind. The chaotic landscape seemed apt for the ruin and disintegration his own life had become.

Just past thirty years old, Brendan was a stocky, dark-bearded man, perhaps too much given to introspection. His girlfriend had called him broody. Until recently he had provided tech support for an insurance firm. His new neighbour, an older man named Sam, told him that the house he had impulsively purchased was cursed, or haunted, or maybe both. Someone had died there, or so everyone believed.

Brendan didn't care much about all that. All he wanted was a place to disappear for a while. Or maybe forever. In the past six months he had lost his good but elderly parents, his unfaithful girlfriend, his meaningless job, and finally, his sense of purpose. When his doctor started using terms like "mental health crisis", he knew it was time to leave. Here on this residential backwater where nobody knew him, he could take a break from work, from friends, from the hurly-burly of city life, from everything. Brendan wasn't sure if he would ever go back. He had always felt like a misfit in the wider world.

Brendan's chief mission in his new digs was keeping despair at bay. He was haltingly successful. He drank too much beer and watched too much television. He pondered at length why it took so long to notice that his relationship was empty and his job was pointless and stupid. One day his neighbour Sam suggested that he start fixing up the house and grounds. Sam was portly and ruddy-faced, with a ball cap permanently perched on his forehead. "You seem as run down as your new house," Sam observed. "Maybe fixing up one would help with the other."

It was sage advice. Keeping busy was better than moping. Brendan occupied himself fixing the house, within the limits of his handyman's skills, and bringing some order to the yard.

He rented a brush mower and used that to gradually tame the overgrown tangle the grounds had become. Lawn began to re-appear, and the outlines of gardens, defined by perimeters of bricks.

One night, shortly after he finished moving in, Brendan had an intense dream. He was standing in a sumptuous rose garden on a fine summer day. Soft breeze on his face, warm sun above. The air sweet with the scent of roses and new-mown grass, animated with the hum of bees. He began walking through the garden, following a white-gravel trail past fountains and statues and beds of exuberantly blooming flowers. He didn't know where he was or where he was going, but he couldn't stay there. He had to find . . . something. The garden seemed endless, or perhaps he wasn't really moving.

Then he saw the woman. She was poorly defined at first: a face, a form, a wave of long brown hair. Her clothing was indistinct too, something long and flowing. She was always moving away, always disappearing behind the next hedge before he got there. Was she running away from him? In the dream he knew only that he had to follow her.

At length he was standing in a large square, defined by towering hedges on all sides. In the middle of the square stood an old-fashioned well of mortared stone, with a wooden bucket hanging from the windlass and a roof overtop. The woman was here – was she? He couldn't be sure.

There was something important about this place. He walked around and around the square, searching for the way out. The hedges enclosed everything. Dark clouds rolled across the sky, blotting out the sun. A sense of something fearful, of impalpable menace, lurked in every corner. Long, glistening knives spiked from the hedges like giant thorns. They began to fly through the air as if fired from a gun, smacking into the wooden bucket over the well and stabbing the ground beyond it. Blood poured from the ground wherever a knife struck.

Brendan heard the woman scream from somewhere. Where was she? He had to find her. More knives were flying now, spinning and clicking and thumping everywhere. The air had grown dark, he couldn't see the knives, only hear them whizzing by, alarmingly close. He was terrified, paralyzed with fear, the woman screamed again . . .

He awoke. He was lying in his own bed in a not-yet-familiar bedroom. The night was silent, without the steady background hum of city traffic. The clock by his bed said 2:10 a.m. Brendan lay still in the dark for a long time, recovering from the nightmare. It's vividness lingered. Only much later was he able to close his eyes and reclaim sleep.

The dream returned the next night, and the next. Over the next two weeks it became his recurring nightmare. The dream was always the same: the garden, the hedges, the well. It always began idyllically; it always ended with a woman's scream in a horror of blood and flying knives.

Gradually Brendan began to see the woman in more detail. The outline of her form and face became better defined each time the dream repeated. She was wearing a long, white nightgown and gold slippers. She was young and comely. She always disappeared before he could approach her.

Of all the oddities in the dream, the woman was the strangest. She wasn't some amorphous female, an embodiment of his sexual desires, or a random figure grabbed from his memory, like his mother or his tenth-grade English teacher. She was a consistent, specific individual whom he had never met. And by the fourth recurrence of the dream, Brendan knew who she was. Her name was Michelle Montagne and she had been dead for twenty years.

Brendan knew about Michelle Montagne because he was living in her house. She was the woman who died there. Michelle had been a translator and interpreter, fluent in half a dozen languages, and an avid gardener. She had lived in what was now Brendan's house for several years around the turn of the millennium before she abruptly disappeared. Her boyfriend at the time, an older man named Jason Orbeck, had been suspected of murder but no body was ever found and no charges were laid.

Brendan learned all this from the realtor, when he asked, in all innocence, why the house was on the market, and why the price was so low. The realtor said that when Michelle disappeared the house passed to an aunt who lived in the city and didn't care. She rented out the house periodically, mostly to keep the insurance active, but otherwise forgot about it. When the aunt died the house came back on the market, but now it was run-down and forlorn and in an older, untrendy part of town. The pall of Michelle's disappearance hung over it like a cloud. Renters complained that the house was spooky; they always moved out after a few months. Perhaps it was no surprise that Michelle Montagne was hijacking Brendan's dreams.

Brendan visited the local library to look up news reports of Michelle Montagne's disappearance. The pictures accompanying the stories confirmed that he was dreaming about Michelle: dark brown hair, soulful eyes, balanced oval face. He probably had her image in the back of his memory somewhere, and living in her house had brought it to the forefront. No one knew how she disappeared, or why, but speculation abounded. It happened in the middle of the

week. She left everything behind, even her wallet and keys. It was generally assumed she had been murdered. Her boyfriend, whom she had met through her translation work, was evasive. He had a shadowy history and questionable finances. Yet he had no apparent motive for killing Michelle and he seemed as baffled by her disappearance as everyone else. He claimed to have been at home in his own apartment the night she disappeared. The neighbours said they were a happy couple.

Brendan continued to be haunted by the nightmare in the garden. Ordinarily he attached no significance to dreams. He generally didn't even remember them in the morning. This dream was different. This dream was immersive, detailed, and as memorable as his waking hours. He remembered the smell of the roses, the flutter of butterflies around the flowers, and later, Michelle's screams as the knives began to fly. It was a dream that became a nightmare, and the nightmare was reality. Before he moved out of the city, with all its stress and grief, Brendan had been insomniac. Now he almost dreaded going to sleep.

Except: Michelle. She intrigued him. Why was a vanished and presumably dead woman appearing in his dreams? There had to be a deeper reason than mere association with her house. He printed out her picture from one of the news sites. He kept it on his bedside table. What mystery was she hiding behind those dark brown eyes?

In his waking hours, Brendan continued clearing and mowing. The layout of the gardens around his house became more apparent as the wild roses and dogwood and meadow-sweet fell under the blade. On the far side of the house, away from the road, lay a wildland impenetrable even to the brush mower. A two-acre lot is far too large for one person to manage. Michelle had compromised by leaving the back acre semi-wild, only carving out paths through it and removing enough underbrush to provide a clean view. In two decades of neglect the pathways had disappeared and the back acre had succeeded to dense young forest.

One afternoon as Brendan wrestled the self-propelled mower through a swatch of overgrown lawn, he noticed a row of three red oak trees standing like sentinels along one edge of the property. He stopped the mower. He studied the young trees. There was always a row of oak trees in the garden in his recurring dream. They were much grander than these, but the setting was familiar. Brendan looked around. Not far away lay a flowerbed he had not yet mowed. He could see the green swords of iris leaves still persisting among the weeds. There

was an iris bed near the oak trees in the dream garden. Had he unconsciously constructed that too?

He fell into the dream again that night. He recognized it now, as soon as it began. Standing in the rose garden, impelled to follow the fae, elusive Michelle across lawns and terraces, past pools and follies, through bowers and hanging gardens, to the square of knives. He saw her ahead, running down an avenue of rhododendrons in full bloom. He felt the urgency of following her. This time he stopped himself. “Wait!” he shouted at the apparition, “What do you want?”

She turned fully toward him for the first time. Brendan could see the beauty and the terror in those great brown eyes. “Help me!” she cried. She turned about again and dashed away down the flower-lined avenue. Brendan followed, as he always did in the dream. The square of knives awaited.

Some time later he jolted awake, blood and blades fresh in his memory. He was damp with perspiration. He turned on the bedside lamp. He gazed at the photograph of Michelle lying on his bedside table. “You want my help?” he demanded. “I can’t even help myself.” He had no job. Mortgage payments loomed. He was profoundly alone, adrift. The ache of heartbreak and betrayal overlay all his thoughts. He turned off the lamp and closed his eyes. The nightmare did not return that night.

In the days that followed, Michelle’s “Help me” weighed heavily on Brendan’s mind. How was he supposed to help? The woman had been dead since the millennium. Perhaps, in the convoluted and uncanny way of dreams, he was appealing for help himself.

Standing in the rose garden. Scented flowers all around. Birds singing in the trees. A sense of pastoral splendour extending in all directions. The serene beauty of the dream garden reminded him of the great botanical garden at Kew, or the vast, statue-riddled gardens at Versailles, both of which he had visited on a high school sojourn, years ago. Without the terror of the square of flying knives the garden would be a pleasant escape from his dreary world.

He knew, in the world of the dream, that he had to go somewhere. He had to find something. This time though, instead of leaving he deliberately sat down on a comfortable bench. He felt the sun on his face and admired the colours and shapes of the grass, the flowers, the trees. He noticed the row of great oak trees beyond the rose garden and the swatch of irises farther off.

Sitting down felt like a reckless act, like walking into a busy street without looking. He was defying the rules of the dream. Even sitting still, he registered the undertow of impending action, that something significant or dangerous was about to happen. Soon enough Michelle appeared, as beautiful and desperate as ever. This time she cried out, “Help me, please!” without prompting. She dashed away down the avenue of rhododendrons, her nightgown flying. She looked back once to be sure Brendan was following.

Brendan followed. Though the air pulsed with the need to hurry, he lingered as long as he could, reluctant to leave the sanctuary of the garden. But the logic of the dream world was ineluctable. Soon enough he found himself in the square by the well, bounded by great hedges like prison walls, feeling the sense of foreboding as roiling clouds obscured the sun. Though he had been here many times by now, the imminence of flying knives still terrified him.

He looked around for Michelle. She was here somewhere, he was sure, though he could no longer see her. Long-bladed knives began to grow on the hedges, like time-lapse images of flowers opening. He shouted: “Where are you!” as loudly as he could.

“Find me!” Michelle shouted back, but her voice was everywhere and Brendan couldn’t see her. Then the air was full of knives, the earth spilled blood and there was nothing to do but crouch and cower and wait for Michelle’s final scream.

“Sam, you’ve lived here a long time, right?” Brendan wondered, one sunny morning. His retired neighbour was helping him clear cuttings off the lawn.

“Nearly forty years in that house,” Sam replied, with a touch of pride. Today his ball cap bore the logo of a farm equipment company. “Sharon and I moved in here right after we got married.” He referred to his recently passed wife.

“So you must have known Michelle Montagne?”

“Of course. She moved in right around 2000, I think. Lovely girl she was. And busy as a bumblebee, all the time. If she wasn’t working she was out here in her gardens, fair weather or foul. They were fine gardens, too. The whole neighbourhood was proud of them.” He grinned. “Sharon accused me of being in love with her.”

“And were you?”

“Well, she was quite expert at sweet-talking me into doing garden work for her. Moving heavy stones, planting trees, all that. That girl always had a landscaping project on the go. I

think she only loved me for my tractor.” He paused. “Sharon believed that your house is haunted by Michelle’s spirit.” His tone was not ironic.

“Perhaps it is,” Brendan said. “Do you think she was murdered?”

The older man paused with a sheaf of branches in his hands. “I don’t know. The police did treat her disappearance as a murder at the time. That boyfriend of hers, what was his name, he was the prime suspect.”

“Jason Orbeck,” Brendan supplied.

“Yeah, that’s him. Never did like that man. As shifty as a sand dune in a high wind, that one.” He dumped his load in the wheelbarrow.

Brendan stroked his beard. “Do you know what he did for a living?”

“Can’t remember, exactly. Long time ago, you understand. He did something in international trade, not sure what. A lot of business with Russia. Michelle helped him translate a bunch of financial documents, that’s how they got involved.”

Brendan sat on the edge of the wheelbarrow, nearly tipping it over. “I’ve been thinking. Maybe while she was translating, Michelle uncovered evidence of illegal transactions of some kind. The papers all say his business dealings were murky. Maybe Orbeck killed her to keep her quiet.”

Sam lifted his ball cap long enough to wipe his brow with the back of a work glove. He grinned. “Sounds like you’ve found something to keep you busy,” he said.

In the afternoon of that same day, Brendan found himself standing on a newly mown lawn behind the house, contemplating the wall of vegetation before him. Beyond lay the quarter that Michelle had kept as wildland. The young forest was as dense as a thicket. Wind-felled trees and woody tangles lurked everywhere. Even walking through it was a daunting prospect.

But he had to try. “Find me,” dream-Michelle pleaded, as he stood in the square of knives, waiting for horror to begin. The dream always ended at the well. Knives flying from the hedges slammed into the bucket hanging over the well, shattering its staves into splinters. “Find me,” Michelle cried. Perhaps the flying knives carried a message, from long-dead Michelle or his own subconscious, pointing out where to look. Find the well.

Michelle’s house, now Brendan’s house, was on the town water supply, but when the house had been built in the 1960s, it was still in the country; it would take decades for the expanding town to envelope it. Sam said that all the old houses along that street initially

depended on wells. Brendan's house would have one, lost and forgotten, somewhere in the untamed forest behind the house.

To search the land properly would require deep patience and a chainsaw. Brendan had neither of those things. He had a pair of loppers and whatever determination he could muster. He entered the forest and started searching.

He accomplished nothing on the first day beyond getting lost. There was no clear boundary between his property and forest beyond it. His pruning tool was utterly inadequate. He considered quitting then, but the dream-nightmare returned that night and Michelle's scream of "Find me!" was louder and more terrifying than ever. Brendan awoke with his heart racing. He had to keep looking.

By the second day Brendan had been in the wood long enough to feel he had searched it all. Maybe he had walked right past the well without knowing. He was scratched, tired and discouraged. He was about give up and head back to the house when he noticed a dark shape hidden under a half-fallen tree. He fought his way over to it. The shape was a concrete cylinder about three feet high and five feet across, jutting out of a small rise in the earth. It was cracked and covered in moss and lichen. The well.

He studied the young forest around him. There were no hedges out here, of course. But there were ranks of spruce trees, deep green and conical, and with a little imagination he could make out the outline of a great square. This was the place. The lid of the well was a concrete disk with a wire loop in the centre, entirely grown over with moss and grass. He would need tools.

Late that afternoon, as the summer sun was approaching the tops of the trees, Brendan returned to the well. He was carrying a six-foot pry bar he had purchased at a hardware store in town. Brendan slid the pry bar under the wire loop in the lid, pressed the far end against the concrete, and heaved. Nothing moved. On the second try the lid shifted a little. A line appeared through the moss, defining the edge. On the third try the lid slid out of the well top with a groan of stone against stone. It was more than half a foot thick. Brendan used the pry bar to slide the lid to one side.

The well was open, for the first time in decades. Brendan contemplated what this well contained and his stomach turned over. He retrieved a small flashlight from his back pocket. He

steeled himself for what came next. He leaned over the open well and shone the light down inside.

Emptiness. Rings of grey, flat rocks winding down and down into the earth in neat circles until they met the dark water reflecting the light from Brendan's flashlight. Nothing else. He had a plumb line with him. He lowered the weight into the well until the line slackened. In late summer the water was less than three feet deep. Too shallow to hide a human corpse. Wherever Michelle Montagne was, she wasn't there.

Brendan slumped down on the mossy ground beside the well, defeated. There was nothing in the well but water. His recurring dream-nightmare had led him nowhere. Surely the police would have searched the property thoroughly twenty years ago. The forest would have been open then. They had doubtless already checked the well.

"Help me!" Michelle had begged him, before she was stabbed to death for the thousandth time. Brendan stared into the hostile green jungle around him. "How can I help you when I still don't know where you are?" he whispered.

The dream had to mean something. To dream of the garden was to visit another place, a land as real as the mundane world of his days, but filled with flowers and light. The hedged-in square, the well and the stabbing knives seemed like aberrations on an otherwise uninterrupted serenity. There had to be a reason for them. Surely the knives signalled that Michelle had been stabbed. They flew across the square like missiles, slamming into the bucket over the well, shattering it into shards and splinters. Those that missed the bucket rammed into the ground on the far side of the square, drawing blood from the wounded earth. Did that blood imply that the earth was the true target, and not the well? Perhaps the bucket was merely in the way. Brendan sat up. Had he been reading the dream all wrong?

He got to his feet. He began pushing through the confining undergrowth all around the well. He probed the ground at intervals with thrusts of his pry-bar. At first he found nothing but rocks and roots. After ten minutes he struck something hard. He probed again, and then again, always striking a flat surface. This wasn't a rock. There was something subterranean here beside the well.

He dropped to his knees. He began to tear through the moss and roots with his hands. After a moment he remembered the pry-bar and used that to scrape off sod and chop through

overgrown roots. In twenty minutes he had revealed a broad square of concrete perhaps three metres away from the well, deeply shrouded in brambles and underbrush.

Brendan sat down on the well-head, dirty, sweaty, and winded. He had uncovered what he guessed was a cistern. It would have been an emergency water supply in times of drought or wildfire. Completely buried in the forest floor, it would be easy to overlook. This was where the dream had been leading him.

Brendan picked up the pry-bar and heaved himself to his feet. His quest was nearly finished, but the final task would be the most difficult. The cistern had a concrete lid similar to that on the well, but the wire loop had long since rusted away. Even with the pry-bar, opening the lid would be no easy task. If he did manage to get the lid off the cistern, he understood with cold certainty what he would find inside. After a moment he dropped the pry-bar. He had done his part. He sat down on the well head, pulled out his cell phone and entered a three-digit number.

Late that night, after the coroner's team had come and gone, after the curious neighbours had all gone home, after the police had finished their hours of tedious questions, Brendan almost collapsed into bed. For the first time in weeks, the nightmare of knives and blood did not return to disturb his needful sleep. The following morning he was sitting on the front step, sipping fresh coffee and pondering the events of the previous day, when Sam wandered over from next door. His ball cap was red today. "Quite the mess, isn't it." the older man said, settling in beside Brendan. He had his own cup of coffee.

Brendan nodded. "They brought in a big brush-clearing machine to cut a path to the well. Threw branches and leaves everywhere."

Sam studied his coffee cup. "Well, it's good that you finally found her. Poor Michelle. But . . . how did you know to look for the cistern?"

Brendan said, "Would you believe it came to me in a dream?"

"Yes."

Brendan raised an eyebrow. Sam said, "Sharon always insisted this house was haunted by Michelle's ghost."

"Did she know?" Brendan asked, without looking up. "Did Sharon know about your affair with Michelle?"

"What do you mean by that!"

He did look up then. “Sam, you’ve lived in the house next door forever. From before the town put in a water line. From the time everyone used dug wells. You’re the only one who would have known that cistern was there.”

Sam was silent for a dozen heartbeats. Finally he said, “Michelle and I, we had a good thing going, way back then. She was tonic for a middle-aged man, and I think I was good for her too. Then she takes up with that Orbeck fellow, the sleazy money-changer. Left me high and dry. I don’t think I’ve ever been so angry. I covered the cistern with leaves and branches but I thought for sure someone would find it. No one did. I don’t think Sharon ever suspected anything.”

Brendan was acutely aware of the pain of infidelity. He fought to keep the bitterness out of his voice. “You betrayed your own wife and when Michelle decided to end it you murdered her because you felt betrayed?”

Sam’s voice was soft. “Yeah,” he said, after a beat. “I guess that’s true.”

Brendan shook his head. “What are you going to do now?”

He sipped his coffee. “The Mountie in charge left his business card. I guess I’ll give him a call. Be good to get this off my chest.” He climbed to his feet. “Good luck, Brendan. You’re a good neighbour.” He strolled away toward his house.

That night as he lay in bed, Brendan found himself standing in the rose garden once again, enjoying the tranquil beauty he had come to know so well. The dream was different now. The urgent need to go somewhere had disappeared, along with the feeling that a trenchant event was impending.

Maybe he could stay here for a while. Heaven knew he needed a respite. He leaned his head back and inhaled the scent of a thousand roses. Then he sat down on the bench and watched the butterflies flit from flower to flower.

Michelle appeared around a hedge. She was dressed as always in the clothing she had died in, a long white nightgown and gold slippers. She sat down beside him on the bench, long hair hanging free, and looking quite lovely. “Thank you,” she said. There was no more terror in those deep brown eyes.

Brendan nodded. “Your nightmare is over,” he said. “And mine too, I expect.” He sighed. “I’m going to miss your garden though. It’s a special place, isn’t it. When I’m here I feel like my soul is at rest.”

Michelle turned toward him. She said, “Visit whenever you like. And stay as long as you want.”

“Thank you,” Brendan said, in turn.

Michelle smiled. The garden seemed even brighter. “Sweet dreams,” she said.

