

# The Garden

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Esmet, like almost any other inhabitant of the city, thought himself very average. He worked about as hard as any other citizen of Treva and had more or less as many friends as any other Trevian—in proportion to personality, anyway—he didn't often get into trouble, and, more often than not, lent a helping hand to his friends and neighbors. Esmet was well-liked and well-spoken-of by his closest friends and newest acquaintances alike. And he owned an apartment of mediocre status within the city walls.

The apartment, his favorite place to be (which was not always the case in Treva), was a little brick home—very cozy, indeed—with a guest bedroom and bath, with a library full of books

new and old, and without bad neighbors. Neighbors were as enviable as the moderate square footage it occupied, for in Treva, space itself was a premium luxury.

Each brick house had been constructed as a part of the home next to it, above it, and below it. A labyrinth of hallways, streets, stairs, and bridges crisscrossed the residential nexus of the city. Access to and from a house always involved hellos and goodbyes—and sometimes a rather-too-tight-for-comfort squeeze through a narrow hallway. So one always had to be on the best terms with one's neighbors.

Esmet thoroughly enjoyed his home, his routine, and his life—until the day he met Alina.

Now, Alina lived across the city, which somewhat explains why he'd never come across her before. She was a cute little Trevian with

short dark hair, irritatingly intense brown eyes, and a bird-like voice. Her job was as unimportant as Esmet's, but her location at a bus-stop at precisely 7:43am on Tuesday, September 3<sup>rd</sup> was extremely important, for it was at that moment that Esmet walked up to the bus-stop, saw the girl standing there, book in hand, and gave a polite nod when she glanced his way. He immediately inspected his feet and wiped his nose on his sleeve, but as a lover of books, his curiosity overcame him and he asked what she was reading.

“Gardening: An Exploration of Possibilities in Modern Treva,” came her curt answer.

Esmet nodded his thanks, shoved his hands in his pockets, and peered down the street expectantly.

Alina studied him for a moment, and turned back to her book.

The bus arrived shortly. Both boarded, sat significantly apart, and Esmet forgot about her almost the moment he arrived at work. But the seed had been planted—and it broke the surface of his subconscious at lunch break. He sat as he always did in the place he always did, eating one of the four varieties of meals he always did, and talking to one of the three varieties of co-workers he always did. This particular day afforded him a meat-and-cheese sandwich and Bill for conversation. Bill mentioned something he'd seen about hydro-farming grapes and wondering if the ones on which he were chewing had been grown in water.

“I met a girl reading a book on gardening this morning,” Esmet mentioned.

“You met a girl?” Bill inquired with amazement.

“I asked her what she was reading,” Esmet clarified.

Bill's countenance fell. “That does sound like you.”

“But it was about gardening.”

Bill took another bite and thought over the piece of information. “And?”

“It was about gardening. Inside Treva. I didn't think that was possible.”

“Well,” pondered Bill, “I suppose anything is *possible*.”

“No, not *anything* is possible. Round squares aren't possible,” Esmet retorted.

Bill shrugged in agreement. “But gardens could

be.”

“Where?” Esmet wondered aloud.

“Somewhere,” Bill postulated and popped another grape into his mouth.

“Even here, in Treva?” Esmet prodded.

“I suppose. I haven't been everywhere. So there might be a place you could garden I haven't been. Pretty sure all the places I have been you couldn't, though.”

Esmet nodded. “Me neither. But you think there could be?”

Bill chewed a grape for a thoughtful moment.

“Yeah. I suppose. Guess you'd need dirt.”

“Yeah, but where would you get that?” Esmet asked.

“Beats me,” Bill replied. “Huh.” They both took a bite.

After a short pause chewing, Bill asked, “What was her name?”

Esmet shrugged. “I don't know.”

And that was the end of that conversation. Esmet did, however, ponder the idea of a garden (and the girl and her name) the entire the bus ride home. And while he cooked his dinner. And while he ate his dinner. And while he cleaned up after his dinner. In fact, the idea of a garden somewhat disturbed him. He meandered to his library to see if any of his books mentioned anything about gardens (they didn't) and he had a disappointing evening conversation with himself resulting in Esmet issuing Esmet an ultimatum: if he ever saw the cute little Trevian with the short dark hair and

irritatingly intense brown eyes again, he would ask her more about gardening inside the city.

Which just happened to occur the next morning at the bus stop (in fact, he had wondered if she were a regular at the bus-stop and he'd only just noticed her yesterday—this was not true; it had been, indeed her first day at this particular bus-stop and would be only the first of a very few days in a row at this particular bus-stop, as she was visiting a sickly aunt for a week).

Esmet gathered all his courage into one big heaping ball of lump at the back of his throat and, after a few agonizing seconds of mental deliberation, hurled his question at the girl.

An older man with a white beard and a trench coat raised his eyebrows at Esmet and shuffled a few steps further away from him.

Alina, however, glanced up from her book and

snatched his gaze out of midair. “Of course you can garden in Treva.”

“Where?” Esmet squeaked out, squirming a little in the grasp of her eyes.

“Anywhere,” she replied without hesitation.

“But what about dirt?”

“Yes, you need it. Can't garden at all without it,” she answered.

“But what about hydra-farming?” Esmet inquired, immediately regretting his question.

“They're not the same at all. Hydra-farming circumvents the process.”

“But the results are the same,” Esmet continued, wincing a little at the expected rebuttal. It came full-force.

“You truly think so? Then gardening is not for you,” she declared and turned back to her book.

“Ah, no. Well. Kind of. But I want it to be,” he backpeddled, but she showed no intention of turning those gleaming eyes back to him. “I mean, I'd like to garden. At least, I think I'd like to have a garden. It would be...”

Alina spun a half-turn to her right and left him facing her back. The words died on his lips. But something grew in his mind through the rest of the day that he couldn't shake and he vowed that if she were at the bus stop again the next morning, he'd do better.

She was. He tried. And he didn't. For all she knew, she and the large lady with the red overcoat and the shopping bags were the only two at the bus-stop.

The next day, however, persistence paid off and Esmet won another conversation with the cute little Trevian with the short dark hair and the irritatingly intense brown eyes.

“Why do you want to garden?” she asked, holding his gaze hostage in her own.

“I thought it'd help me,” he answered, honestly enough.

“Help you,” she mused, “Help you what?”

“I don't know. Do something better with my life? I mean, I like reading books; but reading books doesn't give you something tangible at the end of the day. A carrot is tangible.”

She frowned, then acquiesced. “Rest. It would help you rest.”

“Rest?” he queried, unsure of the connection

between the two ideas.

“Look here, if you don't know why you need a garden, you'll never start. Now, the Master Planner of Treva has set forth in the GSA the requisition for every citizen to set aside 1/7<sup>th</sup> ...”

“GSA?” Esmet interrupted, “What's that?”

“The General Municipal Regulating Statutes and Official City Archives—GSA for short—and this text demands every citizen to set aside 1/7<sup>th</sup> of his or her abiding residence to be used solely for a garden. Did you know that?”

Esmet swallowed and replied. “No.”

“Of course not. Not many do. Well, not as many do anymore,” she lamented, but then snapped her gaze back to Esmet. “So I ask you why he would issue such a decree?”

Esmet shrugged. “Rest?”

“You only say that because I did. Why would he link a garden with rest?”

“Because it would...help people...yeah.”

Alina leveled an unblinking stare at him with devastating effect. And then the bus arrived. She flashed a weak smile and boarded.

With flailing arms, Esmet hurried onto the bus and found her sitting on an aisle seat, next to the old man with the beard. Mercifully, the seat opposite her was empty. He rushed to it and thought he saw a slight grin cross her lips. But it was gone when she turned to him and asked again, “Why would the Master Planner mandate gardens?”

Esmet squirmed and tried to answer a second

time. “Plants are good for people; they produce oxygen.”

“Forget the practical benefits for a moment. If people didn't have a garden, what would they do?” she prodded.

“The same thing they do every day?” Esmet ventured.

“Right. And if people didn't have a garden in their house, what would they do with the space?”

“Fill it up with other things, I guess,” he replied.

“So if people don't own a garden, they'll just fill their time and space with the same old things and never take a break from them?”

“Yes.” Esmet replied, then hastily reverted to a

question. “Yes?”

“Yes. And so....?”

“So everyone should have a garden to break up their daily routines and personal...I don't know...investments?”

“Because...?” she prodded.

“Because they'll be happier?” Esmet guessed.

“Because they need it. Because without it they'll work themselves to death. Because without it they'll assume life is all about them. Because without it they won't rest.”

“Well, I don't have a garden and I sleep at night,” Esmet countered, hoping to lessen the barrage. It didn't work.

“And how's that working for you...you who are

asking me about gardening.”

The intensely personal question took him aback. Esmet faltered.

Alina kept her eyebrows vaulted and lips sealed in expectation.

Esmet thought about his four varieties of lunches and three varieties of conversations at work. He considered the dreary sameness of his life that was bleeding him dry like a leech. He wondered if he'd ever really rested before. And in this contemplation he wondered if a garden might really be just what he needed. He glanced up and found the hawk-like eyes boring into his soul.

He grimaced and replied. “Not well.”

The eyes softened. “So why do *you* need a garden?”

Esmet took a deep breath and then sighed his reply: “To change what I am.”

“As if a box of dirt with plants in it could do that alone,” she responded with a playful hint of sarcasm in her voice. “No, a garden will do you good; but it will not change you. What you need is the Gardener.”

Esmet's heart leaped a little in his chest when he heard this. He waited for her to continue. But she did not. He again swallowed the lump in his throat and asked, “Where can I find a Gardener?”

“There is only one. And he will be found by those who seek him.” The bus had slowed to a stop and Alina had risen from her seat. “This is my stop. Goodbye.” And with that she turned and exited the bus, leaving a confused and curious Esmet standing and trying to say

something, but she was gone before he had the chance to articulate any thoughts.

With a disappointed sigh he plopped down into the seat.

“I'd start with a copy of the General Municipal Regulating Statutes and Official City Archives if I were you,” said the old man with a beard across from him. But when Esmet looked up at him, he had turned his attention out the window and didn't seem anxious to elaborate. Esmet chewed his lip a little and figured the advice wasn't bad—maybe he'd stop by the library on his way home and pick up a copy.

He did. He started reading it after dinner. He didn't stop until morning.

After shoveling a hurried breakfast into his mouth and splashing a handful of cold water on his face, he hurried to the bus stop hoping to

find the cute little Trevian with the short dark hair and the irritatingly intense brown eyes waiting there. To his heart's great relief, he found her standing on the curb, as the past few days, book in hand. He approached her quietly, humbly—unsure of how to begin the conversation. He wanted to talk about gardening. He wanted to know if she had a garden. He wanted to learn her name. But he certainly didn't know how to start. When at last his proximity made her glance up, a flare of that undiluted smile crossed her lips, but immediately vanished.

“You look awful,” she exclaimed with a hint of something that might have passed for worry in her eyes.

“Mmm. Well. I feel pretty awful. But I called the Gardener last night. Found his number in the GSA.”

“Oh?” she queried and narrowed her eyes.

“And what did he say?”

“He didn't answer. I left a voicemail.”

“And what did you say?” she pushed.

“I told him that I needed him. That I couldn't garden without him. That I wanted his help,” Esmet answered.

“And do you believe he will help you?”

“Sure. I guess. Don't know where he'll get the dirt. Or how he'll make space in my small apartment. There really isn't much room.”

Alina smiled. “He'll figure it out. He's pretty good at what he does.”

“You think he'll actually show up?” Esmet wondered.

“I know he will. He did for me.”

“But when?”

“He may already be at work,” Alina stated. He felt her gaze linger a moment before falling back to her book.

When the bus arrived, Esmet boarded last, sat near the front, not at all near the cute little Trevian girl with the short dark hair and the wonderfully intense brown eyes, and pondered all that he'd read the night before and all that she'd told him this morning and the mornings prior.

He didn't dare tell Bill at lunch, but as fortune would have it, he didn't have to, as he ate macaroni and cheese with Crystal, who cared nothing at all for conversation with him. So he sat there and wondered about gardening and

why he hadn't asked her name.

But his curiosity blossomed as he climbed the stairs to his front door at the end of the day. His heart rate spiked as the questions began to boil in his mind. Had the Gardener come? Had he started something in his home? Would anything be different?

With a trembling hand, he opened his door and peered inside. The laundry he hadn't finished still lay on the couch. The dishes he'd neglected last night still filled the sink. The furniture hadn't been moved. A flash of disappointment pierced his heart. He swallowed and shut the door. Perhaps he'd had hoped in vain. Perhaps the girl had been wrong all along. Perhaps it was better he'd never learned her name.

But when he moved to his bedroom, something caught his eye. He moved to investigate. There, on the sill of the one window in his apartment,

sat a little box of dirt. A smile stretched across his lips. Esmet approached and found a note attached. He picked it up and read: “But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.”

A little tingle went up his spine and a peace seemed to settle on his heart—alongside an immense desire to care for and grow this little garden. He rushed to his sink, filled a cup with water and gave the dirt a light soaking. Esmet sat, watching the little bed of earth, for nearly an hour, with a happy grin on his face. He thought of perseverance. He thought of plants. And then he thought of the cute little Trevian girl whose name he'd never learned.

He went to sleep resolved to ask her in the morning.

