Growing Up in Lowell  
VI  
Grandfather’s Garden  
By Joseph Dery  

If I ever have a heart attack, it won’t be due to fatty deposits; rather the blockage would be caused by an accumulation of the dirt that flows through my veins. That’s not to say that I don’t eat my share of cheeseburgers, it’s just that when I see a patch of wasted lawn space, I can’t help but imagine the lush garden that could have been. I have been living in the city my whole life, but my family has fostered a connection with the earth in me since I was old enough to be carried out of the house and to my grandfather’s garden.

Before I had a memory, I had dirt under my fingernails. My grandparents lived at twenty-eight Chapel St. in Lowell. When they had bought the house there wasn’t any land attached to it, but a few years later they purchased a large lot across the street, which they turned into a garden. That garden was a playground for me in my earliest years, as I would dig in the dirt with an old spoon while my father and grandfather worked planting tomatoes, corn, carrots and whatnot. When I was a little bit older, my father and I would excavate sections of the yard in the spring, turning up shards of old bottles and clay marbles that had been lost by some child a hundred years earlier. Turning over the soil to spread the nutrients and prepare the ground for planting became a chance to practice some amateur archaeology.

In the years of my childhood that spanned the late eighties and early nineties my grandfather didn’t do much of the physical labor, leaving most of the work to my father to do, but he would be out there, sitting in the shade on a folding chair. In the fall he would slowly work his way through the garden, picking the red ripe tomatoes and dropping them into the paper shopping bag that I carried along behind him. In his earlier years he found time to care for his garden on the weekends after working hard all week in his job as a painter. Often he would need to work part time in area mills to make enough money to support his family of six children. My grandparents were also regular parishioners at Saint Peter’s church on Gorham Street, where they sang in the choir, until the church was closed and demolished in 1996. My grandfather taught me a lot about gardening, and about life. He taught me how to take care to nourish the soil you plant in by turning in fish scraps and cow manure, and he taught me to have patience. The patience it takes to plant a garden and watch it grow spills over into many other areas of life, and when time is left alone to work its magic, the rewards can be generous.

The neighborhood around my grandfather’s garden was as diverse as the plants that he grew every year. Various ethnicities made the Chapel Street area their home. Many of the Portuguese families grew their own small gardens in the area, and continue to do so to this day. It seemed like anything one could want was within a short walk from my grandfather’s garden. We could have subs from Santoro’s sub shop, fish from Martin’s Fish and Produce Market, or fresh pies and tarts from Barry’s Pastry Shop on Central Street in just a few minutes. Many times my grandfather and I would share a meal out in the garden in the shade of a large tree that grew on one side of the lot, and if either of us needed a fresh tomato for his sandwich, there were plenty of them, ripe and ready for picking.

My grandfather took a lot of pride in his tomatoes. He always devoted a fair share of the garden space to his tomato plants, lined up in rows of metal cages like soldiers in formation. Every spring we marched out the cages from the back of the lot, after digging them out from under the pile of last year’s dead plants. Those wire cages were rusty, but they kept the tomatoes off of the ground so that they wouldn’t spoil before they were red and ripe. My father told me that once, when he was young, my grandfather had planted the whole garden with tomato plants, over a hundred of them, and when all those tomatoes came in he and his brothers went around to restaurants in the area selling them fresh tomatoes at a fair price. I am not such a great fan of tomatoes, so I was lucky enough to have more to choose from in the years that I was partaking in the crops that the earth gave us.

There was indeed a fine variety of produce to be had from the garden, but the one thing that we had the greatest abundance of was apples. There were five dwarf apple trees in the garden, evenly spaced out on the lot, which was a square plot of land
about fifty feet on each side. The trees, being dwarves, were about five feet tall and six feet across, but the apples were full-sized, and full-flavored too. Three of the trees produced Macintosh apples, while the other two were of the golden delicious variety. They all produced fine apples, although without a lot of harsh pesticides we did have to eat around a few spots. There were apple pies, apple pancakes, baked apples, and of course, shopping bags full of apples to give away to friends and family.

One day, when my wife and I were visiting my grandparents, I asked my grandfather about the trees. It had seemed to me that they had always been there, and I was curious about their age. I was in the living room of his house, on the second story. Looking out of the window, I could see the trees in the lot across the street. When my grandfather became too old to work in the garden he sold it to a neighbor who shared the same appreciation for the land as he did. His neighbor kept it just the way it was, and had even made some improvements to the lot, clearing out a few dead pine trees that provided too much shade.

“How old are those apple trees?” I asked my grandfather.

“What? Hold on just a minute.” He said, and then turned off the television, interrupting Sister Mary Elizabeth’s recitation of the Hail Mary. “What was that, I couldn’t hear?”

“How old are those apple trees?” I asked, louder this time, “The ones in the garden.”

“Those trees?” he said, looking out the window. “There about the same age as you are.” “You were just about, oh I don’t know, maybe two or three.” He pronounced three like “tree”. “We were out there in the garden, you and your father, and me and grandma, and the apples was just starting to come in and get nice and red. I says to you, go on over there, pick one of those apples, and you done it. Then I said there’s the first Dery that picked an apple legitimate.” He pronounced “legitimate” with even more force than usual, being the sort who overcompensated for his deafness by an increase in volume, and then he gave me a toothless grin, pleased with his story.

It was a story that my grandfather would tell me again, perhaps three or four more times in the last two years of his life. When he died at the age of ninety-one, I was glad that I had made an effort to spend time with him in his final years, and that I had a chance to learn about my connection to the earth, a connection that stretched back farther than my memory.

Now I continue to foster my connection to the land. In my city garden every spring my wife and I have grown a garden of pumpkins, corn, beans and many other vegetables for the last six or seven years, but our most successful crop so far came in two years ago when my daughter was born. Last spring while I turned over the soil with a shovel my daughter was digging in a section of ground with a stick. When we planted the seeds, she helped step on the ground after to pat it down, and in the fall we could tell which tomatoes she had picked, because they each had just one bite taken out before being dropped into the basket. These memories I keep, not only for myself, but to share with my little girl when she asks me how long we have had a garden to plant, to play in, and to treasure.

(Call Tom Langan at 978-452-0897 to publish your memories of growing up in Lowell.)