Savage Garden

Mark Mills

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Extract

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Later, when it was over, he cast his thoughts back to that sun-struck May day in Cambridge – where it had all begun – and asked himself whether he would have done anything differently, knowing what he now did.

It was not a question easily answered.

He barely recognized himself in the carefree young man cycling along the towpath beside the river, bucking over the ruts, the bottle of wine dancing around in the bike basket.

Try as he might, he couldn't penetrate the workings of that stranger's mind, let alone say with any certainty how he would have dealt with the news that murder lay in wait for him, just around the corner.

1



He was known, primarily, for his marrows.

This made him a figure of considerable suspicion to the ladies of the Horticultural Society, who, until his arrival on the scene, had vied quite happily amongst themselves for the most coveted award in the vegetable class at their annual show. The fact that he was a newcomer to the village no doubt fuelled their resentments; that he lived alone with a 'house-keeper' some years younger than himself, a woman whose cast of countenance could only be described as 'oriental', permitted them to bury the pain of defeat in malicious gossip.

That first year he carried off the prize, I can recall Mrs Meade and her cronies huddled together at the back of the marquee, like cows before a gathering storm. I can also remember the vicar, somewhat the worse for wear after an enthusiastic sampling of the cider entries, handing down his verdict on the marrow category. With an air of almost lascivious

relish, he declared Mr Atherton's prodigious specimen to be 'positively tumescent' (thereby reinforcing my own suspicions about the good reverend).

Mr Atherton, tall, lean, and slightly stooped by his seventy-some years, approached the podium without the aid of his walking stick. He graciously accepted the certificate (and the bottle of elderflower cordial that accompanied it) then returned to his chair. I happened to be seated beside him that warm, blustery afternoon, and while the canvas snapped in the wind and the vicar slurred his way through a heartfelt tribute to all who had submitted Victoria sponges, Mr Atherton inclined his head towards me, a look of quiet mischief in his eyes.

'Do you think they'll ever forgive me?' he muttered under his breath.

I knew exactly who he was talking about.

'Oh, I doubt it,' I replied, 'I doubt it very much.'

These were the first words we had ever exchanged, though it was not the first time I had elicited a smile from him. Earlier that summer, I had caught him observing me with an amused expression from beneath a Panama hat. He had been seated in a deck chair on the boundary of the cricket pitch, and a burly, lower-order batsman from Droxford had just hit me for six three times in quick succession, effectively sealing yet another ignoble defeat for the Hambledon 2nd XI.

Adam turned the sheet over, expecting to read on. The page was blank.

'That's it?' he asked.

'Evidently,' said Gloria. 'What do you think?'

'It's good.'

'Good? "Good" is like "nice". "Good" is what mothers say about children who don't misbehave. Boring children! For God's sake, Adam, this is my novel we're talking about.'

Probably best not to mention the over-zealous use of commas.

'*Very* good. Excellent,' he said.

Gloria pouted a wary forgiveness, her breasts straining against the material of her cotton print dress as she leaned towards him. 'It's just the opening, but it's intriguing, don't you think?'

'Intriguing. Yes. Very mysterious. Who is this Mr Atherton with the prodigious marrows?'

'Ah-ha!' she trumpeted. 'You see? Page one and you're already asking questions. That's good.'

He raised an eyebrow at her choice of adjective but she didn't appear to notice.

'Who do *you* think he is? Or, more to the point: *What* do you think he is?'

She was losing him now. The wine wasn't helping, unpalatably warm in the afternoon heat, a wasp buzzing forlornly around the neck of the bottle.

'I really don't know.'

Gloria swept the wasp aside with the back of her hand and filled her glass, topping up Adam's as an afterthought.

'He's a German spy,' she announced.

'A German spy?'

'That's right. You see, it's wartime – 1940, to be precise – and while the Battle of Britain rages in the skies above a small Hampshire village, an altogether different battle is about to unfold on the ground. As above –'

'– so below.'

Were they really quoting Hermes Trismegistus at each other over this?

'And who or what is Herr Atherton spying on?' he persevered, regretting the question almost immediately.

'A secret submarine base in Portsmouth harbour.'

So this was where two years of English literature studies had led her, all that Beowulf and Chaucer, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: to a secret submarine base in Portsmouth harbour.

'What?' demanded Gloria warily.

'I was just thinking,' he lied, 'that your narrator's a man. Unless she's a woman who happens to play cricket for the village team.'

'So?'

'It's a challenge, I imagine, writing a male narrator.'

'You don't think I'm up to it?'

'I didn't say that.'

'Four brothers,' she said, holding up three fingers. 'And it's not as if you're the first chap I've ever stepped out with.'

This was a truth she liked to assert from time to time, dishing out unsavoury details to drive home her point, although she was too angry for that right now.

She tossed the remainder of her wine away, the liquid crescent flopping into the tall grass. She got to her feet a little unsteadily. 'I'm going.'

'Don't,' he said, taking her hand. 'Stay.'

'You hate it.'

'That's not true.'

'I know what you're thinking.'

'You're wrong. I could be jailed for what I'm thinking.'

It was a crass play, but he knew her vulnerability to that kind of talk. Besides, this was the reason they'd skipped their lectures and come to the meadow, was it not?

'I'm sorry,' he said, capitalizing on her faint smile, 'I suppose I'm just jealous.'

'Jealous?'

'I couldn't do it, I know that. It's great. Really. It hooked me instantly. The drunken vicar's a great touch.'

'You like him?'

'A lot.'

Gloria allowed herself to be drawn back down on to the blanket, into their sunken den, out of sight of the river towpath where the stubby willows bristled.

His fingers charted a lazy yet determined course along the inside of her dove-white thigh, the flesh warm and yielding, like new dough.

She leaned towards him and kissed him, forcing her tongue between his lips.

He tasted the cheap white wine and felt himself stir under her touch. His hand moved to her breasts, his thumb brushing over her nipples, the way she liked it.

Sexual favours in return for blanket praise. Was it really that simple?

He checked his thoughts, guilty that his mind was straying from the matter in hand.

He needn't have worried.

'You know,' said Gloria, breaking free and drawing breath, 'I think I'll give Mr Atherton a granddaughter. My hero needs to lose his heart.'

The note was waiting for him in his pigeonhole when he returned to college. He recognized the handwriting immediately. It was the same barely legible scrawl that adorned his weekly essays. The note read:

> Dear Mr Strickland,
>
> Apologies for making this demand upon your busy schedule, but there is a matter I should like to discuss with you regarding your thesis.
>
> Shall we say 5 p.m. today in my office at the faculty? (That's the large stone building at the end of Trumpington Street, in case you've forgotten.)
>
> Warm regards
>
> Professor Leonard

Adam glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes to get across town. The bath would have to wait.

Professor Crispin Leonard was something of an institution, not just within the faculty but the university as a

whole. Although well into his seventies, he was quite unlike his elderly peers, who only emerged from their gloomy college rooms at mealtimes, or so it seemed, shuffling in their threadbare gowns to and from the dining hall across velvet lawns whose sacred turf it was their privilege to tread. Few knew what these aged characters did (or had ever done) to justify the sinecure of a college fellowship. Authorship of a book, one book, any book, appeared to suffice, even if the value of that work had long since been eclipsed. For whatever reason, they were deemed to have paid their dues, and in return the colleges offered them a comfortable dotage unencumbered by responsibilities.

Professor Leonard was cut from a far tougher cloth. He lectured and supervised in three subjects, he continued to offer his services as a college tutor, and he remained involved in a number of societies, some of which he had also founded. And all this while still finding time not only to write but to be published. By any standards it was a remarkable workload, and one he appeared to shoulder quite effortlessly.

How did he manage it? He never hurried and was never late; he just loped about like a well-fed cat, giving off an air of slight distraction, as if his mind was always on higher things.

He was deep in slumber when Adam entered his office. The first knock didn't rouse him, and when Adam poked his head around the door and saw him slumped in an armchair, a book on his lap, he knocked again, louder this time.

Professor Leonard stirred, taking his bearings, taking in Adam. 'I'm sorry, I must have nodded off.' He closed the book and laid it aside. Adam noted that it was one of the professor's own works, on the sculpture of Mantegna.

'No court in the land would convict you.'

Professor Leonard invited irreverence, he actively encouraged it, but for a moment Adam feared he had overstepped the mark.

'That might be funnier, Mr Strickland, if you'd ever bothered to read my book on Mantegna. Which reminds me – how *is* your serve?'

'Excuse me?'

'Well, the last time I saw you, you were cycling down King's Parade in something of a hurry. You were gripping two tennis rackets, and the young lady riding side-saddle was gripping you.'

'Oh.'

'Has it improved?'

'Improved?'

'Your serve, Mr Strickland. We would all feel so much happier if you at least had something else to show for your absence.'

'I work hard,' bleated Adam. 'I work late.'

Professor Leonard reached for some papers stacked on the side table next to his chair. 'Since you're here, you might as well take this now.' He flipped through the pile and pulled out Adam's essay. 'I probably marked you lower than I should have done.'

'Oh,' said Adam, a little put out.

'Thinking about it, you might have had more of a point than I credited you with at first.'

'Which point was that?'

'Don't flatter yourself, Mr Strickland. To my knowledge – and I read it twice – you only made one point. The others were lifted straight from the books I suggested you read.' He raised a long, bony finger. 'And some I didn't suggest . . . which, I grant you, displays more initiative than most.'

He handed the essay over.

'We'll discuss it at greater length another time. Now, your thesis. Have you had any further thoughts?'

Adam had flirted with a couple of ideas – Islamic iconography in Romanesque architecture, the use of line in early Renaissance drawing – but the professor would recognize them for what they were: lazy speculations on some well-trodden fields of study. No, best to keep quiet.

'Not really.'

'You still have a year, of course, but it's advisable to start applying yourself now, certainly if you wish to show us something of your true colours. Do you, Mr Strickland?'

'Yes,' said Adam. 'Of course.'

'How's your Italian?'

'Okay. Rusty.'

'Good, then I might have something for you.'

The professor explained that he had recently been contacted by an old acquaintance of his. Signora Docci,

the lady in question, was the owner of a large villa in the hills of Tuscany, just south of Florence. 'An impressive, if somewhat pedestrian, example of High Renaissance Tuscan vernacular,' was how the professor described the architecture of the building. He saved his praise for the garden, not the formal arrangement of Renaissance terraces abutting the villa, but a later Mannerist addition occupying a sunken grove nearby. Conceived and laid out by a grieving husband to the memory of his dead wife, this plunging patch of woodland was fed by a spring and modelled on Roman gardens of the period, with meandering pathways and rills, statues, inscriptions and neoclassical structures.

'It's a very unusual place,' the professor said. 'Extremely arresting.'

'You know it?'

'I did, some years ago. It has never been altered – which is rare – and I know for a fact that no proper study has ever been conducted of it. Which is where you come in, if you want to, that is. Signora Docci has kindly offered it as a subject for one of my students.'

Mannerist was bad, too overblown for Adam's taste, and he'd have to do a lot of reading up. Italy, on the other hand, was good, very good.

'Maybe a garden isn't quite what you had in mind, but don't dismiss it . . . Art and Nature coming together to create a whole new entity – a third nature, if you will.'

Adam didn't require any more encouragement. 'Yes,' he said. 'Yes please.'

2



Exams were upon them before they knew it, and gone just as quickly. They celebrated, got drunk, punted off to Grantchester with picnics, danced at college balls and hurled themselves fully clothed into the river – memories irreparably tarnished for Adam by Gloria's decision to end their relationship on the last night of term. The situation was non-negotiable and, true to character, Gloria made no attempt to feign a remorse she clearly didn't feel. She did manage, however, to offer him one scrap of consolation: as he would no longer be coming to stay at her family's pile in Scotland, he would be spared the maddening attentions of the summer midges.

'Cattle have been known to hurl themselves off cliffs because of the midges.'

These were her last words to him before he stormed out on her, slamming the door behind him.

The following day everyone trickled back to their real lives. For Adam, this was a faceless suburb to the south of London, and a Tudor-style villa with Elizabethan yearnings. Thrown up just after the war, the house only existed because a German air crew had taken one look at the lethal hail of flak over the city and promptly jettisoned their payload before running for home.

Adam and his brother had once dug a trench at the end of the garden – the first line of defence against invasion by some imagined enemy force – only to find themselves unearthing the remains of the terraced houses that had previously occupied the plot. Harry had taken those fragments of brick and tile and glass, sinking them in plaster of Paris, producing a mosaic in the shape of a house: the first tell-tale sign of his calling that Adam could recall.

Adam searched out old friends from the neighbourhood. They drank beer together in the garden of the Stag and Hounds, trading stories and trying their best to ignore the inescapable truth – that the ties that once bound them were loosening by the year and might soon be gone altogether.

His mother was delighted to have him home and keen to show it, which usually meant she was unhappy. Whenever she smothered him with affection, he had the uneasy sensation she was using him as a rod with which to beat his father: You see what you're missing out on? His father was more withdrawn than ever, and not best pleased. He had wanted Adam to give the summer over

to work-experience – a placement with an acquaintance of his at the Baltic Exchange. It was a wise thing to develop a working knowledge of the Baltic Exchange before a career in marine insurance at Lloyd's. It was a wise thing to do, because that's exactly what he himself had done. In the end, though, he conceded defeat.

The arrangements had gone without a hitch: a letter to Signora Docci, her reply (typed and in impeccable English) saying that she had secured a room for him at a pensione in the local town. Aside from rustling up a bit of funding for Adam from within the History of Art Department, Professor Leonard had not needed to involve himself. He did, however, suggest that Adam meet up with him in town before leaving for the Continent.

The proposed venue was a grand stone building close by Cannon Street station in the City. Adam had never heard of the Worshipful Company of Skinners, although he wasn't unduly surprised to discover that the professor was associated with a medieval guild whose history reached back seven centuries. They passed through panelled chambers en route to the roof terrace, where they took lunch beneath an even layer of cloud like a moth-eaten blanket, the sun slanting through at intervals and picking out patches of the city.

They ate beef off the bone and drank claret.

The professor had come armed with a bundle of books and articles for Adam's mental edification.

'Read these right through,' he said, handing over

copies of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*. 'The rest are for reference purposes. You'll find the family has an impressive library, which I'm sure you'll be given access to.' The professor was reluctant to say any more about the garden – 'You don't want me colouring your judgement' – although he was happy to share some other background with Adam.

Signora Docci lived alone at Villa Docci, her husband having died some years before. Her eldest son Emilio was also dead, killed towards the end of the war by the Germans who had occupied the villa. There was another son, Maurizio, soon to take over the estate, as well as a dissolute daughter, Caterina, who now lived in Rome.

The rest of lunch was spent talking about the professor's imminent trip to France. He was off to view the Palaeolithic cave paintings at Lascaux – his third visit since their chance discovery by a group of local boys back in 1940. He recalled his frustration at having to wait five years for the war to end before making his first pilgrimage. Thirteen years on, he felt it was now possible to trace the influence of that primitive imagery on the work of contemporary artists. In fact, it was to be the subject of an article, and possibly even a book.

'Europe's greatest living painters drawing inspiration from its oldest known painters, seventeen thousand years on. If that isn't art history, I don't know what is.'

'No.'

'You don't have to humour me, you know.'

'Of course I do,' said Adam. 'You're buying lunch.'

Later, when they parted company out on the street, the professor said, 'Francesca . . . Signora Docci . . . she's old now, and frail by all accounts. But don't underestimate her.'

'What do you mean?'

Professor Leonard hesitated, glancing off down the street. 'I'm not sure I rightly know, but it's sound advice.'

As Adam sat slumped and slightly inebriated in the deserted carriage on the train journey back to Purley, he was left with the uneasy sensation that the professor's parting warning had been the true purpose of their meeting.

A week later, Adam was gone. He changed trains in Paris, aware that this was as far south as he had ever travelled in his life. On Professor Leonard's advice, he slipped some francs to the guard and was allotted a spare sleeping compartment to himself.

He didn't sleep. He tossed in the darkness, France rattling by beneath him, and he thought (far more than he would have liked) of Gloria and of the look on her face when she had said to him, 'I don't know why. I think maybe it's because you're a touch boring.'

He might have been less stung if they hadn't just made love. Twice.

'Boring?'

'No, not boring, that's unfair. Bland.'

'Bland?'

'No.'

'What, then?'

'I don't know. I can't put my finger on it. I can't think of a word.'

Great. He was a category unto himself – a unique category indefinable by words but falling somewhere between 'boring' and 'bland'.

He had lost his temper, hurling a pillow across the room and swearing at her. He could still recall every moment of the long walk back to his own college, creeping down the staircase from her rooms, stepping through the pale dawn of Trinity Great Court, the bitter-sweet taste of self-pity rendering him immune to the daggered look from the porter on duty in the lodge.

Pathetic, really, when looked at from a distance, from the darkened sleeping compartment of a train hurtling through the French night, for example. He tried to stem the flow of his thoughts, or at least divert their course. When he failed, he turned on the light and worked on his Italian grammar.

Dawn rose, bringing with it the barely discernible mass of a steep Alpine valley. A few hours later, they were free of the mountains.

All he saw of Milan was the Fascist splendour of the Stazione Centrale as he hurried between platforms to make his connecting train. He was aware of the heat and the smell of unfamiliar tobacco, but not much else. He briefly glimpsed Shelley's 'waveless plain of Lombardy' before nodding off.

A deep and dreamless sleep carried him all the way

to Florence, where he was woken brusquely by the guard, who talked at him in a language quite unlike the Italian he'd learned at school and recently brushed up on. Ejected on to the platform, it certainly wasn't the kind of reception he'd been led to believe he might receive in Italy.

He found a pensione on Piazza Santa Maria Novella, a short walk from the station. The owner informed him that he was in luck; a room had just fallen vacant. It was easy to see why. Adam made a speculative survey of the dismal little box in the roof and told himself it was only for one night.

He stripped off his shirt and lay on the sagging mattress, smoking a cigarette, unaccustomed to the humidity pressing down on the city. Was this normal? If so, why had no one thought to mention it? Or the mosquitoes, for that matter. They speckled the ceiling, waiting for night to fall and the feast to begin.

He squeezed himself into the shower room at the end of the corridor and allowed the trickle of water to cool him off. It was a temporary measure. His fresh shirt was lacquered to his chest by the time he'd descended four flights of stairs to the lobby.

The storm broke as he stepped from the building, the sharp crack of thunder echoing around the piazza, the deluge following moments later as the amethyst clouds deposited their load. He stood beneath the awning, watching the raindrops dancing on the road. Water sheeted down from overflowing gutters; drain

holes were lost to sight beneath spreading pools of water. And still the rain came, constant, unvarying in its strength. When it ceased, it ceased suddenly and completely.

A church bell struck half past the hour, and immediately people began to appear from the shelter of doorways around the piazza – almost as if the two events were connected, the bell alerting the inhabitants of the quarter to the passing of danger, as it had always done. The sun burst from behind the departing slab of cloud. It hit hard, flashing off the steaming flagstones.

Scuttling figures skipped over puddles, hurrying to make up for lost time. Adam joined their ranks, map in hand, heading south out of the piazza. In Via dei Fossi rainwater still streamed from jutting eaves high overhead, driving pedestrians off the pavements into the road, forcing them to do battle with squadrons of scooters and cars. The narrow street filled with the sound of horns and curses, the cacophony played out with leaps and bounds and wild gesticulations, the distant rumble of the departing storm like a low kettledrum roll underscoring the deranged opera.

A twinge of anxiety stiffened his stride, though not at the chaos unfolding around him. He knew the city intimately, but only from books. What if he was disappointed? What if Florence's 'unique cultural and artistic heritage', which he'd detailed in his essays with such hollow authority, left him cold? As if on cue, he found himself on a bridge spanning the River Arno – no lively,

sparkling torrent, but a strip of brown and turbid water, a river fit for a factory district.

Five minutes later he reached his destination, and his apprehension melted away. The Brancacci Chapel in the church of Santa Maria del Carmine was deserted when he entered it, and it remained so for the next quarter of an hour. Michelangelo and Raphael had both come here to study, to copy, to learn from the young man who had changed the face of European painting: Tommaso Guidi, nicknamed Masaccio by his friends, the scruffy boy-wonder, dead at twenty-seven. Others had contributed to the same cycle of frescoes – Masolino, Fra Lippo Lippi, names to be reckoned with – but their work was flat, lifeless, when set alongside that of Masaccio.

His figures demanded to be heard, to be believed in; some even threatened to step out of the walls and shake the doubters into credence. Real men, not ciphers. And real women. His depiction of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden required no context in order to be appreciated. More than five hundred years on, it still struck home: the fallen couple, with their bare, rough-hewn limbs, granite hard from toil, cast out like country labourers by some unforgiving landlord. Adam's face was buried in his hands, a broken man. Eve covered her nakedness in shame, but her face was raised, crying out to the heavens. All the anger, frustration and incomprehension in the world seemed contained within that gaping, shapeless hole Masaccio had given her for a mouth.

The more Adam stared at the image, the more he saw, and the less he understood. A definition of true art? He was still cringing at his own pomposity when a couple entered the chapel.

They were French. His thick dark hair was oiled back into two symmetrical wings that protruded a short distance from the forehead. She was extremely slender, quite unlike Masaccio's Eve, or maybe as Eve would have looked some years after her banishment from the bounty of Eden – pinched and emaciated.

'Good afternoon,' said the Frenchman in accented English, looking up from his guidebook.

It rankled that he was so readily identifiable, not just as a fellow tourist but an Englishman.

'American?' asked the Frenchman.

'English.'

The word came out wrong – barked, indignant – a parody of Anglo-Saxon self-importance. The couple exchanged the faintest of amused glances, which only annoyed him more.

He looked at the man's perfectly coiffed hair and wondered just how distressing that flash downpour must have been for him. Or maybe the oil helped; maybe it assisted run-off.

He only realized he was staring when the Frenchman shifted nervously and said, 'Yes . . . ?'

Adam gestured to the frescoes. '*Las pinturas son muy hermosas*,' he said in his best Spanish.

As he left the chapel, abandoning the couple to

Masaccio's genius, he wondered whether his antagonism towards them owed itself to their interruption of his experience, or whether the work itself had somehow unleashed it in him.