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The Garden of Secrets and Truths

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“The Garden of Secrets and Truths”

“So long as I know what's expected of me, I can manage.”
— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words: I Don't Know What To Do When Life Isn't Easy)

Burnett really cut to the quick with that one, huh? Because really, truly, what is my life without guidelines and grades, syllabi and sense? I've never been great at managing my life without the threat of a deadline or of failure, which maybe stems from the overachieving tendencies that come from being the oldest child, the smartest, the most talented for a designated period of time and then floundering when things suddenly stop being easy and the creative juices stop flowing.

What is particularly striking about this line is the “I can manage.” Not only does Burnett see that I suffer without structure, but also that I am not “thriving” or “succeeding” or any of the other words that I strive for people to describe me with, but “managing,” which is wholly indicative of the bare-bones survival that I hope to accomplish in my day-to-day life at this point.

“One of the strange things about living in the world is that it is only now and then one is quite sure one is going to live forever and ever and ever. One knows it sometimes when one gets up at the tender solemn dawn-time and goes out and stands out and throws one's head far back and looks up and up and watches the pale sky slowly changing and flushing and marvelous unknown things happening until the East almost makes one cry out and one's heart stands still at the strange unchanging majesty of the rising of the sun--which has been happening every morning for thousands and thousands and thousands of years. One knows it then for a moment or so. And one knows it sometimes when one stands by oneself in a wood at sunset and the mysterious deep gold stillness slanting through and under the branches seems to be saying slowly again and again something one cannot quite hear, however much one tries. Then sometimes the immense quiet of the dark blue at night with the millions of stars waiting and watching makes one sure; and sometimes a sound of far-off music makes it true; and sometimes a look in someone's eyes.”
— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words: Big Little Moments)

One thing I will say I'm good at is appreciating the small things in life. The perfect ray of sun shining on my face at lunch? Day saved. A friend bringing me a coffee? I owe them the world. Maybe this has something to do with the fact that my book and television show-laden brain craves Life in the most romantic sense of the word, or maybe my family just did a good job of emphasizing the Big Little Moments that life has to offer because we couldn't typically do or afford the Big Big Moments. I *will* remember every picnic, every windows-down-music-up drive, every morning coffee, and every laugh that feels exactly as a laugh is intended to: sore and raw and beautiful.

“Never thee stop believin' in th' Big Good Thing an' knowin' th' world's full of it - and call it what tha' likes. Tha' wert singin' to it when I come into t' garden.”

— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words: Journey Was Right?)

For all my talk of being a realist, of taking myself down a peg and refusing to accept my pros, I enjoy believing in the Big Good Things. I enjoy having something, however unattainable, to shoot for, something to place my every high and low on, a pressure to work under. The Big Good Thing, which changes from phase to phase, becomes all-consuming, nothing matters but believing in it, but isn't it good to have something to believe in?

“She made herself stronger by fighting with the wind.”

— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words: She Likes To Push, Even When It Is Unattainable And Dumb)

In trying to reach my childhood levels of success, it sometimes feels like I'm running the wrong way up an escalator. Fighting the wind, if you will. There's no reason to get back to that, no prize that I'm going to lose or badge that will be stripped from me; in fact, I know I've lost too much time to ever come close to where I "should" be by those standards. I must try, still. I must kick and claw and scream and fight the wind until everyone notices that I'm trying (but do I want them to notice? Doesn't that defeat the whole purpose?). The last time I danced/played piano/really wrote for pure pleasure, I felt like a fraud. All of the things that had been such a massive part of who I was, that had defined my personality and relationships, now an embarrassing reminder that I could never make up for lost time. By quitting each of those things when they got hard, I banished myself to a lifetime of fighting time and skill, gnawing to once again feel the validation that comes from having things come naturally to you.

Though I'm not going to get *better* in this pursuit, in this way, I do feel stronger. Maybe it's the self-awareness that I gained with having to work for things that I want, or the acceptance that I'm not ever going to get back to that version of myself, but I *feel* stronger. Maybe this is okay. Maybe this is all I can ask for, and maybe I'll find myself again when I forget how I was.

"Of course there must be lots of Magic in the world," he said wisely one day, "but people don't know what it is like or how to make it. Perhaps the beginning is just to say nice things are going to happen until you make them happen. I am going to try and experiment."
— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words: Fake It 'Til You Make It—Part I)

Was Burnett actually a pioneer of manifestations? Maybe. Certainly this book was my first introduction to the concept, and still gives me a good reminder every time that I read it to drop my cynicism about myself and try thinking happy thoughts every once in a while. It is magical, I think, to be so comfortable with yourself to wish for things you want, to think them into existence, without laughing at the absurdity of it all.

“Much more surprising things can happen to anyone who, when a disagreeable or discouraged thought comes into his mind, just has the sense to remember in time and push it out by putting in an agreeable, determinedly courageous one. Two things cannot be in one place.”

— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words, Fake It ‘Til You Make It—Part II)

Was Burnett actually a pioneer of manifestations? Absolutely. I mean, look at these two quotes! Pushing out the negative thoughts by putting in a positive one? Genius! Saying that happy and sad can never truly exist in some twisted marital bliss? Inspired! I am working on this. I am hoping to be a glass-half-full kind of gal but that’s damn hard to do when I always think that I’m the one spilling the drink. I can pretend, continue to tell everyone else that their doubts are unarguably wrong and that they are capable of it all if they *only stop thinking so negatively*.

“He had made himself believe that he was going to get well, which was really more than half the battle.”

— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words: Fake It ‘Til You Make It—Part III)

Convincing myself that I don’t have anxiety so I can travel alone.

Convincing myself that I’m not gluten intolerant and that stomach pains are normal.

Convincing myself that I Really Didn't Even Like Them so I'm not hurt when they leave.

Convincing myself that I have more to offer than my grades so I don't burn out when I'm out of school.

Convincing myself that I'm Not Bad enough to need to talk to someone, to get anxiety medication, because believing that you *are* well must also be half the battle, right?

"Is the spring coming?" he said. "What is it like?"...

"It is the sun shining on the rain and the rain falling on the sunshine..."

— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words: Spring Is An Oxymoron)

Isn't it wild how even the most natural things in the world (i.e., nature) are as chaotic and confused as humans? Like, I think that I, as a 22-year-old college student, am afforded the luxury of being a chaotic individual (who am I going to hurt by that, really?) but *nature?! Come on...* having the most uncontrollable aspect of the universe be an oxymoronical ball of chaos is just cruel. There is nothing in this world that could make me sadder than a grey, rainy, cold, day. There is nothing in this world that makes me happier than the sunshine and a nice breeze.

The liminal space found in springtime gardens is unparalleled. The world could be burning around you, but a garden (especially one with hedges to protect you from real life) is an automatic safe space; a physical manifestation of a managed mind. My favorite "secret" garden exists behind a long brick walkway lined with hedges, atop a little mount covered in ivy. Though not actually very separate from streets and houses, this garden exists as its own kind of sanctuary, creating a calm and quiet not found 8 feet to the left. On a bad day, coming to the

garden is a sort of torture in-and-of itself; my mind buzzes with chaos with no other sounds to drown it out, I see all of the regrettable memories that have happened just outside of the reach of this garden. On a good day, this garden represents some calm corner of my world; the intimacy I feel bringing anyone to my garden is rivaled by none.

“You can lose a friend in springtime easier than any other season if you're too curious.”
— Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden

(In other words: Spring Is For Rebirth & Also For Loneliness)

The concept of rebirth is cool and all until you come to find out that the “re” implies that you’ve got a 100% chance of losing something that made you feel alive in the first place. To be honest, I’ve only recently begun to even like the springtime. In my life, I feel certain that all the loss that I’ve ever felt, whether it’s a person, moment, or place, has happened in the spring. Even now, as I mourn the loss of my life as a college student, it is the spring that inflicts this death. Of course, on some level, I feel myself just now beginning to understand *why* things end, *why* the spring is known as a season of rebirth rather than heartbreak and loss. I find myself looking forward to my newest form as much as I dread the loss of who I am now, in individual moments.

Right now, I like my life in a way that took years, mountains, oceans to reach. I feel contented by the seasons, understand that maybe even my suckiest moments are going to teach me something. You’d think that I’d be terrified to lose that, and I am, I really am, but I also know that maybe change isn’t the worst and maybe I can learn how to be an actual adult (the verdict is still out on that one, though).

“There's naught as nice as th' smell o' good clean earth, except th' smell o' fresh growin' things when th' rain falls on 'em.”

— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words: Go Outside And Smell The Roses)

I'm an incredibly scent-driven person, I always have been. My sensitive nose gets so easily repulsed that one wrong perfume will give me a migraine; so pleased that the scent of warm rain gives me chills. Here, I will create a definitive list of scents that have strong effects on me:

1. Hose water. The superior water, brings back incredible memories of growing up in the summer, living for Hose Days, that one feeling when you make the water spray and squint your eyes so you can see the rainbow streaming through.
2. Perfume. I adamantly detest perfume in almost every form. It gives me a headache, makes me gag, and I wonder how people can stand to wear it every day, how they don't realize the hell they put some people through by triple-spritzing themselves. A body spray, on the other hand...
3. Vanilla. I always wanted to be the type of girl who smelled like vanilla. Not the chemically, acidic vanilla that can be found in vanilla-mixed perfumes, but the light, airy scent that often accompanies someone's breath after they consume cotton candy or ice cream.
4. Gasoline. Though one of my favorite scents as a child (what a weirdo), the smell of gas repulses me now, associates only with driving and spending money, two activities that I have a tragic love-hate relationship with.

5. Coffee As Drink Or Atmosphere. Coffee is the scent I want to wake up to, the one that wakes up my brain and makes me excited to live each day. There's nothing as intoxicating as smelling the intermingling of coffee/cream/sweetener/foam in the air when you spend hours in a coffee shop.
6. Coffee As Impermeable After-Scent. Sometimes, when you've sat in a coffee shop too long, consumed an unhealthy amount of coffee to stay focused, coffee smell loses all discernible scent and fades to a cross between skunk and B.O. that sticks with you all day long and contaminates every surface you come in contact with.

“But the calm had brought a sort of courage and hope with it. Instead of giving way to thoughts of the worst, he actually found he was trying to believe in better things.”

— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words: Take A Breath And Face The Worst)

I'm a chicken. A bonified, not-gonna-do-it chicken. I laughed in the face of peer pressure, because if something was mildly uncomfortable or scary for me, no amount of coercion could make me actually do it. My stubbornness and my need to please people were at constant odds; I'm *pretty sure* that I'm allergic to shellfish, but I refuse to get another allergy test because my fear of needles outweighs my fear of never eating at a seafood restaurant. When my parents tried to drag me (and try they have) to the allergist, I have no qualms about making a fool of myself to get out of it.

I've never been the type of person who can face the uncomfortability that life has to offer with a quiet resignation, nor am I ever prepared for when The Worst happens. Instead, I dig in my heels, pretend it isn't happening, and refuse to go down without a fight.

“thoughts—just mere thoughts—are as powerful as electric batteries—as good for one as sunlight is, or as bad for one as poison.”

— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words: SOS I’m Thinking About Those Bad Decisions I Made Four Years Ago)

Well, it all began on—never mind, I think I changed my mind.

[The rest of this tale has been redacted for sanity’s sake]

“My mother always says people should be able to take care of themselves, even if they're rich and important.”

— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words: Adulting Is Hard)

I am Very Bad at caring for myself. Other people? No problem! I can feed them, nurse them back to health, give them advice, and fight for their honor, but when it comes to doing any of those things at all for myself, I’m totally hopeless. My family used to make fun of me for it, tell people that I couldn’t even make myself a sandwich. The truth is, I have always been entirely capable of doing things for myself, but I haven’t felt the drive to provide myself with those basic human needs because there was always something better to be doing with my time.

To this day, it boggles my mind how much time is wasted cooking a big meal, cleaning up the dishes afterwards; imagine how productive the world would be if we didn’t have to contend with the little inconveniences like eating or sleeping. And don’t come to me with saying

that cooking is restful, therapeutic; I've never once felt at peace while dodging popping grease or burning the outside of the chicken while the inside remains raw and inedible.

I can't even take a long shower without having serious FOMO. The most "relaxed" I ever get is taking a medium-length bath in which I multitask and catch up on reading/homework/phone calls/TV shows.

"She stopped and listened to him and somehow his cheerful, friendly little whistle gave her a pleased feeling--even a disagreeable little girl may be lonely, and the big closed house and big bare moor and big bare gardens had made this one feel as if there was no one left in the world but herself. If she had been an affectionate child, who had been used to being loved, she would have broken her heart, but even though she was "Mistress Mary Quite Contrary" she was desolate, and the bright-breasted little bird brought a look into her sour little face which was almost a smile. She listened to him until he flew away... she liked him and wondered if she should ever see him again. Perhaps he lived in the mysterious garden and knew all about it."
— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words: Listening Is Not My Strong Suit)

As a part of my never-ending wrestle with control and agency in my life, I struggle to listen when people make suggestions different from the plans I had. Maybe *listen* isn't the right word—technically, I do listen to the words they say... I just fail to make the change. This doesn't come down to some deep-rooted disrespect or lack of acknowledgement of others' opinions at all (I have none of the answers myself). Rather, it's my need to commit, to have a plan, that keeps me planted firmly in my course, un-swayed by even the most logical of interjections.

Occasionally, though, I find someone to listen to, their words coming to me like a siren, breaking through my compulsion and forcing me to tap into my people-pleasing mode and

follow their instructions to a tee. I become entranced; I give them the deepest part of myself by letting their words affect my actions. This isn't always for the best, you see; the pattern always repeats itself. But for just a moment, I savor the letting go, I yearn for someone to tell me where to go and what to do.

“You learn things by saying them over and over and thinking about them until they stay in your mind forever and I think it will be the same with Magic. If you keep calling it to come to you and help you it will get to be part of you and it will stay and do things.”

— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words: The Power Of Positive Thinking)

For all my cynicism towards my abilities, when I set my mind to something I become the queen of positive thinking. Rent is way too high on my dream apartment? We'll figure it out! Grad school costs more than I'm worth? Who cares! Maybe I get this from my parents, who always managed to pull something out of our bad situation, to put a magical spin on life's cruel jokes. Or maybe I'm just delusional and I don't yet understand the consequences of my actions. Anyways...

My philosophy on life, however insane, is that if you truly want something and it's meant to be, then money shouldn't be an obstacle. Strange philosophy for someone who doesn't and never has had enough money, I guess, but it's worked out for me so far. Will I ever have stability? Probably not, but stability is for unhappy people. Will I ever achieve financial comfort as a double-major in English and Historic Preservation? Not a chance, but at least I've had the choice to pursue my passions.

“At first people refuse to believe that a strange new thing can be done. Then they begin to hope it can be done. Then they see it can be done. Then it is done and all the world wonders why it was not done centuries ago.”

— **Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden**

(In other words: Imposter Syndrome)

Though logically, I’m sure I am perfectly capable of being imaginative or innovative based on things I’ve done in the past, I am certain each time an opportunity presents itself that I couldn’t possibly be original or impressive by any means. I used to call leadership one of my defining characteristics, back when I had confidence, back when everything about me screamed extrovert and I was certain I was the most knowledgeable person in the room. Now, though my aggressive leadership persona still comes out every once in a while, (usually in situations in which my actual job title includes “leader,”) but more often than not I miss the chance to do anything myself anymore for fear of being wrong.

Even when writing this piece, prompted only to write about myself or some other piece of truth, the Imposter Syndrome hits hard. Have I ever had a unique experience? Is my writing grammatically correct/stylistically interesting/word-vomit? Is there any writing task suitable for my abilities, anything left that is worth writing?

A List Of Reasons Why I Am An Imposter

- 1) I was homeschooled. By omitting this fact, by laughing at a joke shared by everyone around me who went to public school, I am therefore an imposter.

- 2) French. I don't know a word of it, not even sure I took all the require courses in it, but somehow I reached an advanced course in it? I got a B? I'm pretty sure I've repressed this at some point, have actually never ever taken a course, never spoken a word.
- 3) Graduate school. Huh? Are you joking? Where do I get off thinking I can be qualified in the next two years to have a masters degree in *anything*. I just graduated high school! Middle school!
- 4) Architectural history. This, I know I've put in the work—I remember the tears, the late nights. Somehow, though, I don't seem to remember a word of terminology. I nod and smile and laugh at the niche references that people can pull out without batting an eye and I struggle to recall the unit, the chapter, the book.
- 5) Drinking. I never drank until after I turned 21, defiantly refused, thought it tasted nasty. This is not news. The imposter-syndrome really comes into play now when I invite people over for drinks, order a cocktail at a bar, drink a beer during the movie. I crave the social outlet, the need to feel different or less anxious, but in reality I still hate the taste, the feeling, the hassle of it all.
- 6) Purity. Not in a religious sense, but a moral sense, the sense in which I Am Prude and Prude Is Me. It is impossible to break out of this mold with those who see me this way (and do I even want to? Isn't it easier? Don't people trust me more?) This one leaves a particularly bitter taste in my mouth, "prude" or "uptight" cause me to flinch, even when used in reference to someone who isn't me.

I don't remember the first time I read *The Secret Garden*. I think it was first read to me out loud by my mother, one of those nights in which I'm sure I heard the words, saw the sparse

illustrations in my copy of the book, but I was either too tired or too distracted to have formed any real memory of that first listen.

The first time that I *remember* reading it on my own, I was reading it with all the familiarity of a recurring dream, that feeling where you couldn't explain the plot if you tried but you always knew what would happen next. I had wedged our antique couch, the one that had no place in our little house at the time, in a little alcove created by the dormer windows that jutted out from the front of our house. I craved desperately one of those little reading nooks that were so popular, I needed somewhere to hide and get invested in a book for perhaps the first time in my young life. The couch was deeply uncomfortable, I remember, making me contort myself into all sorts of strange shapes to avoid the aggressive springs, the prickly horsehair. I remember how deeply unpleasant the protagonist, Mary, could be; I saw bits of myself in her.

Though I couldn't have anticipated the amount of times I would continue to think about *The Secret Garden* in my lifetime, I found myself emulating the feelings gained from that first-remembered read; I sought that feeling of *being a reader*, of *identifying with words on a page*. Though looking back on it, I'm unsure why this story resonated so deeply with me, it is certainly a comfort read, the book I can come back to when everything seems lost.

“If you look the right way, you can see that the whole world is a garden.”
— Frances Hodgson Burnett, **The Secret Garden**

(In other words: Life Doesn't Suck Outside Your Comfort Zone)

For as much as I love to romanticize my life, I am very much Stuck with a capital 'S' inside my comfort zone. To be honest, I would love to remain firmly planted within my comfort zone for the rest of time, please.

Unfortunately, I am well aware that this isn't good or possible or helpful. Comfort zone, to me, isn't always just about what is comfortable, though. It is also about stubbornness, about not wanting to change my mind or be spontaneous, even if, on many levels, my decision is wrong. I would rather cry and regret my own decision than chance being pushed outside of my comfort zone, my plan, by someone else. I don't hope to find some great unknown, I would rather be contented with my own decisions and plans and moves.

I know, logically, that as soon as I step out of my little fenced-in patio and out into the world I will see the most beautiful gardens I've ever seen, but I don't feel like budging just yet. Maybe this is how I know that I'm not so grown up yet. Maybe I won't be grown up until I've seen the gardens and left the little patio far behind. I don't think I'm there yet, but I hope to try, even if it's just a toe.