

Blessed be, 2, summer

by mazaher

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Jack and Patrick in their old age, many years after the photograph taken in April, 1897.

As usual, Jack in Courier New and Patrick in Verdana.

The garden is mine.

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Jack

The summer day is sunny, but cool. A brisk breeze is blowing from the southwest, pushing forward flocks of small white clouds from the ocean.

Patrick and he took a ride early in the morning, just after breakfast, walking on a long rein along shady lanes under canopies of trees, trotting out in the open to sudden sunlight, cantering up and down the roll of the hills on vivid grass cropped short by sheep.

After lunch, Jack has been doing a bit of gardening: pruning vines and bushes, cutting the dried stems of the early perennials, clipping off the green hard fruits of the roses, so that they may bloom again before autumn comes.

Neither is very young anymore. They have hired help to tend to the house, stable and garden, but Jack still likes to push his fingers into the soft cool dirt, smear his hands with the juices of the plants he grows. His back aches if he bends down for more than a few minutes, so weeding is out of the question, and his fingers and wrists will be stiff tonight, but Jack thinks that a well-tended garden is well worth some discomfort.

He had a stroke last November, which left him speechless for a few days, but he'd recovered by New Year's Day with no permanent consequences. After the first week, he's taken personal responsibility for most of the cure, and he follows his own orders carefully.

It's nearly five. Patrick has been tending to his beehives, but soon he'll come in for tea.

Jack has never begrudged him the attention he bestows on the bees. He's always been aware that there is a part of Patrick he'll never own, a secret place inside his lover where he can never follow. He's grateful for what he has: more than he expected to receive, more than he ever thought Patrick would be willing to give him.

Jack reaps raspberries in a small basket: they'll sprinkle them on their own fresh honey, spread on toast. Patrick loves raspberries.

He has complaints of his own. There was a fall, three years ago, while he was climbing down the cliff south of Farthingloe, trying to retrieve Jack's tieclip that had fallen over the edge: a gift he'd given him on the twelfth anniversary of their visit to Reichenbach.

Words being useless, Jack had finally tried to physically stop him, and had only let go when Patrick had threatened to roll over them both. He had managed to pick up the small golden bar at last, but the heather bush he was holding on to had given way suddenly. Patrick had fallen about eighteen feet, landing on his back on a small patch of soft sand. All the same, he'd broken two upper ribs and injured his brachial plexus: he'd been in bed for six weeks, and he still felt pain along his right arm after an effort.

But he hadn't let go of the clip.

At the time, they'd been living here only a few months. The beginnings had not been easy: Patrick missing the lively bustle of the city and complaining about the chores, Jack trying (at first, in vain) to enjoy the new lifestyle, and being kept awake by the silence. There had been quarrels. There had been long silent days when Patrick seemed to fold in on himself and shut Jack out. There had been moments when the weight of the life and the death that they had buried in Reichenbach still weighed both down, as well as moments when they had felt as

light and free as the petrels which came sometimes from the Channel to play on the mainland.

The moments of lightness had been the stronger in the long run. Even as age is slowly binding them more and more to the ground, their souls have learned to fly.

As Jack makes his way through the orchard toward the back door, their cat leaves his favourite summertime resting place on top of the vine, and comes at a trot to cross his steps, asking to be fondled. Jack crouches gingerly and complies. The cat is warm from laying in the sun on the fresh green leaves, and he purrs softly, stretching his spine and forepaws under his hand with eyes closed and hind legs curled up like a kitten.

The sweet scent of early strawberry grapes comes on the breeze, and a cricket begins to tune its violin in the newly-mown grass.

Soon the day will be over, and the stars will gush out like sprinkles from a fountain.

Jack stands and pops his own spine straight. He can see Patrick slowly walking on from the far end of the pasture, hat in one hand, bucket in the other.

The slanted rays of the setting sun flood him with gold and pink.

Sometimes, the texture of the physical world lets a different light come through, and the fundamental peace of things can be felt for a moment or two. And for this particular moment, Jack is nothing but grateful.

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Patrick

The weather is still gorgeous. Even at its best, London doesn't have a thing on Sussex on a summer of sunny weather, with just enough rain at night-time to keep everything verdant. The garden and orchard are brimming with flowers and buzzing with bees. The tall stalks of the lavender bushes bend and sway under the weight of the busy insects, striped in black and burnished gold and sprinkled with the lighter gold of pollen. Liatris, foxglove, delphinium, the bright pink globes of allium, the pale grapes of lilac, and under that the bellflowers, lady's mantle, pansy, and Jack's sweet-peas climbing on the fence: the garden and orchard are overflowing with colours and scents, to the point of making Patrick slightly dizzy.

He picks one sweet pea, white petals fading into pink; he cups it in his hand and inhales the clean scent, as cheerful as a promise which will be kept.

He also loves wintertime, when the hills are shrouded in rolling waves of fog and the cawing of crows flying over breaks the silence early in the morning. He loves curling in his armchair, reading and listening to Jack's pen smoothly gliding on paper, or to Jack's light snore as he falls asleep on the sofa before lunch, the clock on the mantelpiece quietly keeping time in the background.

To Patrick, this has always been the sound of peace, even when peace was a distant dream. The war has come and gone, leaving behind a rotting sea of spilled blood and a world which will never be the same anymore.

Neither was drafted.

The clock ticked on.

Patrick's been tending the beehives today, gathering the fresh honey Jack prefers, thin and clear from the newly uncovered honeycombs. Dionysian, he calls it; cured honey is for winter. It's mostly ivy and hellebore today, the long dark green aftertaste fitting for the gradual shortening of the days after Lughnasa.

Patrick fleetingly thinks that their days are also shortening-- but they have a long way yet, a long way to go before Samhain.

As he's been working, he's picked from the tree and eaten a few golden Mirabelle prunes, hot in sunlight like small suns themselves, their juice dripping on his hand. Tomorrow, if the weather will hold, he'll call Jack here and have him taste them.

He can hear him even now in the distance, clipping hedges and pruning. Always so neat in his gardening. In the early times, Patrick asked for a small corner of the pasture, beyond the willows, to be left wild. Jack looked at him in puzzlement for a moment; then something clicked, and he smiled. "A savage garden," he'd said. "For good luck."

And so it had been. Foxes come to shelter there, kestrels make their nests, and wild flowers grow in profusion.

To Patrick, it is a reminder that life and death walk side by side, and their path crosses at each step. It had been a familiar feeling, a rock bottom which had put a boundary on his grief, when Jack's stroke had threatened to fell him also, like a tree hit by lightning. But Patrick had planted his feet firmly on this awareness of death, and pushed them both back up to the surface, to the soft mist of late November, to the chilly sparkle of snow at Christmas, and to the kiss they'd finally exchanged --the first after the blow-- on New Year's Day. They had not stopped at kissing; they'd never stopped before.

"Tell me," Patrick had said. "Yes," Jack had answered. The pot-pourri Patrick had made for Jack during his illness, trying to capture in herbs and flowers the delicate scent of spring rain Jack loves, had been scattered on the floor together with the broken shards of its fine blue China bowl. They'd agreed afterwards that it had been worth the loss.

Patrick thinks that this life they have now is worth all the losses: even the loss of the guilt and the grief around which, like a core of unforgiving steel, he had built himself a fortress.

The tieclip he'd given Jack was its key.

Jack has stripped him of his former self and given him a new one, one capable of happiness.

And never once, never in so many years, Jack has made him feel caught and trapped. His hand always so light on his elbow, reminding him of limits. His eyes watchful, and fond. His heart beating, steady, hot in his chest under Patrick's hand, like the mantelpiece clock. Peace he never thought he could have, he never thought he had earned.

As he turns back toward the house for their afternoon cup of tea, Patrick can see Jack bending to stroke their cat, a small basket in his other hand, sunlight catching in his hair and turning it into a haze, a halo of pure light. They both know that there will be many more days like this, before the blessed string will end; many more perfect moments.

And for this particular moment, Patrick is nothing but grateful.

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