Shipwrights

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The Foreign Garden

By Kinga Broel-Plater

It was the beginning of the summer. The grass was shimmering in the early sun, still wet with dew. The beautifully trimmed communal lawn was bordered by neatly ordered wild rose bushes, their little buds still dormant in the early days of June. A few lone sparrows were attempting the first concert of the day and a carpet of thousands of daisies, interrupted by the occasional dandelion, covered the grass, petals still closed from their night's sleep.

I was sitting on a threadbare burgundy sofa that my mother had picked up from one of her flea market visits, my bare feet just over the edge of the small concrete patio on the damp, unruly grass in our garden. My sister Monika was sprawled out on a hammock our father had brought back all the way from Poland. We were both in our pyjamas, sipping our morning tea. I could feel dawn's first warm sunbeams on my face and my mind was getting excited about the summer holidays and my sister's birthday party. Tomorrow she would be twelve. We were chatting about which friends were invited and how we would decorate the garden. We had bought a range of sweets, peanuts, streamers and colourful balloons, and our mother was going to bake a cake. Mika, our ginger-coloured mongrel, was lying in the long grass, her paws paddling the air to keep up with the imagined quarry racing ahead in her dream. We had the rest of the day to prepare for the party, and although the weather report had predicted rain for the following day, we could see only a few small white clouds in the distance.

The area where we grew up was an idyllic playground. In the summers, Monika and I would cycle to the local swimming pool, hang around the dozy town with the few friends that had not gone away, pick strawberries in the fields, pinch apples and plums from the trees in the wealthier neighbourhoods, cycle back quickly not to be caught, and play basketball at the school courtyard until dusk had claimed the game. It was a period of freedom, away from the chores, structure and demands of school. Away from teachers trying to erase any trace of ”Polish-ness,” away from adults asking us to conform to meaningless rules and to speak Swedish to each other at the breaks, away from the nasty group of older boys hidden in the bushes outside the schoolyard throwing snowballs at us on winter mornings and chasing us with their gym bags in the spring and autumn shouting: “Why don't you go back to your own country?”

My sister was my soul-mate, my accomplice, my partner in crime. She was an observant, determined girl, with an extraordinary natural beauty: curly chestnut hair and sensual green eyes that would break many a heart in the years to come. Of the two of us, I was the dreamer, she was the doer; I was the temperamental one, she the sensible one. When it came down to it, I was the faint-hearted one and she the courageous one. Together we were inseparable unconquerable.

Our garden was always our haven, our sanctuary. On rainy days we sat on the patio, well-shielded from the rain by the floor of the balcony belonging to the Kenyan family above. We would make perfume from rose petals, collect ants and worms, play cards or monopoly. Later when we grew older, we made up stories and fantasized about trips we would take, adventures we would have. We talked about what we would do when we grew up, how many children we would have, where we would live, and what we would do for a living. I wanted to be a teacher and Monika wanted to go to America. We dreamed of freedom and independence and a big house where we would all live together with our big families. We talked about boys we fancied and teachers we didn't like and parties we would have. Sometimes we hosted a play. We wrote the scripts ourselves, making up stories with enough characters to give all our friends from the neighbourhood a role. Dressed up and excited, we made the garden our theatre, sheets hung between the juniper trees to serve as curtains, the plot of grass as the stage, and a tumble of chairs to seat the audience, usually my mother and the kids too young to get a part in the play.

Often my friend Patty would join us; her parents wanted peace and quiet in the daytime, tired from nightshifts at the factory. They had left their smokestack mining town in southern Poland when Patty was seven to come to southern Sweden. Her mother, a chemical engineer, and her father, a mining engineer, had both found shift work on the assembly line, an interim solution they had said. But bureaucracy and the difficulty in translating their credentials kept them there.

The council block we lived in was a large, solemn concrete building with three entrances, each incorporating fifteen flats. It was part of a family of twenty-eight identical siblings, conceived in the 1960's love affair between communal architecture and social democratic ideology. Resembling rectangular sugar cubes, the buildings sat at the edge of the city, bordering a motorway, overlooking acres of flat rapeseed fields. Each block had an asphalt yard with a metal climbing frame, a couple of swings on a rusty stand, and a few wooden benches. They had become shelter not only to local inhabitants but to many of the immigrant families of the previous three decades: labourers from Greece and Turkey, political refugees from Iran, Poland, Albania, and Africa.

My parents were political refugees who had ended up in Sweden at the beginning of the seventies. They were originally headed from Poland to Canada, but I had decided to come into the world almost two months early.

“This is a country where the streets are paved with gold,” my father had said. “This is where we will make a new start.”

They found Sweden a welcoming country. Due to its lenient immigration policies, Sweden had given them asylum and a monthly social welfare cheque along with a social security number. They also got their own social worker, a newly graduated, eagerly helpful young lady of twenty-three, who visited frequently to ensure their transition into society was satisfactory and that everything was all right with the newborn. She made assessments of my parents’ suitability as parents and the suitability of the flat and its furnishings.

“In Sweden we have mirrors in the hallway,” she said informatively to my mother on her first visit, “and in the kitchen, we usually have at least four, or even six, chairs at the table. Also, we sleep in the bedrooms in beds, not in the living room on a mattress.” She continued, “According to the Social Affairs office, it is appropriate to eat six to eight slices of bread per day.”

Much to my mother’s disapproval, my parents received their first charity donation from the Swedish state: a furniture cheque of two thousand Swedish kronor to be used at Ikea in order to get the flat up to proper family standards.

When my sister was born, my mother had applied to the council for a ground floor flat in the hope that she could escape the inconvenience of carrying prams, shopping, washing, a toddler and a little baby girl on her own up the three flights of stairs to the top floor. After ten years on the waiting list, we had been lucky to get one. It had three humble bedrooms, a larger living room and an adequate kitchen, which had a door leading onto the garden. The garden was an enclosed patch of grass and a stone patio with a tired wooden fence, its little gate leading onto the communal garden. Still, it was an oasis in the concrete neighbourhood. It had long grass, and wildflowers surprised us during the warmer seasons. We had snowdrops in the early spring, wild strawberries in the summer, and even a handful of bluebells. “I love when the long grass sways in the wind,” my mother used to say. Or “Look, the wild strawberries have come out,” her face lighting up with excitement. The previous tenants had planted two small juniper trees on the grass. They took up most of the space and the view, but one year my father ceremonially planted a miniature Christmas tree in between the junipers. In just a few years, it had outgrown its two cultivated neighbours.

The patio area was filled with a variety of furniture, all meeting my mother’s most important requirement of furniture: comfort. A concrete pillar divided the patio in two sections. On one side was a large sideboard we had been given by a friend of the family. It was made of plywood with an oak veneer and was stacked against a grey concrete wall. Throughout the years it had been filled with a range of things including flower pots, plant food, plant soil, kitchen dishes, toys, cups, and spades..

On a few occasions over the years there had been verbal exchanges with the neighbours about the appropriateness of our paraphernalia and the aesthetics of the garden within the communal setting.

"Why would we throw anything away?" my mother would say. "It might come in handy one day. When you've lived in a world where there is nothing in the shops, where you have to take turns to queue for meat and butter, and fish only comes every second Tuesday, then you keep everything, even a plastic bag. Besides, this is a democratic country. We should have the right to furnish our garden the way we want."

Complaints were, by and large, ignored. Like a hedgehog, my mother's main defense was to close up and wait for the predators to go away.

The spring of my sister's eleventh year, just when the frost had relinquished its grip on the earth, giving way to the warmer embrace of the first crocuses and snowdrops, things flared up and the matter of our garden came to a head. What had seemed like a few friendly and advisory remarks had turned into a neighbourhood feud led by the elderly couple in the last entrance of the communal building; in their pursuit to bring our garden to order, they had managed to get broad support for their case amongst many of the inhabitants of our block.

During February and March, we received a series of calls from the landlord.

"An anonymous neighbour is complaining about the noise coming from your garden. . . we've had a report from an anonymous source about disorderly activities going on in your back garden. . . we had an anonymous call about the state of your garden."

My mother would brush these off.

"What kind of activities? Who is to decide what my garden has to look like? Can this anonymous source stand up for their opinion and declare themselves?"

The elderly neighbours were in their seventies. After a head-on collision with a Czech driver, his trucking career had come to the end of the road. He had retired at fifty-nine on a small, state disability pension. As a result of the accident he used a walking stick and was often seen limping around the communal lawn, quietly monitoring all activity with his beloved, child-hating Jack Russell terrier. His wife had a face like an overripe lemon, crumpled and bitter, and hair that looked like purple cotton wool. Anything to do with children, noise, pets other than her own, and any sign of life annoyed her. She would glare at us from her window or balcony whilst we were playing games in the garden or cycling. When she'd had enough staring she would open her window or lean over the balcony railing and scream.

"Can't you be quiet! This is not a playground! People live here, you know! I'll get those balls taken from you!" And sometimes if she was in a particularly agitated state she would howl, "Jävla utlänningar! If you don't stop I'll call the police!"

At the beginning of April we received yet another phone call from the council. There had been a quarterly council meeting and a vote. They wanted to unify the look of the place, including our garden, with trimmed grass and proper garden furniture. My mother said, "They can't tell us how to live."

In May, my mother decided to put Mika on a long lead attached to our fence to allow her to roam freely in the communal garden. She was frolicking in her newfound freedom, running around, digging in the earth, sniffing and inspecting each little tuft of grass. Sometimes she would give off little barks of excitement whilst rummaging around in the newly accessible rose bushes; perhaps she had found trace of rabbit or a hedgehog. But as a result there had been a new campaign by the neighbours, and with a list of names they filed a joint complaint. One day, the council and police knocked on our door.

"It's about your garden. We need to make a statement. Can we take a look?"

The landlord took notes, a report was filed, letters were sent, and phone calls made, all concluding that a change to our garden was necessary. We had to keep the dog within our own fence, cut the meadow-like grass, get rid of some of our clutter, and put some proper garden furniture on the patio. It all had to be done by the end of May, and if we didn't do it ourselves, it would be executed by the council.

"This is worse than communist Poland," my mother said.

The day of Monika's birthday I woke to the tapping sound of rain against the window-panes. Outside, beneath a dark sky, the birthday balloons were swaying in rhythm with the grass in the wind; some had untangled from the trees and were bouncing between the furniture and the fence like lost souls. The paper streamers had lost their spiral shapes and gone dark, hanging in strips along the fence, which had taken on an almost black colour in the rain. Raindrops poured down the kitchen window creating rivers along the glass like little streaks of tears. My mother and I were in the kitchen. On the table was a large pair of scissors and a roll of black garbage bags. A handful of empty banana boxes were scattered across the floor.

"We will only cut the grass a tiny bit," my mother said whilst unfolding some of the black bin bags. "And we'll clear the sideboard a bit and put some of the clutter in the cellar; it's good to clear up every now and then."

I was staring at the raindrops on the kitchen window, my mind somewhere else, and I had a looming feeling of disappointment and sadness. I didn't want to think about angry neighbours, grass cutting, and de-cluttering. I wanted to get excited about the party and giggle, plot and plan with Monika, come up with some new ideas about what an amazing summer we had ahead of us.

"Why won't they leave us alone?" I muttered. "I'm going to leave this place one day."

My mother put her hand on my shoulder and looked at me affectionately with her learned eyes.

"Remember what your father used to say: What is within you, nobody can take away. Like your name. Nobody can take away your name."

Monika appeared in the kitchen door in her pyjamas, stretched her arms out with a yawn and looked at the world with a sleepy yet inquisitive gaze.

"What awful weather on my birthday."

She walked up to the patio door and paused, then shrugged her shoulders. "Oh well, we're going to have to stay indoors, then," And then she saw them.

"Kinga, look!"

Two small hedgehogs had made the long trek over from the rosebushes of the communal lawn and in through fence into our garden. Oblivious to the world around them, they were feasting on the milk my mother had left out on the patio in a shallow bowl the night before. Monika looked at me and smiled, and then I smiled too. Across the horizon amidst the clouds and the rain, a beam of sunlight suddenly appeared, creating a perfect rainbow, a colourful archway over the yellow rapeseed fields.

KINGA BROEL-PLATER was born in Lund, Sweden, to Polish immigrants. Kinga is a native Polish and Swedish speaker, English being her third language. In 2000 she graduated from Lund University with an MSc in Business Administration and Finance and has since been based in London working within the financial sector. She has no previous publishing credits and started writing creatively in autumn 2009.