

THE NAÏVE GARDENER

A Scrios Chronicle Short Story

It was supposed to be a rainy day, the day Gordon was born, but it wasn't. The howling storm named Frieda, with its violent winds and dark clouds, inexplicably vanished as Persephone Cartier's contractions began in earnest. Wind and rain slammed the city one moment, causing unsecured dumpsters to roll down the road, but at 10:03 AM, the sun emerged. The unexpected weather change puzzled the meteorologists.

Her husband, Casimir, was not falling for it. "It has to be the eye of the storm," he said as he grabbed the large golf umbrella in one hand, along with the go-bag. This freed his left hand, allowing him to help his wife into the taxi.

The passenger visor revealed that Ahmad Jamail was the taxi driver. An older picture of him with thick black-rimmed glasses, from before he had gotten contact lenses, greeted new riders. Underneath the license on his dash, the six-day-old wilted dandelions his daughter had picked sat in a disposable poker coffee cup. Ahmad felt a pang of annoyance seeing them come down the stairs of their 82nd Street brownstone. "Ya Allah, she is giving birth," he thought. "Oh no, if she ruins my seats, I'll use the dispatcher's face to scrub them," he silently vowed as anger welled up in him.

Getting a fare up here was rare, so he was initially thrilled. Most people up here use a ride service. The last time in this neighborhood, he had received a \$100 tip, and it had made his week. "Now this," he thought with a shake of his head.

However, the ride was quick, uneventful, and took just 15 minutes to reach NYC Health on 2nd and East 97th. With rain in the forecast, many people had apparently stayed in. He pulled up to the emergency zone as the pair prepped to depart the taxi.

Through the sliding window, the man offered Ahmad a small stack of bills, folded the money, smiled and said, “Thank you for our safe and quick journey... I am going to be a dad!”

In his hand, Ahmad unfolded the bills, revealing six crisp \$100 bills sandwiched between three wrinkled twenties. The initial joy in Ahmad’s eyes faded as the total amount registered, and remorse for his earlier thoughts washed over him. He looked for and discovered a parking spot and entered the emergency room. The woman had disappeared, presumably whisked away to the back, while the man paused at a desk signing papers. Ahmad waited without complaint until the man stood and began heading to the back. Ahmad softly touched the man’s shoulder. “Sir, may I have a word?”

“Yes? oh hey... problem?”

“Yes... sir, uh, you paid me far too much,” the driver said.

“It’s okay, really,” said the man. “You got us here quickly and safely, so thank you. Take your family out for a nice dinner. Sorry but I have to go,” the man smiled, and he patted Ahmad on the shoulder and walked to the back.

Ahmad walked back to his car. The tip from the man was the largest he had ever seen. He was happy, but most importantly, he thanked Allah. This money was more significant to him than a family dinner. The money relieved him of the dreaded monthly fear of eviction. This would allow his family to purchase fresh food at the market. Perhaps this meant he could give up a late shift one night soon, to be with his family. Yes, yes, he would do that.

Once he was back in the car, and settled, something had changed. He needed almost twenty seconds to understand what it was. The aroma provided the first sign. There was a sweet scent in the car. He soon noticed someone had replaced the old dead dandelions with fresh ones. No, somehow, something had refreshed the dandelions there, and they stood proud in the cup, just as they had when first picked. They would somehow remain in that state for the next year.

Gordon’s mother, Persephone, was born into the upper-middle class on New York City’s Upper East Side. She attended elite schools, did well in her studies, and enjoyed art. Truthfully, her father seemed disappointed when she announced her

plan to major in art in college. It appeared to him to be a dead end, a waste of talent for that remarkably gifted young lady. Her mother advocated for her. It wasn't because of any vast artistic talent she had witnessed, but because her passion flared when she discussed the subject.

Casimir Cartier, Gordon's father, also hailed from the bustling streets of New York City. He was a second-generation descendant of French immigrants who arrived after World War 2. During the early war years, his grandfather had been a member of the French Resistance near Paris. The family's lineage was a source of pride. His father, a translator in the signal corps, had served in the humid jungles of Vietnam. He was already fluent in French, a language learned from his parents, and had taken Mandarin Chinese in college. The Army had put him in immersive classes for Vietnamese, and its complex tones clung to him, like a second skin. Following the war, Casimir's father found success as a Wall Street trader, enjoying the bustling city life.

At a college mixer for incoming freshmen, Persephone, known to her friends as Persie, met Casimir, who also had a shortened nickname, Cas. Shortly after they began dating, they were inseparable. Casimir studied business and minored in sociology. A year before they graduated, the couple, with dreams in their eyes, planned to join the Peace Corps after they received their degrees. Their parents weren't particularly happy about their children's upcoming adventure to an unknown place, but they agreed, since it was just for one year.

Both of them went into the damp green depths of Brazil's rainforests. The poverty they witnessed there was unlike anything they could have imagined, a stark contrast to their own upbringing. The weather combined striking beauty with harshness. It seemed the drugs couldn't stop them from getting malaria, but they were probably key to their living through it.

Despite the experience's fulfilling nature, it was not the life they felt called to.

Five months before Gordon was born, Persie and Cas sat side-by-side, holding hands as the doctors shared the news. First, she discovered she was pregnant, and that she was carrying a boy. Days later, the grim news shook them after the amniocentesis test results arrived. The results revealed that the baby she was carrying had Trisomy 21. The doctor quickly listed the options for ending the pregnancy when Persie and Cas spoke in unison, “Stop.”

Persie asked, her voice trembling slightly, “Is the baby viable?” Cas nodded with her as she questioned.

The doctor mumbled, “Uh, yes,” a flicker of bewilderment in his eyes. However, it will probably have other health issues frequently found in individuals with Down syndrome. This often results in both a shorter lifespan and significant financial burdens.

Cas looked at Persie, and a loving smile spread across his face. Persie turned to the doctor, her voice firm, and said, “We are having this baby. It’s come to us for a reason. If his life is short, we will make it as wonderful as we can.”

Gordon’s arrival was on September 18th, 2016, at 3:25 PM EST. Knowing what was coming, the nurses were careful with their words, as the doctor had prepared them before the baby’s birth.

When he was born, the slap on his bottom didn’t elicit a single cry. He simply blinked, as if to acknowledge the sudden, sharp sound of the slap. Within seconds, his skin bloomed a rosy pink, and Persie gazed at the most beautiful baby she’d ever known. Happiness overcame Cas, and he felt his heart swell as he held their child.

Though I could embellish this perfect world for the child, I must stay true to you, dear reader, in this tale, because demons also exist. Even if Gordon never recognized their evil. Since he never interpreted the cruelty they wrought upon him as such, he never interacted with or embraced its intent.

Gordon’s initial four years mirrored those of a typical baby boy. His parents took him to playgrounds and museums. Every year they had birthday parties. What

stood out as strange was the yearly decrease in children, as parents of kids deemed normal by society gradually stopped attending or inviting Gordon to birthday parties. The parents acted as though his condition were contagious. Similarly, the invitations to playdates diminished.

Gordon usually stayed with his mother in her studio while she worked on her art. She'd give him art supplies, and he'd make random marks. During other parts of the day, Gordon would ride sidesaddle on her hip while she worked in the Green Room, as they called it. It was the main differentiating feature of the home and the reason they had purchased it. A unique feature of this home was an orangery, built in the early 1800s. When they bought the home, the previous owners had abandoned and relegated the orangery to use as storage. To them, however, it was the main reason they wanted this home, even though it was in terrible condition. Previous owners had ignored the room for at least fifty years. On day one in their new house, they began work to restore it to its original purpose. Now, for their family, it served as a greenhouse where they grew most of their own fresh produce, year-round.

Gordon's arrival, along with Persie's role as a stay-at-home mom, aided her artistic growth and also led to a thriving garden. The fruit was so plentiful on the branches it seemed impossible. Every plant in the room was robust and in good condition. One of her few genuine friends... well, one who didn't let her child's disabilities affect their relationship, nominated her garden for a city competition, and it won.

Those friends who remained present in his life would witness a boy who almost always had a smile on his face. While he rarely spoke, occasionally a word would escape the world he lived inside his head, and in response, his mother would hug him and have a conversation about that word. At other times, they communicated through nods and pointing.

One day, when Gordon was four, he pointed to the Orangery and said the word "flower!"


"Yes dear! The flowers in there turn into yummy fruits and vegetables."

Gordon looked in concentration at his mother and said, "Mommy... flower."

Persie knew his thoughts were more profound than his words, even though he rarely used complex words or expressions. She picked him up in her arms and embraced him in a hug. After he pointed to the orangery, they went there, and upon arrival, she noticed a significant change in the room. Someone had planted a vine of some sort that resembled a morning glory in shape; however, it had a totally original color pattern. In her lack of awareness, she thought that someone had planted it at the back of the orangery and routed the vine across the roof of the structure. “Cas must have done it,” she thought. The flowers were breathtaking, and even with her horticultural expertise, the plant species remained a mystery. She searched the internet, but nothing similar came up. She noted the plants had fused themselves to the wall and lights, their organic holdfasts looking like living glue. “That’s impossible!” she breathed, eyes wide with amazement, and Gordon clapped, his body rocking back and forth in a frenzy.

While he rocked, he kept repeating, “Mommy... flower!”

When Cas returned home, the scent of the wonderful flower lingered in the air, but he denied any knowledge of it.

n kindergarten, the children noticed Gordon’s physical differences, and his quiet nature made him an easy target for the older kids on the playground. His only friend was a quiet yet strong black girl named Starr. Before Gordon, Starr had been the target of playground thugs, who taunted her because of her extra weight, thick glasses, and tightly braided hair. Tiny faded scars on her hands and knees silently testified to the moments where someone had shoved her from behind. It had been a game to some of her classmates. Older kids, in on the expected attack, would even record it on their cell phones. Her hands and knees had hit the ground so often that she now wore jeans.

Her parents had complained to the school, expressing their concerns. The school conducted restorative circles, but they didn’t produce any positive results. They emboldened the little bastards in the school to repeat their actions, knowing they’d face no consequences, so they carried on each day, bullying Starr. Until the day Starr stopped them.

Some people wither in those types of situations. Starr's strength made her someone no longer worth anyone's effort to harass. Ironically, when she knocked one of her attackers out cold, the school suspended her. Only when the fourth child involved in her abuse lost a tooth did the harassment of Starr stop. When Starr's resolution stopped the harassment, the school's administration patted themselves on the back for their efforts.

When Starr recognized Gordon was their new target, she quietly stepped in, put her arm around him and walked him to class. The look on her face dared anyone to challenge her, and no one did.

To her, Gordon was an enigma. That boy would get hit in the face, knocked to the ground, and after the teachers finally arrived, he would get up, dust himself off, and hug the person who had just attacked him.

Each day, Gordon would offer a teacher, or someone from the office, a vibrant bouquet or a small potted plant. Starr saw Gordon emerge from a house on the street as she strolled along after disembarking from the city bus at an unfamiliar stop. His mother walked beside him with their hands clasped together as they went to the school, a journey of several blocks. Before he entered the school, she would give him a kiss on his forehead, exchange some words with him while smiling, and observe him as he walked up the stairs towards the main entrance of the building. With his backpack secured, he carried a lunchbox in his hand. That was it... she was right behind him going inside. The instant he crossed the threshold of the building, a beautiful plant materialized in his hand, which until that moment, had been empty. With him walking ahead, she walked behind him until they reached the office; she watched as he entered the office and, with a huge smile, gave the plant to the receptionist.

Starr was dumbfounded and racked her brains to figure out how he could have performed that trick. In her neighborhood, she had long ago figured out the Three-Card Monte scam. She figured out it was a cheat before anyone told her it was a con.

The next day, she got to school early and sat on the stairs just inside the door. She saw him approach the stairs with his backpack, lunchbox, and an empty hand. He crossed the entryway, and as if by magic, a bouquet was in his hand, which he

presented to the art teacher. Each bloom had a pattern, as if an artist had carefully brushed strokes onto the petals.

Seeing the art teacher surprised Starr. She'd heard the teacher was out of school, grieving the loss of her husband in a traffic accident that had occurred just weeks ago. When Gordon handed the art teacher the flowers, she embraced him, tears streaming down her face as she expressed her gratitude. When the hug ended, he walked to his classroom with the same smile he had every minute of the day.

The next day and for the rest of the week, she clutched her father's small video camera, anticipating the moment. Each day she watched and tried to understand the illusion of the magic trick. She was terrified of showing it to anyone. Gordon was special, she concluded and determined that she needed to protect him.

Brutal was the only word to describe the winter of Gordon's first-grade year, with snow piling high. For fifteen days, the city stayed frozen, never warming above the freezing point. Broken pipes were creating havoc all over Manhattan, flooding streets and buildings. Every night, the news reported tragic stories with somber tones. Infrastructure failures led to people freezing and lacking clean water. There were murders at gas stations as people fought over dwindling supplies of kerosene for portable heaters. There was even violence at Red Cross blanket and food give-a ways. For the first time since 1821, the Hudson River had frozen over. Nobody missed the irony of the canceling of the Anthropogenic Global Warming Conference at Madison Square Garden, scheduled to take place in the middle of the frozen city.

Gordon watched the TV, and his mother watched him watch the TV. Each story seemed to cause him to wince just a little. She feared that watching this was hurting him somehow, so she reached for the remote as the story changed to something unexpected.

In the frigid city, flowers blossomed everywhere, defying the cold as if spring had arrived. A miracle had occurred in the snow, and the city stilled, awestruck. Despite

the 22-degree temperature, vibrant spring flowers stubbornly bloomed. By the next day, the cold had relented, and the warmth of the day seemed to answer the silent request of the flowers to change.

With the news spreading globally, Persie watched Gordon's face, the ever-unchanging smile, as he stared at the television. The only difference was the unsettling rhythmic sway of his body. As if the excitement bubbling inside him needed to burst free... like it had to escape.

The colorful pattern of the flowers triggered a memory in Persie's mind, telling her she had seen them before. Their colors were almost identical to the ones on the vine that trailed along the walls of her orangery. But that was not the entire story... not exactly. The bloom's solid colors were striking against its softer pastel accents. She had seen those colors before.

She walked into her art studio near the orangery. As she walked in, she remembered where she had seen those colors. It was the vibrant colors of the 128-color crayon box she had given to Gordon.

In the corner of her studio, on the rubber jigsaw mat where Gordon sat, his art sat in a pile. On top, the child's wild crayon scratching mingled with the smudged charcoal drawings. He loved the way the charcoal would smear on the page, but he always smudged it with a paper towel. Whenever he got something on his fingers, it was one of the rare instances where he would lose his smile.

While leafing through the thick stack, her eyes landed on a burst of color around the eighth page. She nearly dropped the entire stack of paper when she opened the gap to look at the drawing. In the picture, a paper cup held seven dandelions. The cup's side depicted a full house with playing cards, jacks over kings. The drawing of the dandelions was so well done that they looked real. It was far better than she could do... especially with crayons. The background appeared to be the inside of a car. It was unbelievable how much detail there was, with its effervescent colors and intricate design. The paper coffee cup had coffee stains drawn on the rim, and the shadows in the picture were perfect.


Even though she didn't want to leave the first page, she had to see the next. The drawing on the next page showed the vine from her orangery in precise detail, just as an 18th-century botanist would have documented it.

Subsequent pages were of bouquet arrangements and potted plants, dozens of them. All the flowers and plants on the pages were unknown to her and amazing in their beauty.


About half-way through the stack, the second to last page in the pile of illustrated pages displayed flowers emerging from a snowbank. The last page was of another stunning bouquet.

She was so lost in her thoughts that she didn't realize the silent tears falling. Persie struggled to believe the impossible thing that was right in front of her.

Persie couldn't wait to show this all to Cas. He was the only person in the world who would believe her.

 In April, at the school open-house and spring performance, Cas and Persie walked through the school, taking in the colorful decorations and the sounds of music. From the moment they walked in until they left, they were constantly hearing the teachers' praises, grateful for the flower arrangements and plants sent with Gordon. They recovered from their initial shock, listening to the teachers' repeated, separate explanations of how the gift Gordon had given them hit them at a time where they really needed a boost. It surprised the teachers how healthy the colorful, soft-petaled plants were, how long the bouquets appeared fresh, and asked how they made a bouquet that could stay fresh for months.

"If you just keep watering them," Persie said, "they'll last a long time!"

 Spring fell to summer and summer to fall... and soon winter came again. Just as time seems to flow faster with age, an entire year slipped by. One morning, Persie noticed Gordon seemed sluggish when she went upstairs to see if he was awake for school. She found him still lying in bed. When she touched his head, she noted a fever.


She contacted the school, explaining that Gordon would be absent. Next, she made a doctor's appointment. What she couldn't have known was that she'd never see Gordon in their home again. The doctor's face darkened with concern, and they sent Gordon to the hospital, the same one where he had taken his first breath.

The prognosis was dire following a battery of tests conducted at NYC Health Children's Hospital. To make matters worse, doctors could not pinpoint the exact origin of the illness. His blood pressure was abnormally high, and his white blood cell count was off the charts, but infection was nowhere to be found. The doctors found it much simpler to list what he didn't have, rather than what he did. He had no signs of leukemia or any other form of cancer. The one thing they knew for sure was that he was losing the struggle against the unknown malady. They spent months fighting whatever was making him sick. A constant visitor was his only friend from the school, the tall 7th grader, Starr. She would bring letters and cards from the teachers. Soon the letters filled the walls of his room. She would sit with him and watch TV and sometimes hold Gordon's hand.

Now and again, Gordon appeared to be making a comeback. During those times, Gordon scribbled with his crayons as he watched TV together late at night with his mother. His art was a chaotic explosion of color and form, utterly devoid of any structure. Neither Persie nor Cas had ever seen him draw like the pictures in his pile, which seemed to capture the world like a camera. Yet, there was no other way to explain the source of the art Persie discovered.

The "Winter Miracle," as the news had dubbed it, was now spoken of like a legend. The UFO crowd connected it to crop circles and aerial lights that had allegedly appeared over New York City during that period. Cas, Persie and through her conversations... Starr, were the only ones who knew what had really happened, though doubt, because of its fantastical nature, still lingered in their minds.

Every minute of his hospital stay, either Cas or Persie was there. In his room, they took turns sleeping in the green hospital recliner.

n May 17th, day 127 in the NYC Health Children's Hospital, they ate dinner. In the room, the TV was on, showing the news with the volume barely audible. Because Gordon was watching TV, Cas turned up the volume a little. The story in the news was about areas of the world facing starvation. They spoke of Sudan, Haiti, Yemen, Mali, and Somalia, which are sites of horrific suffering and starvation. Next, they discussed how malnutrition affects the U.S. and the globe.

A flash of movement, which had ceased before they could even turn their heads, snagged Cas and Persie's attention. Before Gordon, on the hospital table, rested a picture of a vibrant green plant. There was some sort of fruit or gourd suspended from its branches. Even though the plant resembled a tree, its branches formed a flower-like shape and crept across the ground like vines. Gordon's drawing portrayed kids and adults feasting on the plant's fruit. As Gordon showed his mother the drawing he made on one of his last clean pieces of paper, Cas and Persie were stunned into silence.

Reports of a mysterious plant, identical to Gordon's picture, appearing across the globe aired the following day. Unlike anything ever seen, a strange fruit or vegetable sprouted from the plant. It had appeared overnight, and its presence was especially clear in countries battling starvation. The public warnings were not enough to deter the people in the poorest areas, who were already sampling the plant's bounty. Everyone who tasted it found it reminiscent of something they enjoyed, and the descriptions were wildly varied, even comical. Some claimed its flavor was reminiscent of chicken, while others, living on the shoreline in fishing communities, insisted it tasted of fresh fish. To some, it brought to mind the sweet taste of a beloved pastry.

Within days, health officials, despite their best efforts, had found nothing of immediate concern regarding the plant's structure or makeup. In fact, they discovered it possessed qualities akin to those of certain plants commonly known for their nutritional value, referred to as super-foods. The flavor, though, might have been exaggerated. Following safety approval, people frequently compared its mild, uninteresting taste to the food served in hospitals.

In the weeks following the miracle, they sat in the sterile hospital room, watching the news reports. Gordon's strength was visibly fading with each passing day.

Persie saw that Gordon's paper supply was almost gone and suggested getting more from the store later. Gordon's hand found hers, and his gaze met her eyes. In a voice as soft as a whisper, he uttered, "No more paper, Mommy... please?"

In a blur, his hand moved and drew a single rose on his final clean piece of paper. Out of nowhere, a multicolored rose appeared in his hand. As tears rolled down her face, he gently placed the flower in her hands.

Gordon was 8 years, 3 months and 22 days old when he passed. At his funeral, every teacher at the school was present. One student came, Starr. For the first time in three years, Starr allowed herself to cry in front of people.

THE END

