

THE GARDENER

By: C.J. Henderson

The rake's weathered bamboo tines scratched at the ground, assembling the brown and graying leaves scattered over the lawn into pile after pile. Ben Goodell pulled the ancient tool across the width of his parents' grounds, hour after hour, ignoring the increasing chill of the salty breeze twisting its way along Water Street.

There had been no wind earlier in the day when he had begun his yearly care-taking efforts. But, as the afternoon had waned, the dark zephyrs usually contained beyond the ragged ocean front cliffs of Kingsport had begun to billow, rattling the small, diamond panes in windows all across the town.

At first, Ben had cursed the growing inclemency, but he had quickly forsaken such futile pursuits for action instead. As the breeze began to threaten his colorless mounds he broke off raking, heading for the stack of regulation, city council-approved garbage bags he had picked up at the local hardware store before beginning his endeavor.

Unfolding one of the black, thick-plastic shrouds, he maneuvered it in front of the largest pile and began to sweep his gathered detritus inside, using his parents' rake with one hand. It was slow, sloppy, tedious work, but Ben did not mind. It gave him a chance to think.

Ben Goodell did not live with his parents, had not done so for ages. But, every fall the dutiful pilgrimage was made, from the luxury of his Manhattan penthouse to the steep, narrow crooked streets of his home town. Back to the tiny room of his childhood to tidy and clean and secure his meager birthright against the fierce New English ravishes to come.

Of course, his annual sojourn did not inconvenience anyone. Ben Goodell had no wife to desert, no children to abandon. Oh, there had been a girl, long ago, an engagement that had meant the world to him. But the girl had left one day without a word. It had been a heartbreak beyond reason and that had been the end of such things for Ben.

He had left Kingsport after that, turning his back on the ceaseless maze of colonial houses with their ancient vanes and antediluvian gables, setting his sights on an adventure that would relieve the sting of his Gloria's desertion. Ben Goodell had travelled then to New York City, turning his back on love for the more reliable venture of commerce. He conquered a dozen kingdoms over the decades, heaping up treasure that would have staggered Midas. Never resting, he threw his nets ever further, reaping airlines and banks and computer firms, restaurants, film studios, automobile manufacturers and all manner of properties until he became known as the man who could not fail.

Oddly, Ben drew little satisfaction from his prizes. At first there had been a tremendous thrill to it all--the power, the women, the heaps of gold and the army of desperate sycophants cringing in his shadow. Eventually, however, he realized that it was all too easy. And thus, pleased with his creations, but bored with them as well, every November he would take his Seventh Day to rest, heading back home to where he was once more beholden to a greater power.

Over the years, the chores had grown more numerous as his father fell further into disrepair. They changed as well, as even ancient Kingsport became enmeshed in the vulgar regulations of the modern era assaulting it on all sides. Ben struggled with his bag, grunting over the extra effort required, remembering how few years earlier it had been when all that would have been needed was a match and a watchful eye to eliminate his moldering burden.

But that was another time, he thought ruefully. Long, long ago.

Ben dragged his first bag across the lawn, dumping it at the designated spot on the curb for biodegradable trash. Not to be confused with the spot for plastics and glass, not to be bagged in their properly specified colors, not to be left at the spot assigned paper products and magazines, nor that where metals were to be deposited, nor household trash, nor ...

God, Ben frowned at the notion of such regulations invading his sanctuary, you'd think with the checks I send Mayor Cooper every year they could preserve a little more of the charm around here.

Ben stared up and then down Water Street in bemused amazement. New York City with its lawyers and socialist politicians and its uncaring, mongrel teaming millions he could understand. But for Kingsport to be caught up in the same suburban progressivism, it made his head shake with sadly bitter frustration.

His hometown was a place that, for the most part, history had passed by--a forgotten pocket of musty, moss and ivy-covered houses where one structure in five still stood with one foot as firmly in the sixteenth century as in the twenty-first. Of course, if you included the seventeenth century, then half the town still belonged to the past, including every public building save for the concrete bunker of a post office the WPA had erected--the last time an outside influence had been permitted to scar the town's eternally somber beauty.

When had so much changed, he wondered. When had the outside world found its way into Kingsport?

"You look particular burdened, son." Ben turned to see his father approaching, a steaming mug in his outstretched hand. "Think it's time for a break?"

He answered the old man in the affirmative, gratefully reaching out for what he knew would be a stiff brace of bitter black coffee sweetened with a generous stirring of his father's homemade blackberry brandy. Ben downed a long pull of the steaming

brew, smiling as much at its heady taste as at his ability to anticipate his father's actions.

Of course, he thought smugly, I ought to know the old man by now. He and Mother didn't have me until they were almost fifty--and since I'm almost there myself now ...

Ben let the notion trail off within his brain. Yes, his parents were in their upper nineties. Yes, they would be dead soon. Yes, in many ways it really didn't make sense that they were still alive.

What did keep his parents going, he wondered sometimes. How did they survive, year after year, unaided, what was essentially an extremely hard life. He offered so much, so often, but it was always politely refused. His parents were so proud of him, but so unwilling to share in his success.

Staring at his father, he looked the elder Goodell up and down, trying to work the puzzle out in his mind. His musings in no way indicated a lusting after their fortune. They had none while his was massive. Nor did he resent their longevity, like so many of his contemporaries did that of their own parents. He saw them only the one time every year, and found himself missing them the rest of the time.

"So," said the elder Goodell. "What's new in that corporate kingdom of yours?"

Ben smiled. He had been waiting for this moment. Every year, sooner or later, his father quizzed his son on what he was doing, where his empire was going, what strategies he was unfolding. After more than twenty-five years, Ben never ceased to be amazed at the elder Goodell's knowledge of the financial world. For a man whose entire world was held within a three and a half mile circumference surrounding an antiquity of wharves and churches and overgrown graveyards, he always seemed to know so much.

Ben loved his father--both his parents. He tried often to get them to come to the city--to live, or even just to visit--but they would have none of it. They would not let him

support them and they would not step a foot outside of Kingsport. And, although he loved them, he had not given their reluctance any real consideration over the years.

Benjamin Goodell was an important man outside his home town, one with numerous responsibilities and duties. Even one extra visit made over a long weekend would have been extremely taxing on his hectic schedule. So, every year he simply made his dutiful journey, travelling to New England in one of his expensive cars, leaving behind his corporate importance to clean gutters and scrape shingles, to rake and trim and mow and to perfunctorily ask his parents to come to see him, quietly awaiting their polite refusal in between bites of dinner.

Ben finished rattling off his list of upcoming battles--the Thornton merger, the Ridalex take-over, his desire to open casinos in both Nevada and New Jersey, the scheme to buy up formerly nationalized properties in former communist strongholds--all the rest. His father nodded after each description, staring out over the ocean down at the far end of Water Street as he listened to his son.

When Ben went silent, he continued to drink in the wizened, fragile form of his father when suddenly the enormity of his callousness swamped him. The sharpness of his father's mind could not belie the weakness of his frame. His parents were nearly a hundred years old. No matter what it was kept them going decade upon decade, they were not immortal. They were aged and frail and withered.

A strangled cry shattered within Ben's throat, threatening him with tears and worse. He washed it away with more coffee, struggling to hold onto his composure. He was a leader of men, in command of thousands of lives. He knew how to control his emotions. He did. Then, his father stretched out his back, his movements slow and methodical.

"Heh," he snorted with a dreamy pleasantness, "Guess I'm not as young as I used to be."

And Ben's eyes filled with tears as he watched the tiny shell of the only giant he had ever known amble back to their shrunken home in gently measured steps.

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"What do you mean, you're going to spend another week there?" The voice in Ben's cellphone was more surprised than angry. Not surprised as in shocked, but as in flabbergasted. "They've got that many chores for you this year?"

The voice belonged to Brenda MacLoren, Ben's executive assistant. Calmly, he told her, "It's nothing like that. It's just ... I don't know how to explain it except to say they're old. Old and alone."

"Alone...?"

"I mean that everyone they ever knew, everyone I grew up with, they're all gone. I don't know what keeps them from going crazy."

"They probably are," answered the woman. "You're just too soft when it comes to them to notice."

"I'll let that slide," responded Ben without amusement. "They're my parents, Bren. And they're old. Old enough that I don't think I'm ever going to see them again once I leave town this year."

"And that's so terrible?" snapped his assistant. "Maybe it's not my place but those two have you twisted around their little finger. We've got the Harper Conglomerate leverage in two--"

Ben cut the woman off with several coldly harsh words, reminding her of who actually worked for whom. Then, with instructions on what she was to do to ensure the continuing success of his empire, Ben told her in no uncertain terms of where he was going to be, for how long, and that the subject was closed to discussion. Snapping his phone shut, he turned to find the hard, frightened eyes of his mother locked upon him. Instantly he understood that the discussion was about to be reopened.

"What do you mean, you're staying on?"

"Mother--I just want to see you two a while longer."

"We're not spring chickens, Benny," she snapped at him. "And we're not made of money. We don't have the energy or the where-withal to entertain you until you decide you've wasted enough of your precious time on us."

"Mother!"

"We welcome your help at this time of year, son--I wouldn't insult you with a lie to the otherwise. We're old and can't do like we used to. But that's no means for you to take advantage--"

"What are you talking about?" Without realizing it, Ben had slipped into his CEO voice. Defiant and somewhat threatening, he barked back at the old woman before him. "Take advantage, waste my time--where is this coming from?!"

The elder Mrs. Goodell pulled herself to her full height. With a dark sneer spread across her tight, dry face, she told her son, "You're done here. It's time you go home."

"But, Mother ..."

"What?" the old woman snapped. "You've got nothing better to do? Lazy? Is that what ye've become? An idler? Ready to just move in and eat us out of house and home?"

"My God," thundered Ben. "What are you talking about?"

Mrs. Goodell staggered from her son's bark as if from a blow. Ben stared, not understanding anything that had happened. Why had his mother said what she had? Surely she could not have meant her words. But if she had not, then why say the things she had? And, he wondered, what was really wrong?

Ben reached out toward his mother, but she stepped away, gasping for air while swinging her aged hand at his. She struck his open palm a blow with her bony knuckles, her rough skin scraping at his soft flesh.

"Maybe the boy should stay, Elizabeth."

Mother and son both turned at the voice behind them. Ben looked on in surprise, hard pressed to believe his father could move so quietly. Mrs. Goodell stared in shock, wide-eyed and silent in her disbelief at her husband's words. It was, however, a short-lived silence.

"What did you say?"

The old woman's voice was a thing of angered pain, a viper blinded by disbelief, hissing for a moment to hold its tormentors at bay until it could clear its field of vision. Braving a storm his son could scarcely comprehend, the father dared the fates once more.

"I said maybe it's time the boy stayed. After all, the ship *is* coming in tomorrow night. Maybe it's time he saw it."

No words emitted from Mrs. Goodell. Instead, a scream erupted from the thin, old woman, a growling panic of hate and denial that tore through the two men, shaking the windows and scattering the cowering, witless starlings gathered in the barren, thorny bushes beyond.

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Ben had not argued further. His mother had left the room after her outburst. She had not cried, restated her case or said another word. She had simply headed up the narrow oak stairs for her room, the dry wood barely creaking beneath her withered feet. His father had given him the shrug known to all sons desperate to understand how a woman could hold so much power over a man.

"Well, perhaps ye'd better pack up, after all, Bennie," was all he said, however, leaving the younger Goodell lost in a painful confusion from which he could not disentangle himself no matter how hard he tried. And try he did mightily.

Through his packing and then all through the night, during his terse leave-taking, while getting into his car and pulling away from the house, he considered what happened. So lost in thought was he as he piloted his car up the slick cobblestones of

Water Street that he drifted by the neglected house with the strange gathering of oddly grouped and painted stones in its front yard without even noticing it.

The place had been there since before Ben had been born and numerous stories were told of the old man who dwelled within it, spending his days speaking to his collection of peculiar bottles. The gnarled and dying trees of the musty, moldering abode had always bothered Ben as a boy, a nagging respectful fear that had never left him as a man. But, so agitated and confused was the younger Goodell with the actions of his parents that he sailed past it without a notice, his mind locked in swirling wonder at his mother's words.

He drove the serpentine alleys of Kingsport, connecting to Ship Street, passing the Congregational Hospital where he had been born without seeing it. Swinging off Green Lane past the Market House, he made the left onto Back Street with robotic precision, motoring its length until he reached the connection to State Route 1A that snapped him back to the modern world of asphalt and concrete roads. 1A lead to Interstate 95. That took him to 90, which took him to 395, which in the curious way of New English travel took him back to the Interstate, propelling him on through Rhode Island and onto Connecticut. He did not reach it, however.

Only miles from the border, he saw a sign for Mystic Seaport, a place of brightly painted wooden houses and wooden ships. It was home to a sterilely recreated past, erected as a haven for tourists desperate to believe they had touched what had gone before simply because they had snapshots of themselves standing in front of butter churns and spinning wheels all discreetly stamped PROPERTY OF MYSTIC CHAMBER OF COMMERCE. It was the idealized representation of a clipper ship on the sign that caught Ben's attention.

Again he heard his father's words within his head ... "Maybe it's time the boy stayed. After all, the ship *is* coming in tomorrow night. Maybe it's time he saw it."

The ship? Ben wondered at the words. What ship? What ship could he be talking about? And why would it matter if he saw it or not?

Ben pulled off the road. He sat lost in thought, his engine running, his foot on the brake. What kind of ship came in at night? To Kingsport? And what made it so important?

Without hesitation, without thinking, Ben gunned his motor and shot back onto the Interstate. He toyed with the idea of simply cutting across the median strip but he could not take the chance of being stopped. He had to get back to Kingsport as quickly as he could.

Damn, he thought as he slid into the exit lane, this late in the year it'll be dark by five. Dad could have meant anytime after that.

Roaring up the small leg of road taking him back to the Interstate, he joined the traffic headed in the direction from which he had just come. Without further thought, Ben stared out through his windshield, watching the miles disappear between himself and the answer he found himself desiring desperately. He had realized even before he had left why the confrontation with his mother had become so important to him. For years he had never had to listen to another person. There simply was no one powerful enough in the world outside of Kingsport to command Benjamin Goodell to do anything.

He was in charge of his life. He had the money and power to make anything happen--easily. Take-overs and mergers impossible for anyone else were nothing to him. The resolve of corporate tigers evaporated into cold steam when they faced Benjamin Goodell. He was not a man used to being denied. He barely even understood the concept any more.

His mouth a grim line, hands locked on his steering wheel, Ben sped along the darkening fall roads back to Kingsport. Hour after hour he traveled, stopping only for the fuel necessary to take him home. Darkness came and still he drove, his car slicing

through the crisp, leaf-dotted air. The miles disappeared, town after town falling behind him as the hours dwindled and his speed increased.

At slightly past eleven-thirty Ben left the asphalt highway, crossing that dividing marker between Kingsport and the outside world. His rear wheels slid dangerously as they connected with the slick cobblestones of Water Street. Ben shifted down through the gears at reckless speed, wrenching his steering wheel to the left, then the right. Without a thought he rushed along the quiet, darkened lanes of the somber town, determined to discover the answers to the questions he could not actually form within his brain.

He stopped his car in front of his parents' home with a horrible screaming of brakes. The shrunken house was still, all its lights extinguished. His engine still running, Ben left his car and ran across the lawn. Reaching the front door, he banged on it with fierce power, shouting powerfully for his parents. No matter how he raged, however, there was no answer.

And then, after another mighty slam, the door swung open. Ironically, Ben discovered that it had not been locked. A moment's thought reminded the CEO that his parents never locked the entrance to their home. Standing in the open front doorway, Ben threw his senses outward into the darkened home. No scent or feel of life returned to him, no sounds of movement, no hints of breathing, not the slightest stirring of life. Stepping backwards, down the slab granite front steps to the chipped slate walkway beyond, Ben studied the familiar yet somehow alien structure, trying to discern where his parents could be.

A ship coming in, the back of his brain reminded him. Where do you think they are?

Ben rushed back to his car. Throwing himself inside, he stepped clumsily back and forth from the brake to the gas, eliciting growls of protest from the powerful engine until he finally got control of himself and was able to pull away from the curb.

Get a grip, moron, he chastised himself. The docks are less than a mile from here. Let's try to get there in one piece.

As Ben cruised slowly through the streets leading to the ocean, he began to notice that all the homes in town seemed as empty as his parents'. A terrible notion came over him, an unsettling feeling that bore outward from his soul to tighten his skin, chilling the sweat leaking from his brow.

What if, he wondered. I mean ... could ...

The opening crumbs of the answers Ben wanted had finally begun to form within his brain, but he could not extend them, could not look at them long enough to see more than a few words before his attention would be wrenched off in some other direction. A horrible truth was growing in the back of his mind, a realization he had hidden from for longer than he could imagine.

As he slowed his car further, rolling quietly toward the centuries old dock area of town, bursts of memory began flashing through his head. Something about a ship--something he had refused to know--was stirring in his mind, bubbling past the locks he had strapped upon it decades earlier. Before he could gather all the myriad pieces, however, reality grabbed at him, forcing him to slam on his brakes.

The dock area was ablaze with spectral light. All the men and women of Kingsport were assembled on the wharves. In their hands they held candles and torches, gas lanterns and hurricane lamps. More than one gripped poles with buckets of flame hung from them. Ben noted that every person held their own light, and that all the illumination seemed to be coming from natural sources.

No flashlights, no battery lanterns, he mused as he automatically snapped off his headlights and silenced his engine. Why? Hell, why not just turn on the damn street lamps?

Ben exited his vehicle silently, moving down the short incline of Water Street toward the rest of the crowd. He did not fear anyone noticing him. Why would they care? They were the people of his parents' village--he knew most of them by name.

And, he noted, their attention did seem elsewhere.

Ben moved slowly, in some ways frightened, but still curious as to why everyone was so intently staring, not out to sea, but upward along the cliffs to the north of town. He knew where they were looking. The crags extending out of Kingsport at that point climbed steeply, terrace on terrace, until the northernmost of them hung in the sky like a grey, frozen wind cloud. It was not that far bluff that held their attention, however, but the solitary, ancient house which stood upon it.

It was a place of many rumors and wild stories, a thing the town whispered about--as it whispered about so much--but which it had always basically ignored. Ominous No Trespassing signs surrounded the property over which it towered, signs curiously erected not by the owner--whomever that might have been--but instead by the Kingsport town elders.

Of course, Ben should not have been able to see the unhallowed cottage, should not have been able at that time on such a starless night to see even the cliffs themselves. But somehow he could see it all. And, like the rest of the crowd, he saw the unintelligible door on the cliffward side of the house open. The crowd gasped, but the sound of them was overrun by the noise of a rushing billow that seemed to scream outward from the northern heights, a great shrieking hiss of approval that unfolded like a spray of clouds one could only hear.

The much ignored house faded from view then, the cliffs and trees and all fading from view even as the town's attention turned eastward out over the dark ink of the midnight waters.

Ben turned his head from person to person, looking for something in the eyes of anyone in the crowd that would give him the answers he sought. Where were his

parents? What was everyone doing on the docks? With fire, no less? Why fire instead of sensible, modern electric power? And, for God's sake, where was this damnable ship?

Dread filled Ben's throat as the clouds suddenly parted and a laser-like stream of moonlight slammed downward to crash against the motionless water below. Fear sweat broke out across his brow. He smelled his body moistening as he realized there were no waves lapping against any of the pier's great wooden pillars. And then, as he felt the tension of the crowd all around him slip away, he saw it.

Out of the icy blackness slid a pale, translucent ship, a massive thing of fluttering sails and long decks that should not have been seen along that stretch of coast in over ten score years. Cold and forbidding it was, a silent runner that cut the still the frozen ocean with a bow that barely seemed to touch the water.

Ben noted creatures stuck to its hull, strange, tentacled barnacles with horrible staring eyes. How he could make them out at such a distance he could not comprehend, no moreso than he could explain a ship that could stay afloat with massive, pulsating worms eating their way through the planks and beams of its shining hull.

Its white sails fluttered with a noise that rippled time, shimmering--not with light reflecting from any source as mundane as the blazes surrounding Ben on all sides, but from cutting through the currents of space itself, from filtering the sounds of other dimensions into a fuel that gave it its own horrible life.

Ben shuddered, unable to look away, unable to comprehend how he could know the things he was realizing. He watched the undulating decks rise and fall to the beat of some terrible pulse. His eyes stared unblinking at the helm, his heart stopping as he realized the waxen vessel's wheel seemed to be steered by different hands every time he took note of it. The pilot always appeared roughly human, but there would be differences caught only by the corner of his eye--legs that would turn into the clawed

lengths of a birds underside, arms that would seem to be wrongly jointed, or suddenly serpentine.

But that was not the worst of it. The vague ashen vessel's captain could not hold the CEO's attention as he began to make out its passengers. One by one, the visages of those screaming, gibbering souls roped and spiked and sewn to the very fabric of the ship became clear to him.

"Mother," he screamed. "Father! Where are you?"

He recognized William Grangier, the head of Brendalno's Manufacturing, who had perished in that fire. Alice Harris, consumed by cancer. Murshlin and Tuttle, taken in the car wreck.

"What's going on? What is this?!"

People began to turn and stare. Neighbors of nearly half a century saw not the boy they watched grow but an outsider as he stared at the sea and screamed.

More and more faces he saw, more and more men and women who had stood in the way of his success over the decades--MaCallan from Broklin Airways, Stevenson of the Linhurst Proxy, Sheldon Meyer ...

"Father! Help me! What is all this? Why is this happening?!"

The crowd around Ben began to part, the hand-held flames lashing him with wicked shadows as his parents struggled to make their way to his side.

"Don't look at it, Bennie," his father's ancient voice begged. "Turn aside, boy--turn away!"

And then he saw the figure he had avoided for so long. Hands once beautiful were nailed to the phantom clipper's hull, the weight of a long suffering body dragging at them, creating a torturous agony that had spasmed the first of the sacrifices for decades. Golden hair hung ragged and clustered with burrowing sea life, obscuring the hollow, slime encrusted pits which once had contained blue eyes capable of possessing a young man's heart. One heart in particular.

"Gloria!"

The tattered, raggedly chewed head turned toward the sound of the familiar label. Its mouth opened, and laughing, screams burst forth from it condemningly.

"We did it for you, son," came the frightened sounds of an old woman. "We just wanted what was best for you."

Ben stared in reeling horror as the silent ship neared the dock. His brain spun madly, laying all the discordant facts of his life out plainly for him to see. His ritualistic visits, his father's curiosity into his affairs, looking for details, asking for names, needing to know--

"We never took anything for ourselves," a mother's desperate truth plead pitifully. "It was always for you."

Benjamin Goodell broke away from the crowd, racing to the end of the wharf. A many-voiced cry rose up from those behind him as he ran. He heard feet rushing after him, a thunder of panicking heels slapping against the dock. They were too late.

Ben was scant yards from the end of the pier. The ghost vessel slid across the water, closing with the shore with incredible, yet silent speed.

"Not for us," a parent's voice cried. "For you, it was all for you!"

And then Ben leaped, clawing the air as the world before him filled with shining nightmare.

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"And, the lead story on tonight's news is merely an echo of that from the last two weeks. The unstoppable worldwide collapse of hundreds of corporations continues as the unexplained disappearance of financier Benjamin Goodell sends even more tremors through the international marketplace. As you know, Goodell, forty-eight, vanished while driving alone on his way to New York City from ..."

The sharks moved in eventually and gobbled up all the pieces. Goodell International disappeared much as it was created, one large bite after another. The

event shook much of the outside world, but it did little within the small and ancient town of Kingsport save to set tongues to wagging. And then, only for a few weeks.

It was understood that there would have to be some belt-tightening done by the community leaders now that certain generous donations would no longer be forthcoming. Still, Kingsport had been given much by its benefactor, and they would survive.

Clearing away the last of the fall debris from around the once proud cannon in the center of the town's only park, the old gardener pulled at the handkerchief in his back pocket. He rubbed his rheumy, addled eyes with it, giggling to himself as he sucked on the prizes he dug from their tired corners. No one paid him any mind. It was the least they could do.

Satisfied, the old ward of the town pulled his rake's weathered bamboo tines across the ground once more, assembling the brown and graying leaves scattered over the area into a tidy pile. He pulled the ancient tool with calm ease, his vacant eyes spinning happily as he did his job.