

The Stone Garden

by J.A. Pak

It was her modern fairy tales that made Poppy's mother so successful. And with her new money and with her new husband from Scotland, Poppy's mother purchased an ancient manor deep in the English countryside, a hundred acres of green woodland framing a Jacobean house whose foundations dated back to the time of William the Conqueror. Since the Great War the manor had changed hands many times, but the manor itself seemed never to have changed, as if a sleeping spell had been cast upon it, which is what had appealed so much to Poppy's mother. Perhaps the spell would now extend to her, Poppy's mother liked to joke. Poppy thought her mother's wish strange, strange that her mother liked to say she wished she could hold time, strange how she said that the best time of her life had been when she was Poppy's age. Poppy was nine years old.

Poppy first saw the house during her summer vacation. Most of the year Poppy lived at a boarding school in upstate New York. She didn't like it, the house. It smelled. Sort of like old mushrooms. And it was always cold, wet cold, as if the house were holding back tears. Her mother said it was because of the stones, the thick, ancient stones and William the Conqueror and that it was a privilege to be living inside so much history.

Poppy was happiest when she was playing outside. There were so many flowers, so many different gardens to explore. Alone, Poppy skipped rope and chased rabbits and watched polecats bounce along the grass. Sometimes the polecats had rabbits hanging from their mouths as they ran, the heavy weight of the rabbits dragging them down, making them pause to catch their breath. The rabbits were so still, so frozen, even their eyes, so frozen. Poppy didn't know who to feel more sorry for, the rabbits or the over-burdened polecats who had to work so hard to keep the rabbits in their small little mouths. After lunch, Poppy usually fell asleep on the front lawn, which was like a beautiful carpet, the blades of grass so fine, shaved so close to the ground. There were even tiny white daisies woven all throughout

— from a distance it looked as if someone had sprayed the lawn with thousands of white polka dots. And that made Poppy think that she would like to take a piece of that daisied lawn and make it into a full skirt, maybe even a dress, a fine beautiful party dress for her to wear. The lawn was more comfortable than her bed — Poppy found it hard to sleep inside the house — the house filled her with odd little dreams which seemed to have been cut and pasted from other odd little dreams, dreams that were not hers. She stayed outside as much as possible because the house was like those dreams.

While Poppy was playing in the garden, Poppy's mother was in her bedroom working, in her gigantic bedroom with all its meandering cubbyholes, with its walls that twisted, with the floor that rose and fell, Poppy's beautiful mother writing the well-crafted stories which had bought her the house, had attracted the husband. Even the windows twisted, tiny diamond panes of glass weeping into their metal frame husbands. She was very happy, Poppy's mother. She said it had always been her dream, even as a little girl Poppy's age, to live in a house just like this.

To Poppy, her new stepfather was as strange as the house. He was rarely at the manor — Poppy's stepfather worked in London, which was several hours away — he even had an apartment there, an apartment with such large wall-like windows that there seemed nothing but air separating the apartment and the river they called the Thames. Poppy thought the wall windows were a lot like the lawn with the daisies, that she would like to lie on top of it and see the world, only she'd have to lie on her stomach because it was glass and the world was on the other side of it. Most Thursdays Poppy's mother drove all the way into London so she could spend the weekend with her stepfather in the glass apartment. Sometimes Poppy went with her and they'd go have tea and scones at Fortnum & Mason where her mother did her grocery shopping. And when she didn't, she stayed at the house with the housekeeper, a friendly Scottish lady named Flora who was married to the old, stout gardener Barnaby.

Barnaby had many gardens to look after. There was the large formal garden at the back of the house with its topiary shrubs, stone paths, white statues and fountains. There was the lovely rose garden — when it was hot, the competing smells of the many roses could make Poppy feel sick to her stomach. The rose garden extended into another garden where the plants had been trained to make walls and roofs, even seats. Sitting surrounded by flowers and foliage, it was always cool, cool and slightly humid from the breathing plants. There was also a kitchen garden where Flora's husband grew vegetables and herbs for the house. Poppy often helped Flora pick peas and cut lettuce. They'd eat the ripest tomatoes right there in the garden, marveling at how wonderful the taste of fresh food was. Of course, they'd always pick much more than they could possibly eat; the garden was large, and in the middle of the summer heat, the harvest was bountiful. If they didn't pick what was ripe, the vegetables would rot, and there was no point in that, Flora told Poppy. So secretly, Flora sold the extra food at a farmers' market (Flora let Poppy hold the secret, and she did love to hold it close to her, smiling as she watched her mother eat all the hot, buttery vegetables at dinner).

With so many gardens, it was hard to choose a favorite. But Poppy thought her favorite was what she liked to call the stone garden. It was east of the house, past the tennis court. Her mother didn't even know that it was there. The garden must have been very old. Poppy had to walk down steep stone steps to get into it. The stone steps sunk heavily in the middle, so worn were they from the many years of eroding footsteps. The stone garden wasn't really a garden at all. Poppy called it the stone garden because all the flowers were made of stone.

One day while Poppy was playing in the stone garden, she noticed a generous patch of wild strawberries growing near a tumbling wall. The tiny strawberries were blood red and dewy. It was the only live thing Poppy had ever seen growing in the garden, if you didn't count the almost-black moss that crawled all over the stone flowers. Poppy fell on her knees. Her happy fingers quickly picked at the strawberry

plant, strawberries in her mouth, swallowed half whole, strawberries between her fingers, dripping juice. Poppy thought the strawberries were the most marvelous things she had ever eaten and she felt deliriously happy running around the garden looking for more. In her happiness, Poppy didn't notice she wasn't alone. She didn't notice that a woman was standing by the entrance, silently laughing as she watched Poppy dancing around the garden.

"How happy you are!" the lady finally exclaimed. "How wonderfully happy you are! You must be Poppy."

The shock made Poppy fall on her knees again. She sat dumbfounded.

"I am Poppy," she finally stammered. "Who are you?"

"I used to live at the house," the strange woman answered.

"Are you the lady my mother bought the house from?"

"Yes. Come. Sit here." She was sitting on a stone bench now, motioning for Poppy.

Poppy slowly stood up. She felt a little dizzy, but eventually found her place next to the lady.

"So, did you eat all my strawberries?" the lady asked.

"Yes," Poppy said, feeling very frightened. "I didn't know they were yours. I'm sorry I ate them. I wouldn't have if I'd known they were yours."

"I'm glad you ate them! I grow them just for little girls like you."

"Is this your garden?"

"Yes. Do you like it?"

"I love it," Poppy answered.

"Oh, I am so glad," the lady said. "You are a pretty girl. I must have only pretty little girls in my garden. I can't tell you how pleased I am that you've come to my garden. It's very unusual, isn't it? It's a secret garden and only my little girls can know its secrets."

She took one of Poppy's hands and rubbed it on her cheek. The lady's hands were dusty.

She was tall and beautiful, the strange lady. With long hair that was wrapped elegantly on top of her head in layers of thick curls. The lady's hair wasn't dark, but it wasn't light, as if the color had

forgotten what color it had been. Poppy sensed she must be old, very old, but she didn't look old. Maybe she seemed old because the lady was wearing an unusual outfit, a suit made up of a jacket and a long, narrow skirt that dropped to the lady's ankles — Poppy had thought the suit was lavender, but looking close she saw that it was made of tiny threads of every color. When Poppy moved her head, the color of the suit changed.

“Are you doing some gardening?” Poppy asked.

“Yes. Clearing away the broken flowers. They get so brittle with age. It's the cruel weather that breaks them up. I'll have to replace them, but it's hard finding replacements.”

“Are you sad you don't live in the house anymore?” Poppy asked.

“Yes,” she said. “How very sweet of you to think of me.”

“My mom says the house is very, very old,” Poppy said.

“It is very old. Almost as old as I am,” she said, laughing.

Poppy wanted to ask how old the lady was, but she didn't dare. She didn't understand what was so taboo about asking grown-ups their age. She liked telling people how old she was. Maybe she could ask when she got to be friends with the lady. She'd like to have a friend.

“How old are you?” the kind woman asked. It was as if she could read Poppy's heart, wanted to please her most.

“Nine,” Poppy said breathlessly.

“Perfect.”

“Perfect?” Poppy asked, puzzled. She was expecting the usual reply. She didn't know how to respond to perfect.

“If a girl is too young, she isn't formed enough and if you enter her you could get lost, forget yourself. If the girl is too old, she's already stone and is quite impenetrable. Don't worry. You'll understand soon enough.”

“Grown-ups are always saying that.”

The lady laughed. “True enough. But I promise you, you will understand all you need to know very, very soon. Now I'll give you a short history lesson. You live in this house now and it is paramount that you learn its history. This garden was the private garden of the

first mistress of the house. No one was ever allowed into her garden. Not even the gardeners. They say she grew the garden with magic. They say she was a witch."

"There were never witches. Just wise women. They were just jealous that she was such a good gardener. She must have had a green thumb. My mother would die to have a green thumb. She can't even get cactuses to grow."

"Don't you believe in magic?"

"Magic is just wishes. Do you believe in magic?"

"Oh, yes. It's very powerful. But you have to believe with all your heart and soul for it to work."

Old people were so corny.

"I'm too old for all that," Poppy said, weary and wise.

"You mustn't say that. Or the magic won't work. And you want the magic to work, don't you? Like I said, you're an absolutely perfect little girl. That is why I am so glad you have come."

Poppy was filled with love. She suddenly hugged the lady, her arms begging for more adulation. She wanted the lady to kiss her and hold her and she was so dizzy with her wanting.

The lady whispered, her voice so soothing: "Go along now, my sweet Poppy. But come back soon and visit me."

"When?"

"Sooner the better. Goodbye."

Poppy began skipping back to the house. When she realized she was skipping, she laughed.

"Where are you coming from?" The gardener Barnaby was standing in front of her. He seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. He scared her.

"From the garden over there."

"The witch's garden? Stay away from there. It's dangerous. Bad things will happen to you. You don't want the witch to get you. She likes little girls. She steals their bodies. And you know what she does with their souls?"

Poppy rolled her eyes and ran. She knew whose garden that was. She knew how welcomed she was there.

"I don't want to find you there," the gardener yelled after her.
"Flora knows about the witch!"

He was always telling her not to touch that, not to do this. She'll go wherever she liked. She didn't understand how Flora could be so nice and her husband so mean. He didn't even sound like her. His accent was so thick she couldn't really understand him at all. Flora said he wasn't Scottish but came from the West Country and that explained him.

Later, when Poppy remembered, she asked Flora about the witch. Flora was making dinner, cutting carrots into thick wheels.

"Who's been telling you about witches?" Flora asked, laughing.
"Barnaby."

"Yes, they say there was a witch. There are some who call the manor the Witch's Weir. Are you afraid?"

"No," Poppy said defiantly. Although now she was, a little.

"Good. No use being afraid." Flora turned her attention back to the vegetables. "Have you met the Lady yet?"

"The lady who lives near the stone garden? Yes, she's very nice. I like her very much, Flora."

"What did she think of you then?" Flora asked.

"She thought I was perfect," Poppy said proudly.

Flora nodded, smiling. "I told her so myself."

"Are you friends with the lady, Flora?" Poppy asked, excited.

"Oh, yes. We're old friends."

"She said I could come to the garden any time."

"Did she? Then she must like you very much. Now, here's a carrot to eat. Be a good girl. Eat it all up and then go take your bath before dinner. Run along. Dinner will be done before you know it. Run along, I said!"

She liked Flora very much too.

Poppy had her dinner with Flora in the kitchen. Her mother was in Florence with her stepfather. Flora and Poppy shared a nice beef stew and apple pie. They watched TV while they ate. When it was bedtime, Flora tucked Poppy into her bed and gave her a kiss on the forehead. Poppy fell asleep almost instantly.

But late that night, something brought her out of her dreams. There was a noise, something strange that seemed far and near at the same time. Poppy got out of bed and went to the window. It was quiet now. Unusually so, because the night was never really quiet. Sometimes you could hear the foxes mating. Or owls calling. Poppy put on her coat and shoes and went downstairs to the kitchen. She knew where Flora kept the emergency supplies like extra fuses, candles and flashlights. Poppy took a flashlight and opened the kitchen door.

It was so dark and quiet. No moon. No stars. The dense darkness made Poppy unsteady but she continued to walk. She didn't know where she was going. And then — something, like laughter and music. Yes, laughter and music. She was in the stone garden. She'd somehow walked all the way to the stone garden. And it was full of light, light of marvelous colors, pinks, blues, yellows, purples. And it was full of little girls, girls the same age as Poppy, playing games, running and laughing, wearing beautiful dresses. Where had they come from, Poppy wondered? There was no one in the village except old ladies.

“So you came.” It was the lady. Her hands reached for Poppy. “We're having a birthday party. Mine.”

“I didn't know. I don't have a present.”

“I'm much too old for that kind of birthday,” the lady laughed. “On my birthday, I invite all my little girls and they entertain me and feed me. Would you like to be one of my little girls?”

Poppy nodded.

“Rosa, Lila, come here and greet Poppy,” the lady said.

Two dewy little girls ran to the lady, laughing.

“Your dresses,” Poppy said. “Your dresses are so beautiful.”

Poppy had never seen anything like them. The skirts were like flower buds, the layers so full the top petals turned upwards, each petal covered with frosted crystals. The dresses seemed moist and alive.

“Would you like one?” the lady asked. “A dress just like the one they're wearing?”

“Could I please?” Poppy said, excited.

“Close your eyes,” the lady said. Poppy closed her eyes. “Now, open them.”

Poppy opened her eyes. The lady was holding a lavender dress.

“Rosa, Lila, help Poppy get into her dress.”

The girls laughed and put the dress around Poppy. The dress was so soft and light — Poppy wanted to run and laugh and play games with the other girls.

“Go and play,” the lady said, again reading her heart. “Have a wonderful time. The party is for you, Poppy.”

Rosa and Lila took Poppy's hands and they ran and laughed. The world was spinning, Poppy laughing with so much joy, tears were running down her cheeks. Tears, turning into such heavy sadness, Poppy falling on her knees, her heart breaking. And then she was laughing with joy again, dancing, the stone garden churning with the hysteria of little girls. Round and round, spinning round and round. Her eyes — she looked up, her eyes bright and open. Poppy saw the sun. The bright yellow sun; she was so tired. Her body ached; her body froze. Even her dress stiffened around her. And all the other girls, they too were still, the colors of their dresses fading, disappearing, becoming gray and spotted. She couldn't see their faces anymore — their bodies had disappeared too. All she saw was stone; all she felt was stone, grey, cold stone.

She could still see and hear, wrapped in stone. But it was strange and confusing, as if she was dreaming. Because she saw herself, Poppy, playing in the garden, growing up, getting married. She saw Poppy grown very old and she was no longer Poppy but the lady, holding the hand of a little girl. Soon, on the blackest night, she felt her dress glowing light. She could move again, all that life which had been held in stone bursting open. The lady took her hand and the hands of all the other little girls who were waking up and laughing. The lady was so beautiful.

“Look who's come at last,” the lady said, her hands on the shoulders of a pretty little girl.

“My lovely girls, come and greet Rhoda. My perfect Rhoda.”

They ran to Rhoda and gave her a dress, so light and frosty, thick and binding.

