

The Magic of the Old Man

by Sheila Luecht

When I was a very young girl, in grade school, I walked two blocks to school. No turns or road crossing, just a straight two blocks to the private school on the corner. It was a church, our church with it's own school attached. Most of the time this was calm walk, often with the sound of children ringing off the playground.

There was this house about two or three houses from the corner. It's backyard was up against the playground fence. When we were in the playground, we had contrasting sections to play in, the children were separated by grades and let out at different times too. I never got to play right behind this house on my block, but that didn't stop me from being curious about it. When we walked to church as a family or drove the car, we always passed this house. It was a house in the model of ours, a brick two story with a basement, but this one had a garage attached.

As far as I knew it was just an old man and his wife who lived in this house, but not really. I mean if you had seen what every person on that block had, you would have realized that many lived there, well many beings.

The home actually had a bit of green house and a fabulous kind of outdoor garden attached. The garage was glass panes from a base of brick which made a kind of half wall foundation with a cement drive in front of it, which was their driveway.

I don't know if he was a former zoo keeper or a florist, gardener, or if he was a WWII vet who survived the jungles of the Pacific. For whatever reason he had this truly magical place at the end of the those two blocks. He was there when I was five and gone perhaps when I was seven or eight. Just in time to open the window of total

magic for me. I don't know how many years it took him to build such a beautiful place.

Our climate at that place in the Midwest was four well defined seasons. During winter the place was still abuzz with green growth that you could see through the glass, but not in the same way as summer.

The most incredible thing was the actual peacock that roamed the grounds. To see that spread itself, in that magnificent burst of color was a kind of once in a lifetime event. My father was so curious that he began to talk to the man and in his friendly demeanor convinced him to let us into a bit of the garden. It was like a fantasy. Such pretty flowers, and palm like leaves, the pinks and purples, that as a child I just knew by vivid colors as something in no one else's yard. I remember him telling my dad that sometimes people bothered him because of the fence backed up to the school, during mass the recess area doubled as an extra parking lot. Sometimes it was people just too curious, touching the fence or being too noisy for the animals, of which there were a few, mostly small and unseen, frogs, birds, squirrels etc.

It is only this past year that I have gone to Hawai'i, (for the first time, courtesy of my children), and what a feeling that was, to be engulfed in such incredible beauty. Those colors, they looked kind of familiar. I was certain that in my travels to parts of the states that are more southern I had glimpsed a few of them. Perhaps it was the botanical gardens I had walked through too in different countries and states. I only then started to think harder. It comes to me now that it was on my own block as a child that I first fell in love with those. I saw my first Bird of Paradise and Anthurium, my first Gardenia. The smells were always familiar to me, because of the walk into that old man's garden.

Since I lived at the end of those two blocks many years, until I was in my twenties with time away for university and living in Austria, I had a chance to see that house change. First as a child still going to grade school I got to notice the garden gone and then the greenhouse gone, a regular garage back after so many years. It was a place truly stamped in magic and I always wondered about the peacock and the other little creatures who made there home in that garden. What an oasis it was!

May we all find the oasis of beauty somewhere in our memories.

