

Chapter 3: A Modern-Day Knight

“Nannie,” I said as I walked into the kitchen, making sure I stepped on the metal threshold plate so it would click. “Who’s that man in your garden?”

Mom paused in her chore of setting Nannie’s round, Colonial style kitchen table to look at me: “What man?”

“That’s my new gardener,” Nannie announced as she hovered over the stove, tending to all the little steaming pots and sizzling pans. Her face was flush from the heat.

“You hired a gardener?” Mom put her hand on her hip as she registered her surprise. “Why? You do your own gardening.”

“I wanted help with my roses. He’s supposed to be an expert...at least according to Mrs. Robbins.”

The look of surprise on Mom’s face increased: “I thought *you* were the expert. What makes you think you need help?”

Nannie shrugged as she wiped the perspiration off her brow: “I’m tired of the old garden looking the way it does. I want something different.”

“What’s wrong with your garden? And who is he? What does Mrs. Robbins say about him?”

“He’s from England,” Nannie said with delight in her voice, “and he...”

“Say no more,” Mom said dismissively. “I see why you hired him.” She looked at me and shook her head. My grandmother was an incorrigible Anglophile, even to the point of putting on “English” airs. Even her speech would change when she was in a particularly “English” mood.

Mom’s dismissive tone irritated Nannie and made her a bit defensive: “I’ve always wanted a true English garden – you know that, Rose Ann. This is my chance to have one. Is there anything wrong with that?”

“No. But do you know anything about him? What does Mrs. Robbins say?”

“Only that he is an exceptional gardener. Besides that, I just like him.”

“Oh?”

“He’s a hard worker...and very polite. You’ll see. You’ll like him, too, once you get to know him.”

“How long has he been here?”

“A couple of weeks.”

“A couple of weeks! Why haven’t you mentioned him?”

Nannie gave us a hurt, disgusted look, but didn’t say anything.

“Well, what have you got him doing right now?” This conversation seemed to have brought a halt to the preparations for lunch. Luckily, the little pots and pans were still steaming and sizzling on the stove. And inside the oven I could smell cornbread baking.

“He’s digging up my rose bushes,” she answered deadpan. “We’re moving around the old and adding in the new. It’s going to have a totally different look.”

“I can’t believe it.” Mom lay down the flatware she had been distributing and walked out on the porch. I followed her. At the end of the porch she stood and searched the garden. The man was no longer in the spot where I had seen him.

“Where is he?” she asked in a low voice.

“I don’t see him,” I replied.

Just then we heard a sound underneath the porch, where Nannie kept her tools. Looking down, we saw the top of the broad-brimmed hat he was wearing. He was pulling out tools and throwing them on the ground behind him. Finally, he stopped and took a step back. Then he looked up and saw us.

“Oh...hullo.” He *was* English.

“Hey, how are you?” Mom responded, somewhat embarrassed.

“I’m Lance.” He removed his hat. “I’m just doing a bit of work for Mrs. McGimsey.” He had a pleasant, friendly face that was rugged and flush from work, with bright blue eyes and a broad smile. His hair was dark brown, medium length and matted down with sweat. But he had no beard – that was how he differed from Rembrandt’s gardener.

“I’m Mrs. McGimsey’s daughter, Rose Ann, and this is my son, Waitzel.”

“Nice to make your acquaintance. Mrs. McGimsey is a wonderful lady. We’re having great fun redesigning her garden.”

“Redesigning it?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m a landscape architect. When she told me she wanted her garden to look like it was in England, I was thrilled. That’s my specialty, English gardens, and especially rose gardens. I love roses.”

“So do my mother and I. I’m sure you’ll do a wonderful job.” Mom smiled self-consciously as she shifted her weight, but remained poised and discreet. “My son, Waitzel, will be staying with his grandparents over the summer, so I imagine you’ll be seeing a lot of each other.”

“Good.” He smiled up at me. “Maybe you’d like to learn something about landscaping.”

Mom continued: “How long do you think it will take...to redesign her garden?”

Lance rubbed his hand through his hair, glancing out at the garden: “Oh, several months. Not working every day, of course, but off and on. I have several other ladies I’m doing work for.”

“Well, I look forward to seeing what you do. Nice to meet you.”

“Pleased to meet you, Rose Ann. And I look forward to seeing you around, Waitzel.” He went back to sorting through his tools. I noticed the hat on his head was one of Nannie’s.

When we turned around, there was Debbie standing behind us, looking like a kid in a candy store. Mom helped her turn and gave her a gentle nudge toward the kitchen.

“Well, did he meet with your approval?” asked Nannie, her arms akimbo, as we stepped back in.

“He’s a nice looking young man,” Mom admitted.

“He’s a dream boat!” Debbie gushed.

Mom hushed her: “Lower your voice.”

“Well, he *is*,” Debbie whispered back in earnest.

“He’s wearing one of *your* hats, Nannie,” I said, stepping on the threshold plate again. He *was* nice looking, and friendly. I looked forward to getting to know him.

“I’ll be interested in seeing what he does with your garden.” Mom resumed her chore of setting the table. “I can’t believe it’s going to take all summer.”

Nannie just cackled to herself as she checked the little pots and pans on the stove.

Nannie stood in the middle of the kitchen looking impatient: “All right, where’s Mac? Everything’s ready.”

Just as I walked back out on the porch, I heard a car pull into the carport. After the opening and closing of car doors, and the subsequent sound of footsteps, I heard the first strains of “Yes, We Have No Bananas,” Pa’s favorite song. This was the familiar way he announced his arrival at lunchtime. The wrap-around porch, which extended three-quarters of the distance around the house, carried his voice like a megaphone.

Pa McGimsey – or Mac, as practically everyone called my grandfather – had a wholesale grocery business that he ran with his son Charlie, his partner Mr. Dobbin, and

Mr. Dobbin's son Charlie. That was where he spent most of his time. He loved to work; but, more than that, he loved making money. He also loved the kidding and horseplay that went on down at the warehouse. Everyone seemed to like Mac.

If he had had a good morning, he would be singing when he came around the corner into the view of the back porch. If not, he would be silent; but you would still hear the sound of his feet because he shuffled as he walked. Today, he was singing louder than usual, so it must have been a very good morning.

"Who's that on my back porch?" he called out cheerily as he opened the side screened door.

"Hey, Pa!" I went over and squeezed his arm in lieu of a handshake. He was loaded down with a corrugated box full of groceries. "You okay? Can I help you with that?"

"I'm tired and hungry," he said good-naturedly without releasing the box. "Has that little woman got anything for us to eat?"

Pa was a short, balding, taciturn man of Irish descent, and always nicely attired. He had on a yellow short-sleeved dress shirt and brown dress slacks for the office. He usually wore a hat, like the Frank Sinatra style straw hat he was sporting today because of the heat. He also had a dimple in the middle of his chin. Together, Nannie and Pa looked a little like the Mertzes on "I Love Lucy" – except that Nannie was quite a bit shorter than Ethel.

"She's been *acting* like she was fixing something," I answered with a smile.

"*Smells* like she's been fixing something. Well, it better be good," Pa chuckled, "or I'm gonna pop her jaw." He always joked about Nannie that way. It was far more likely that he would be the one getting his jaw popped.

Nannie suddenly appeared in the kitchen doorway acting like she was offended. "Who's jaw are you going to pop? You talk like that and you'll get nothing for lunch." She pecked him on the lips affectionately. "Did you bring everything I asked for?" She peered down at the contents of his box.

"I hope so..." Pa sounded unsure.

"Where's the candy for the kids?"

"I brought gum."

"Gum?! *Clove gum*!?" Nanny looked at him in disbelief as he began to search for an excuse.

"Honey, you had too many things for me to bring...and I've got more to think about at the warehouse than...!"

“Well, maybe you can take the boys down there this weekend and let them pick out their own candy.” She made a face at me, as if to say, *How about that?! Then she said, “Get cleaned up. Everything’s ready.”*

“Where’s Rose?”

Mom emerged from the kitchen as if on cue: “Hey, Dad.” She kissed him on the cheek.

“Where are the girls and Bob?”

“Debbie’s in the kitchen, Linda’s swimming with some friends, and Bob has a business meeting.”

“He works too hard,” Nannie said with a look of concern. “All right, it’s getting cold.” She led the way back into the kitchen. Pa headed for the laundry room to wash his hands.

“Mother, was there anything else you wanted to serve?”

Nannie surveyed the table: “No...just the applesauce. I’ll get it. You sit down. Did everyone wash his hands?” She looked at me, so I jumped up and followed Pa into the laundry room.

“What are we having?” asked Pa, returning.

“Oh, this and that.” Nannie placed a bowl of homemade applesauce on the table. “Just leftovers.”

There was nothing “just” about Nannie’s leftovers – they were luxurious. The table was spread with dish after dish of a dab of this and a dollop of that: not a lot of any one thing, but everything tasty. There were three half-ears of yellow corn, sliced scarlet-red tomatoes, homemade coleslaw, succulent cantaloupe, plump homegrown green beans, a couple of hamburgers cooked in Worcestershire sauce, some leftover chicken in a mushroom soup gravy, black-eyed peas, turnip greens, okra, fresh corn bread, carrot sticks, celery, rye crackers, homemade pimento cheese sandwiches left over from a party, several deviled eggs, red Jell-O with fruit and nuts, grapes and sweet tea with mint sprigs and extra lemon. We thought we were in heaven. For dessert, we had our choice of caramel cake, vanilla ice cream or brownies.

“Mother, are you sure having all those boys this weekend isn’t going to be too much for you?” Mom began eating in her usual self-consciously polite manner.

“Why? Do you think I can’t handle them?”

“No, but I don’t envy you.”

“We’re going to have a grand time.” She smiled at me with a look of excited anticipation.

“I hope everyone behaves.” Mom shot me a warning glance.

“Oh, I’m sure they will.” Then she noticed Mom’s glance. “Waitsel doesn’t misbehave, does he? He’s my best boy.” She smiled at me as if her question was rhetorical. Then she put a bite of food in her mouth and made a Chaplin-like yummy expression. Nannie’s manners were more down-to-earth than Mom’s, and at times even comical. Our favorite custom of hers was when she would stick her napkin in her mouth to blot her lips and then forget it was there, leaving it to dangle indefinitely until either she needed to use her mouth again or one of us pointed it out.

“Lately, he’s had some problems. But we’re hoping he’ll be doing better now.” Mom smiled at me.

“Why? What’s he been doing?” Nannie looked at me with genuine concern.

Mom hesitated then said, “He and his father haven’t been getting along too well.”

“Why?”

“He doesn’t understand me,” I offered. “He never has.”

“What doesn’t he understand?”

“Bob is impatient,” Mom explained. “But you’ve had other problems, too, Waitsel...”

“Like at school,” Debbie volunteered. She hid a sly smile behind the food she was putting in her mouth.

“What’s happened at school?”

Mom waited to see if I would answer, then said, “Some of his teachers say he misbehaves for them.”

“Who?”

“Miss Bird, for one,” Debbie volunteered again.

Ah, sisters! Mine would have been a hit during World War II – as an informer!

“Why, she’s a good friend of mine! What did you do that she didn’t like?” Nannie took a big swig of tea, letting the mint leaf perched on the rim touch her cheek. Her hand, which was small and knobby from arthritis, could barely grasp the large tumbler, although her grip was strong.

“They say he cuts up and talks,” Mom said. “I don’t think they give him enough to do.”

Suddenly, Nannie inadvertently slammed her glass down on the table and looked at me. At the same time, her beaded bracelet clattered with finality. “What’s wrong, Waitsel? Why aren’t things going well for you?” There was sympathy in her voice that pulled at my heart.

I didn't want to get into all the details of my present difficulties, so I just sat there staring down at my food.

"I know what part of the problem is," Debbie offered.

What a sister! She always sounded so confident, like she knew everything. What in the world had she come up with this time? I was quickly losing my appetite, and my temper.

"What?" Nannie asked, truly interested.

"He's obsessed."

"With what?"

"Knights, soldiers, warriors... It's all he thinks about. If he's not attacking me and Linda, he's building forts and blowing up our playhouse. I'm surprised he hasn't destroyed our entire neighborhood! Most of our friends are afraid to come to the house anymore. I'm even afraid to live there." She stared at us in all seriousness, then broke into a delighted cackle.

Unbelievable. I shook my head in disgust.

"Well, there's nothing wrong with being a boy," Nannie said.

"Yes, but *he is obsessed...*"

Nannie studied my face for a moment. I could feel her searching to try to discern my heart. Then she must have picked up on my discomfort, because she said, "We can talk about it later. Right now, let's just enjoy our lunch. Mac, tell Waitzel what you were saying last night about your cousin. He'd be interested in that."

"Which cousin, Dad?" asked Mom, taking a sip of tea.

"My cousin Joseph. I was telling Bertha how he died in his sleep."

"Recently?"

"No, when he was a boy."

"How did he die?"

"He dreamed it."

"What do you mean?"

"In the old days, people believed that if you died in your dreams, you wouldn't wake up. That's why people usually wake themselves up before they get killed. But my cousin Joseph didn't." That was the most words I had ever heard Pa string together at once. We all just sat there in wonder.

"You mean he died in his dream, and that caused him to die in real life? How do you know that?"

“Because he always talked about his dreams. He was always just before being killed by something – the bull or the reaper – when he would wake up. But one day, he didn’t wake up.” He sighed and took a sip of tea like he had just recited the Gettysburg Address.

“That’s terrible. And you believe that – that if you die in your dreams, you’ll really die?”

“That’s what people used to believe. And it happened to my cousin.”

“How old was he when he died?” Mom hadn’t taken a bite since Pa began his story. Now she started to eat again.

“Thirteen.”

Mom paused with a forkful of green beans in mid-air and looked at me.

“Are you still having *your* dreams, Waitsel?” Nannie asked, picking up on Mom’s look.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You don’t dream about dying, do you?”

“Not really. I’m usually being chased. Or I show up at school without something – either my homework or my clothes.”

“Your clothes!” Mom looked embarrassed. “You’ve never left the house without your clothes.” She laughed.

“I’ll bet you’ve never left the house without your homework, either, have you?” Nannie had utter confidence in me.

“N-not...u-usually.”

“Ha!” Debbie smirked into her tea.

“Then why do you dream that? And who’s been chasing you?”

“I don’t know. I usually can’t see their face.”

“Dreams are funny.” Nannie laughed weakly to herself as she pushed her food around and took another bite.

“I don’t think I dream,” Mom announced.

“Everyone dreams,” said Nannie. “You just don’t remember yours. And they usually mean something. Sometimes they hold the answers to what is going on in our lives. They’re like puzzles that need to be solved. You like puzzles, don’t you, Waitsel?”

“I love them.”

“Have you ever tried to figure out your dreams?”

“No, ma’am.”

“I’ll bet your dreams are interesting. Just don’t dream about death. Will you tell me if you ever do?”

“Yes, ma’am.” This concerned me because, lately, my dreams had become more intense and scary. Before, they were mostly just embarrassing situations. But lately, I often woke up in a sweat, usually because the person or thing chasing me was about to catch me.

“What do *you* dream about, Pa?” I asked.

He laughed: “I’m like Rose. I don’t think I dream, either.”

“Oh, pshaw!” Nannie inadvertently slammed her glass down again. I looked at Mom and smiled. “You two just don’t have much imagination. Everyone dreams, and people with a lot of imagination dream interesting things...and remember them.”

“I dream a lot,” Debbie said, with a faraway look in her eyes. “Mostly about boys.”

Oh, for crying out loud! She was starting to disgust me. “What do *you* dream about, Nannie?”

“I think I dream mostly about the old days, out in the Valley. Those were happy times...but they were hard. They made an impression on me. I dream about cooking and gardening, having parties and teaching school, taking care of your mother and uncles when they were young’uns. All the things I’ve done in my life.”

“Never anything scary?”

“No! Well...maybe an occasional snake.” She shuddered. “I don’t like to remember those dreams.”

Pa laughed: “I’d hate to be a snake in one of your dreams. I wouldn’t last long.”

“That’s right,” Nannie agreed, as she laughed into her tea.

“This has been a strange conversation for lunch,” Mom commented: “people dying in dreams and snakes. We should talk about something else.”

After that, our conversation turned to Nannie’s garden and the changes Lance would be making. We all seemed duly impressed with what we had seen of him – especially Debbie.

The highlight of every meal at Nannie’s house was when she got up and went around, offering second helpings to everyone.

“Who would like more cornbread?” She held a piece in front of my nose; and, before I could say anything, had placed it in the middle of my plate. “How about you, Mac?”

Pa shook his head, since he had a mouth full of food; but she placed one on his plate anyway. He made a face.

“How about more applesauce?” Again, in front of my nose.

I nodded my head – I knew she would give it to me anyway. As she approached Pa’s plate, he shook his head again, since his mouth was engaged in drinking tea. Down went the applesauce. He looked peeved.

“Who wants the rest of this chicken? It’ll only go to waste if you don’t eat it.”

“I can’t, Nannie; I’m full,” I said as quickly as possible. Debbie and Mom agreed; so, she headed toward Pa. He began shaking his head vigorously, moaning and crossing his hands over his plate in a desperate attempt to block any landing of chicken there. Plop. *Nice shot, Nannie.*

“Honey, I can’t eat that! You’ve given me way too much food!”

“Well...” Nannie wrinkled her nose and began strutting away, satisfied with her success... “if you don’t appreciate my cooking, I’m sure my cats would like to have it.” She winked at the rest of us.

“I appreciate your cooking, but I’ve got to get back to the office.” He looked at his watch. “Those boys are probably stealing me blind right now!” He was kidding, of course; but it got him out of Nannie’s half nelson.

After lunch, I went outside to see what Lance was doing in Nannie’s garden. He had staked out and marked with string a good third of her back yard to indicate where borders and various plants would be placed. Most of her rose bushes had been dug up and were waiting to be moved to new locations. In fact, almost the entire garden had been dug up in some form.

Lance was sitting under a tree eating a sandwich when I walked up. He greeted me with a big “hullo.”

“Just came to see what all you were doing,” I said. “Kind of a mess, isn’t it. But I can sort of tell what you have in mind from the layout. It’s big – way bigger than it was.”

“Yeah. Your grandmother said I had a free hand, so I’m making it the way I would want. I hope she likes it.”

“Well, if it’s English, she’ll like it. She likes everything English.”

“I hope that includes me.”

Suddenly, I felt awkward: “So...you’re from England, then.”

“Born and bred. My family lives southwest of London.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Two years. I came over to study the Biltmore Estate.”

“In Asheville?”

“That’s right.”

“We’ve been there.”

“Magnificent. The whole place is: not just the house and gardens, but the forests and farmlands. It’s a masterpiece. I’d love to have that much land to work with some day.”

“How much is it?”

“Oh, about 5,000 acres now; but originally it was 125,000. Frederick Olmsted was the landscape architect. Genius. I’ve never seen trees that old except in northern Europe. You can’t reach your arms a quarter of the way around many of them, they’re so big.”

“You should visit the redwood forests in California. Some of them are so big you can drive a car through.”

“The trees themselves? Really? I’ll have to go out there sometime.”

Now that I was close to him, I could study Lance’s features. They were very fine. His blue eyes were clear and sharp, with a certain softness to them, like blue water on a clear day. His nose was very straight and noble. His lips were thin and always tending toward a smile. They were supported by a strong chin and jaw. His hair was thick and dark, with very little wave or curl. It contrasted strikingly with his fair complexion. His ears were interesting – they didn’t stick out like those of the men in my family. His neck was large, spreading out like the trunk of a tree into his strong shoulders that continued on down into powerful arms and hands. His hands were rough, as you would expect a gardener’s to be, with, of course, plenty of dirt under his fingernails.

There was solidness to his body that one would hope was reflective of his character. He certainly seemed to be a cut above most men, though in stature he was medium height – probably not much taller than my dad, who was 5’9”. Sitting cross-legged on the ground, wearing a white tee shirt, blue jeans and work boots, he seemed like he would fit in most any century, and be a hero of some kind. Perhaps that was the romantic in me fantasizing.

“What do you like?” he asked suddenly.

“I like...being outside, making things...drawing.”

“Really? What do you like to draw?”

“I love knights, so I draw a lot of them, plus horrible dragons and beautiful princesses.”

He perked up: “Knights. You’re into knights?”

“Yeah.”

“So am I.” He paused, and then said clandestinely, “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Sure.”

“I’m descended from a long line of knights. My full name is Lancelot. Remember him from King Arthur’s round table? He was my ancestor.”

“But...I thought he was French?”

“Our family settled in England.”

“But, I thought those stories were made up?”

“They’re true. My family is proof of that.”

“Then why do people act like they’re made up?”

“Don’t know. Maybe because they have a hard time believing in them. People today have a hard time believing in anything. They only want to believe in things they can see. But the best things in life are the things we can’t see.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, love...or friendship...chivalry. Like knights and dragons and beautiful princesses. Like dreams.”

I was quivering and it wasn’t because I was cold. Something about this man was making me shake. I was excited, I guess. I had never met anyone like this before. He was telling me things I had wished someone would say to me my whole life. He was telling me about a world I had always dreamed existed. He was telling me that it was real.

“If you could have been one of Arthur’s knights, which would you have been?” Lance was staring at me in all seriousness, waiting for a reply.

“I like them all, especially Lancelot and Arthur. But I think I would like to have been Sir Galahad.”

“Why?”

“I think he had the best heart. And he’s the one who found the Holy Grail.”

“Good choice. Did you know he was Lancelot’s son?”

“No.”

“He was a good knight – many think he was the best. He had a pure heart. That was his forte, and it’s something you don’t find every day. It takes too much self-sacrifice” Lance looked me in the eye. “You think you could have a pure heart?” It seemed like he was offering me a challenge.

“I don’t know.”

“It means making choices – hard choices...choices most men aren’t willing to make.” There was a focus and intensity to Lance that was very appealing. He paused for a moment

then relaxed so that his countenance changed. “Well, I’ve got to get back to work.” He stood up and stretched. “Can I show you something first?”

“Sure.”

He led me over to a pile of tools and picked one up. It was a pruning hook with a long handle. It almost looked like a spear. He began handling it like it *was* a spear and ended by throwing it a great distance, so that it stuck up in the ground. Then he picked up another tool and treated it like it was a sword. After that, he grabbed an ax and hurled it into a dead tree. As I stood watching him, I had a crazy idea: *this man really is a knight! He may be wearing modern clothes, but he is straight out of the Middle Ages!*

The idea sent chills down my spine.

Then Lance said something that sent them back up: “How would you like to learn to *be* a knight?” He stood there with his feet apart, looking like he was ready to begin training right then.

“Y-yeah. How? When?”

“I’ll have to look at my schedule, but I think we can work it in around my work for your grandmother. Since you’ll be around all summer, that shouldn’t be difficult.”

“N-no. Great!” I was really trembling now. *Can this really be happening?*

“Okay. We’ll talk about it later. Right now, I have a stump to clear.” He smiled and extended his hand.

I took it and we shook. Then I headed back up toward the house thinking, *This is going to be the most incredible summer ever.*

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