

Introduction

The idea for this story dates back many years. At the age of sixteen I was living with my parents in Bangor, Maine. My father was a prominent businessman and my mother a well-known artist. One day my mother decided that she wanted to dispose of one of her framed oil paintings, exceedingly small in size, of a street scene. Trash collection was on a Monday and my father always put the trash barrels out by the street on Sunday night. Since both barrels were full, my mother leaned the little painting against one of the barrels, thinking that was the end of it.

I happened to be tutoring a woman in math who lived nine houses down from ours. When I went to her home for our next scheduled appointment, there was the painting hanging on a wall in her entryway. I was very surprised and asked her about it. She told me she had taken a walk by our house and had seen the painting, liked it, and brought it home.

And now, the story of The Garden.

PART ONE

One rainy September evening, a brown tabby kitten with orange highlights and lime-green eyes shivered and meowed on the front porch railing of an apartment house. Just hours ago, she had crawled out of a shoe box by the side of the road.

Good fortune would find this kitten, however, because one of the apartment dwellers carried her into his small apartment. There he towel-dried her, fed her a large bowl of milk and named her Eve.

The person responsible was a likable, 51 year-old man named Maurice who for the last ten years had managed The Suds and Duds Laundromat in Deerfield, Maine.

At six-feet-two-inches tall, Maurice had been thin all his life. With his abundant long brown hair drawn back in a ponytail, his beard in the awkward beginning stages, and noticeably crooked wire-rimmed glasses, he looked like he'd never left the 1960's. Not what you would call handsome, Maurice was known for his gentle, easy-going disposition.

Once a student at Deerfield Theological Seminary after majoring in Latin at Roosevelt College, Maurice had aspired to become a Congregational minister. But he abruptly changed his mind without explanation in his final year. After graduation, Maurice, who was always an avid reader, managed the Little Bear Bookstore until it burned down, then was the proprietor of a semi-religious bookstore called Salvation. A few customers wandered in occasionally, but most people confused it with the Salvation Army. Unable to continue paying the rent after a few years, he found employment at the local laundromat, The Suds and Duds.

It did not seem to bother Maurice that folks in town thought it odd that a person with such an immense amount of education would manage the laundromat; job status never mattered to him.

And only a handful of people in Deerfield knew that Maurice had not become a minister because his fiancée had broken their engagement shortly before they both graduated from the Seminary. After that, he lost his zest to minister to people.

He never had another serious involvement with a woman, or anyone for that matter, until Eve came his way. Eve was like a breath of fresh air. Caring for her added a spark to Maurice's otherwise humdrum life. He now was buying cat food at the IGA, and had a cat bed and scratching post from the Deerfield Pet Palace. He even acquired the book, *Your Cat, Your Friend*, which gave him tips for enjoying Eve, as well as information about illnesses and behavioral issues. Eve held even more significance to him than his job, which lately had become problematic.

For the past few weeks, a married couple, appearing to be in their fifties and new to the laundromat, loudly argued while washing their laundry. Maurice overheard that the husband had been laid off from the Allen Shoe Factory, and angrily found fault with his wife over such things as brands of laundry detergent and the way she folded their clothes. Each time he offended her, she would criticize him, until it became a shouting match. Although Maurice pitied the couple, he had to warn them that they were disturbing other customers.

Another faithful customer's three undisciplined children, between the ages of five and eight, always accompanied her to The Suds and Duds. In warmer months, they could play in the park across the street, but in the winter they seemed unable to decide which was more pleasurable, pulling vending machine knobs, opening dryer doors before the time ran out, or drawing faces on humid windowpanes. Windowpane pictures were harmless, but Maurice had to draw the line at their other shenanigans.

Being a shy person, Maurice did not like this part of the job, and after a long day at The Suds and Duds, looked forward to returning home to Eve. She seemed happy, but he did worry

that she might miss her previous owner if she'd had one. He never checked the lost pet section in the newspaper, nor did he place a lost cat notice. Even though Maurice felt a twinge of guilt that he might be keeping Eve from some distraught owner, he did not act on it. After all, Eve was the first cat Maurice had ever owned, and he had fallen in love with her.

Eve felt very fortunate that Maurice adopted her and one of the ways that she returned Maurice's love was by greeting him at the door each evening. Scooping Eve into his arms, Maurice would share the details of his day and inquire after hers. Then he would inspect his aquarium and talk to his various goldfish. Each one had a name. Sometimes he would just rock back and forth in his Moosehead rocker and stare at the fish tank, which helped him unwind before starting dinner. His physician had recommended the fish tank at Maurice's last physical, believing that Maurice would enjoy his interaction with the fish and the relaxation benefits. But that was before Maurice found Eve. Now Eve was the object of his affection. She followed him everywhere, even sleeping with her head on his pillow.

After saying goodbye to Eve in the mornings, Maurice walked two miles to work. His route took him through some very prominent neighborhoods. One evening he was walking home as usual, when he spied an oil painting leaning against some trash barrels at the curbside of a stately mansion that he had long admired. He stopped and glanced around to see who was in sight. Not noticing anyone, he quickly picked up the painting to study it further. At first, he thought it was a pastoral scene, but further inspection revealed an enchanting garden.