

Mr. Bradley's Garden

By
Queen of Spades



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A short story by
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Dedicated to:
My grandfather

For his relentless work ethic, his generosity to those around him, and his many life lessons. I'm the person I am because of him.



Queen of Spades

6:30 AM.

The bedroom door creaked open. No blares of an alarm or the talking of a morning announcer could be heard. Mr. Bradley never needed those things. He naturally rose at the same time every day. Eight steps later, he was in the bathroom. The wooden walls just above the bathtub still needed to be tiled. *There just weren't enough hours in a day.* Mr. Bradley would get to it, eventually.

Mr. Bradley turned on the faucet: eighty-five percent hot water and fifteen percent cold water. That was his preferred temperature mix. He unscrewed the blue Noxzema jar top with his right fingers while his left fingers grabbed the fuzzy green washcloth hanging on a nail. Familiarity with modern appliances was not his specialty. The long nails hammered in the walls would do as towel rods.

Soon Mr. Bradley's dark brown face was covered in white cream. He inhaled it and smiled as the eucalyptus mist from the product tickled his nose hairs. He let the Noxzema set for a few minutes before soaking the washcloth and removing it from his face. After doing so, he noticed the prickles of hair jutting from his chin.

“Time to shave.”

He opened up the medicine cabinet and grabbed his razor. He turned the knob at the bottom of the gray razor counterclockwise to open up the top. The blade needed changing. Mr. Bradley removed one from the pack and carefully swapped out the old for the new. Then he used clockwise movements to seal the top. Mr. Bradley also secured a small black bowl, a beige shave brush, and the red and white striped can that held his shaving cream.

About ten minutes later, Mr. Bradley had a smooth face. He was going to take a bath but decided against it. He would wait until after he had completed his work outside.

Mr. Bradley went to the bedroom and proceeded to get dressed. He threw on a white A-line shirt and a light green cotton button-down that had seen better days. Then, he pulled up and fastened his dark denim overalls. He looked around for his boots but just as quickly recalled they were in the living room. Mr. Bradley's oversized straw hat hung on the bedpost. He didn't want his head to get too hot. Plus, he was self-conscious of the center bald spot of his head but wasn't brave enough to shave the rest of his pepper-colored hair.

After pulling a pair of white socks from the chest of drawers, Mr. Bradley made his way to the kitchen. To his surprise, his huge brown ceramic mug was already filled with hot tea. He carefully lifted the mug and sampled a taste. It was perfect—extra sweet just as he liked it! Mr.

Bradley glanced around. He didn't hear the TV so he knew his wife wasn't up yet. The mystery of the tea was solved when he looked out the screen door and saw his granddaughter drawing.

Mr. Bradley sat on the couch and savored all of his tea before putting on his socks and boots. The third step was a bit unsteady as he made his way outside. *I will have to repair that later on today.* Mr. Bradley didn't want his wife or his granddaughter getting hurt.

"G'mornin', Grandpa!"

"G'mornin', Maggie. You want to help out in the garden?"

Maggie was a bit reluctant. The last time she was out there, she accidentally stepped on an ant hill that was in the garden. Her foot hurt for quite a few days. Sensing her thoughts, Mr. Bradley chimed in, "You won't have to wander through the garden with me. You'll just stand on the edge, and I'll pass you the buckets."

Maggie smiled. She could definitely do that.

Mr. Bradley unlocked the utility shed and grabbed four plastic buckets—two white, one green, and one red. He gave the colored ones to Maggie while he carted the white ones. While Maggie waited, she watched her grandpa put on his gloves and wander near the crowder peas. It wasn't long before one of the white buckets was filled. He brought it over to Maggie.

"Sit this next to the bottom of the step. Do that with all of them."

This bucket wasn't extremely heavy, but every so often, Maggie would have to swap between hands while carrying it. The second white bucket also got filled with peas—that time, black-eyed peas. Maggie made the trek again, placing the black-eyed peas on the opposite side of the crowder peas.

"Maggie," Mr. Bradley called. "I'm going to help you with these last two. They are too heavy for you to handle by yourself."

With teamwork, Mr. Bradley and Maggie carted over the remaining two buckets—one overflowing with green bell peppers and another with red tomatoes.

"When your grandma wakes up, let her know I picked some more stuff. Watch that next-to-the-bottom step. It's very loose."

"I know, Grandpa. I usually skip over it."

Maggie grabbed the handkerchief dangling from Mr. Bradley's pocket. She beckoned him to come closer and she wiped the little hints of Noxzema that were still on his face.

He nodded and went back inside to prepare. It was almost time to make his rounds in the neighborhood. But first, he would ask Maggie to fix him some more hot tea.



Once a week during the summer months every year, the neighbors would awaken to a bagged surprise at their doorsteps. There was never a note, but everyone knew who did it. When this practice began, the locals were very appreciative of this gesture. As the years progressed, the neighborhood began to change. The generations that remained were not as grateful and began seeing the delivery of fresh fruits and vegetables as a requirement.

Mr. Bradley's energy started to decline. He was a man who loved being outdoors and took pride in his garden and yard. More often now than not, he couldn't finish mowing the three acres of land in one day. Since he didn't have the stamina to maintain a huge garden, he opted to operate a smaller garden. There weren't as many crops grown; therefore, not as many deliveries.

One day while Maggie was looking at TV, there was a knock at the door. She opened it, and Mrs. Murphy peered at her on the other side of the screen.

"Oh, Maggie, it's you!"

"Who else would it be?" Maggie snapped. She wasn't exactly Mrs. Murphy's biggest fan.

"Is your grandfather in?"

"He's resting. What message would you like me to give him?"

Mrs. Murphy pulled at the latch to the glass door. "Maggie, I'd rather tell him myself. Could you wake him? It's rather important."

Maggie emphatically shook her head. "I told you, Mrs. Murphy. He's RESTING!"

Mr. Bradley's bedroom door opened, and he made his way towards the door. Maggie's voice was unusually loud so he had to check on the commotion. He clamped his hand on Maggie's shoulder.

"What's going on?"

“Grandpa, I told Mrs. Murphy you were asleep, but she insisted on talking to you—”

Mr. Bradley sighed. “Well, I’m here now. Gertrude, may I help you with something?”

“I sure would love some black-eyed peas to go with the greens I’m cooking at the house. You think you can drop some on by?”

Mr. Bradley regarded Mrs. Murphy carefully before replying, “Perhaps a little later. Like my granddaughter said, I was resting.”

“You’re usually so good about these things. The peas aren’t going to do any good later since the greens are on the fire as we speak.”

Maggie looked from her grandfather to the demanding Mrs. Murphy.

“Fine,” Mr. Bradley conceded.

Mrs. Murphy smiled in pleasure, got in her car and drove back to her house, which was within walking distance. Mr. Bradley sat on the couch. Maggie looked at him in disbelief.

“How could you let her bully you like that? She went to the grocery store and bought the greens. That beggin’ ol’ bitty could have gotten the black-eyed peas there, too!”

Mr. Bradley pointed to the half-filled bag in the adjoining room. “Take those to her, Maggie.”

“Grandpa, didn’t you hear what I just said? Those special deliveries aren’t a right, yet everyone in this neighborhood behaves like they’re entitled!”

Mr. Bradley gave Maggie a stern look. That was her cue to stop talking. As he made his way back to the bedroom, Maggie shoved the bag under her arm, rushed out the door and stomped up the street.

Less than five minutes later, she had made it to Mrs. Murphy’s brick home. The dog rushed out and started barking. As soon as he saw Maggie, the dog stopped barking and his tail joyfully wagged.

“How could you have such an old crone for a master?” Maggie crooned as she ruffled the top of the dog’s hair. The brushing of his wet nose and tongue against her palm made her chuckle for the moment.

Initially, Maggie was just going to mimic her grandpa’s actions—leave the bag and walk away. But she just couldn’t let Mrs. Murphy off the hook *that* easily.

Her knuckles rapped on the glass door. Mrs. Murphy was there instantly and flung it open. Maggie dumped the black-eyed peas out of the brown sack. The dirt from the outer shells coated Mrs. Murphy's pink fuzzy slippers. Maggie ran back to her grandfather's house while Mrs. Murphy cursed and raised her fist in anger.



Mr. Bradley had always been a fighter. He had gotten his diagnosis a while back. When it was initially sighted, the doctors convinced him all he needed was to get the operation. The operation had been a success, and all of Mr. Bradley's activities resumed. Everything was back to normal. *Or so he thought.*

When his activity level started decreasing rapidly, Mr. Bradley had no choice but to return to the hospital. The very ailment that all believed was originally defeated was back, stronger than ever. Because of his advanced age, it was too risky to get on any type of radiation. His wife agreed. All she wanted was her husband to be at home—to be around those who loved him.

As the deliveries slowly became nonexistent, the number of visitors and calls dried up as well. Mr. Bradley never expressed it, but Maggie could tell it bothered him. There was a sadness that lingered in his eyes. His moments of laughter dwindled, and soon Maggie couldn't pinpoint the last time he had exhibited any expressions of joy.



“Don't give me my flowers when I am dead. Give them to me when I'm alive and can appreciate them.”

Maggie's aunt (her grandpa's sister) had always said that from time to time. The truth of that all came crashing down the day of Mr. Bradley's funeral. So many people far and wide had come to pay their respects. The church was jam-packed.

Maggie couldn't understand. The hypocrisy of the scene sickened her. Her fury and sadness wrestled for position throughout her body. *How could they all be here when none of them even stopped by the house to check on him, Grandma, or even offer a helping hand with the yard and garden he treasured so much in his prime?*

Maggie's body was stiff as each person embraced her. The “sorry for your loss” muttered from each person sounded garbled. Everything became deafening. She excused herself and stumbled

to the bathroom. Maggie locked herself in one of the bathroom stalls. Several dry retches transformed into body shaking sobs. *How could God snatch such a wonderful person like Grandpa but permit these heathens to still walk the earth?*

Although it felt like hours, it was only minutes Maggie took to compose herself. Maggie walked back into the church. Everyone was standing up. It was time to journey to the cemetery. Maggie resumed the position next to Mrs. Bradley. Although the grip on her hand was snug, Maggie didn't have the heart to tell her grandma to loosen it.

After the burial, Maggie and Mrs. Bradley were asked if they wanted to go back to the church. Maggie ordered the driver to return to the house. Mrs. Bradley grumbled that she wanted to get out of her thigh highs. But Maggie knew the truth—she was experiencing a bit of social overload and just wanted to be left alone. While Mrs. Bradley sat on her husband's favorite couch, Maggie sat curled in his favorite lawn chair under the carport. Her last coherent thought before she drifted off to sleep was of the tea she used to make her grandpa.

When Maggie woke up hours later, she rubbed her eyes. Perhaps she was dreaming. Maggie closed her eyes, and then slowly opened them. The same images were still in front of her: rows and rows of bagged fruits and vegetables—all of them unmarked.

The End

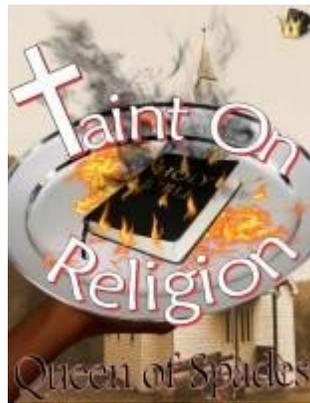


Dear Reader,

Thank you for downloading Mr. Bradley's Garden. This short story was one of my favorites to write. It was loosely based on my late grandfather. Plus it goes to show that I'll always be a Southern girl at heart.

Please leave a review and share your thoughts on this story, and if you enjoyed it, please check out my other works as well.

Queen of Spades



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