

Garden of the Missing

A Short Story by Frances Itani

It was as they were driving in, Alan at the wheel, that she felt it. Felt it the length of the dirt road that led to the Inn, felt it as they rounded the curve and stood outside the car and looked at timbers that had held the place upright for four hundred years.

The children were silent in the back seat. She turned to look at them as she followed Alan inside, and knew they had seen and caught the uncertainty on her face. But what she felt was vague, indescribable — not something she could tell Alan, not something she could tell the children.

All day they had visited the D-Day landing beaches: the children hoisting themselves in and out of German bunkers buried in the heart of cliffs near Pointe du Hoc, the films at Arranches, the immersion into the events of war, the loss of the sense of their present selves, the *awe*. She had been sucked back. Felt herself pulled into a vortex deeper than imagination, a vortex as immediate as it was past, and inescapable.

The clerk was leaning into the counter. Alan began to argue softly. A problem with registration — but they *had* phoned ahead. The family suite *had* been reserved in his name. No, he did not want the modern units in the garden annex. No, no. The clerk shrugged, bit at her bottom lip. "The family suite is no longer available." There was nothing more to say. Her shrug told them that in Normandy, in the month of July, one did well to have two rooms at all.

They had come upon the description of "Les Quatres Fourchettes" in the guide book: sixteenth-century Inn half-hour from the coast, two star dining room, timbered walls, very old, old even by French measure.

It was apparent that the room in which they now stood had shifted and altered throughout its centuries: stairwells added, walls deleted. Maddie sensed rather than

saw remnants of heavy beams, low ceilings. Still, there was something else. She watched as Alan filled out a blue card, accepted keys on two rings. Yes. An outline, an image, something she knew but could not bring into focus. It could almost be imagined as sound, such as the Aurora Chorus she had heard while watching an awesome fluttering of Northern Lights one summer by the sea. She had been drawn into the spectacular play across the horizon and only when it was over did she realize that music had somehow penetrated, had entered her. Since then, there were times when she had tried to recall, describe, but she found that the details were elusive. A subterranean awareness. Perhaps. She thought about it as they stepped out of the Inn, and as they drove the car round to the annex, and as Jeff and Carrie were carrying luggage into their own tiny cabin. For it was here as well as inside the main Inn. A murmur of many voices, an absorption taking place without her conscious consent; an unnamed act or event that seemed suddenly to be altering her deepest self, but in a most natural way.

There were several cabins throughout the back gardens; she hardly noticed any but their own — a double, with separate entrance and two steps descending to a path which linked to the children's. The children had not been left on their own before. Should they be given their own key? Alan was checking their windows, thinking it over; Maddie had not the energy to agree or disagree. She was ragged-edged, still drenched in the *immediacy* of a war during which she had been safely born forty years before on the opposite side of the ocean.

At mid-day they had spread out a picnic on a stone wall overlooking a last remnant of a Mulberry Harbour. And after that, with no planning whatever, found themselves driving through the entrance gates

of a War Cemetery. They left the car and began to walk — up and down row upon row of crosses and Stars of David carved from Carrara marble. Nine thousand three hundred and eighty-six, buried in that place. In every direction a linear arrangement of dead; and beyond, battlefield, as far as the mind could envision. Alan, as if reading her mind, said, "It's as if all of France were covered with dying and wounded, isn't it? Every meter of every path and field fought for in hand-to-hand combat." And she felt a gut-wrenching pain which sent her stumbling forward. She wandered alone then, reading names and ranks and ages, and rejoined the others at a section that was separate, and from which they could look down the steep and quiet cliffs, down and out, far out over the navy-grey waves.

Alan was reading aloud to the children from an information sheet: *the main avenue of graves, he read, the chapel and the two flagstaffs, are laid out as arms of the Cross. To the north is the beach and the English Channel. To the north-east, the semi-circular 'Garden of the Missing.'*

It was where Maddie was now standing. Carrie and Jeff and Alan were talking, their voices saying: What's *in* the Garden of the Missing?

Bones, soldiers' bones.

No, no, it's a memorial, consecrated ground.

The ones who were lost? Or buried at sea?

Or never identified. The ones who were not found. The ones who were never really laid to rest.

It was where she was now standing. *The Garden of the Missing*. Could such a place be thought of, or imagined?

She tried to concentrate on what Alan was saying. He was outside the cabin now and had placed a foot in the dampness of garden beneath the large, hinged window

of the children's room. He was demonstrating how easy it would be to enter; a single step and he could be inside. If the children have a bad dream, he was saying, if fire breaks out in the night, as long as they leave their window open we could reach them in an instant. So. It was settled. The children could lock their door and keep the key.

But Maddie knew Alan better than this. He was one to check and re-check, look in on them at night, make sure they were safe. She looked at the children's faces. They were seven and eight, after all.

"But once we say good night, Alan, you won't go in to check them again? If they wake to see you climbing through the window, they'll be terrified."

"We'll be grown up," Carrie said emphatically. "If we need you, we can pound on the wall."

And what Maddie needed, she knew, was to leave for a different part of the coast. A sea where she could lie on the sand, empty the mind, suck in the salt air. Let the wind blow through the presence of war that would cling to her until she drove away from Normandy and on to an other place.

And that was it exactly: the *presence* of war. She was surrounded; she was filled with it.

Maddie struggles to wake. A film seems to be stretched across her throat, a membrane; words cannot be spoken. But it is more than that; it is sound. Sound that

drifts and surrounds. Sound that rocks and soothes. She gives up struggling, allows herself to fall back. She remembers the Aurora Chorus, curtains of light lifting and falling across a stage that is horizon, the penetration and resonance of music, all the world's voices, a depth of enchantment beyond reckoning. She is wakened, not by someone, but by the knowledge that someone is there.

Two men are standing by the bed. Alan is asleep. The men are youthful; one is standing beside her and looks down at her face, the other is at the end of the bed on Alan's side. Maddie is filled with compassion, but why? They do not speak; they want only her help. But she cannot help. She realizes that she is fully awake and she sits upright and hears herself shouting, knowing while she is uttering the first word that she is driving them away. She turns on the lamp at the side of her bed. A pink light glows beneath the tiny shade. Alan stirs, reaches for her, settles again into deep sleep.

Her heart pounds and pounds. What has she seen? What do they want? Again, she is filled with compassion for the two men. *Children*. She knows now it is something to do with their children. Looking for their children, perhaps. And how does she know? She just knows. The two men have been looking for their children, for a very long time.

In the morning, when Maddie awoke, she saw that the pink lamp had been left

on. She was quiet, thoughtful. There was something she must try to recall — but what? Was it that she had been so very tired the night before? While Alan was shaving she went outside and rapped on the children's door, and they let her in as they dressed and prepared their luggage for departure. They were to have breakfast in the dining room of the main Inn, a windowed room that at one time could have been an expansive summer porch.

And it was there, inside "Les Quatres Fourchettes," when they were halfway through their meal, that Carrie suddenly asked her father: "Why did you come into our cabin last night and kiss only Jeff, and not me?"

"Alan — " said Maddie, *and remembered*. "Alan, you did not, surely, climb through the window, after all."

"No," said Alan, looking at her queerly, "I did not."

"You were there, Dad," said Carrie slowly. "You were there when I woke up." She looked at Maddie's face and back to Alan's. "You were standing in the dark, looking at Jeff. And you pulled the covers back just a little and bent down...and kissed him on the forehead."

And yes, Maddie knows. And in her own way, Carrie knows. Something they will never be able to do anything about, or explain. Something that will never matter to the others. Something that will always be a part of them, when they drive away from Normandy.

