

Waltz Through Wilting Gardens

by Ava Linda Feliz-Sutter

Annie felt guilty for being sad that day. For months, they had dreamt of this place, drained the last of their savings, and plotted every mile with such care. The forest sprawling before them had already surpassed every hope and expectation—its leafage lusher, its evergreen glow more resplendent, its silence crisper than either had imagined. The late-May sun sifted through umbrellas of olive foliage as fir branches fanned skyward in concentric whorls, their lowest needles pricking her arm like a sharp kiss. Mammoth trunks, silvered nearly white, towered into the canopy, and in the deep afternoon shadows beneath them, dew twinkled as though twilight had already fallen. With each step, their soles sank soundlessly into endless cushions of moss. Tender yet tremendous, ancient yet vigorous, the forest seemed to exist somewhere beyond—borne into the present and worn back into the past by the same ageless winds.

Anil walked slightly ahead, glancing back as if her silence had made a sound. He had always seemed to sense the sorrow beneath it, though neither knew how to plumb its depths. However spectacular the landscape, however close its beauty came to soothing her deepest wounds, some faint wistfulness remained beyond its reach. They wandered through the woodlands as though returning to a childhood lost eternities ago, though no wide-eyed, wondrous dream could have conjured a world as sublime as the woodland realm before them. Within hours, they had given their hearts to it.

The river's babble gushed into the roar of a waterfall just ahead. They followed the sound to its basin, exchanged a brief glance, then turned together toward the leaping torrents.

"Annie?"

She looked up and, for an instant, felt herself a little girl again, sheltered by his height. He reminded her of the trees—not in force but grace, in the strange way something so tall could make her feel so safe.

"You know what I just realized?"

She said nothing, only waited.

"I don't think I ever knew how much I loved waterfalls." Anil turned back toward the cascade. "The way the water throws itself over the edge again and again, as though intoxicated by its own wild rush." He glanced at her, grinning now. "I think even the ocean seems dull beside it."

Anil reached for her hand, but she had already caught his.

"The ocean?" Her smile widened as she braided her fingers through his. "I like waterfalls, but I'd choose the river any day. I could curl up on its bed and listen to that murmur forever."

Forever. The word immediately conjured an image she did not want: herself alone on the riverbank, listening to the same water, Anil's place beside her empty. She tightened her grip on his hand. Couldn't she simply remain in this moment without imagining its end? Couldn't she gather the fine rays of sun, trail her fingers through their glow, and let the warmth of his hand keep her there—just this once?

Annie had always thirsted for that warmth—hungered to sink into the harmony that flowed so effortlessly through Anil. Only later would she understand how often he had tried—in each lingering look, reassurance, and squeeze of her hand—to give her some sliver of that calm. She closed her eyes and tried to hold the moment still, but already it was slipping from her. Before long, mist pierced the leaves, and every opening revealed the same overcast sky—mountains upon mountains of cloud thickening into a charcoaled nebula of gray. As the light dimmed, she felt herself sinking with it, drawn into a darkness she could neither name nor escape.

Anil bent to kiss the crown of her head.

“Please, Annie,” he murmured. “Don’t go so far ahead. I’m happy here with you.”

They ventured deeper into the forest, hands still clasped, talking their way from old wounds to old lovers—his first heartbreak, the man she had once thought she would marry—and then, somehow, into language, memory, and all that words could never contain. Now and then, the conversation fell quiet: one of them had said something the other could not answer, or perhaps Annie had paused to maneuver her way across a slick stretch of mud. But the silence never lasted. Before long, Anil would begin humming one of their favorite songs, prancing a few steps ahead until Annie caught the tune and joined him, lyrics and memories answering one another.

Somewhere between one song and the next, the horizon darkened. Evening thickened into fog, swallowing the path ahead as the unease in Annie’s chest sank with it. As they neared the river they should have crossed hours ago, the first drop of rain struck her arm like a sting. She startled, one boot slipping beneath her as she lurched toward the mud—barely catching herself against a low branch. Before she could regain her footing, Anil was beside her, one hand bracing her elbow, the other steady against her back.

“Annie—are you hurt?”

“I’m fine.” She smiled too quickly, though the scrape across her palm had begun to burn.

Anil pulled her upright. The moment her fingers closed around his, a raindrop struck her cheek—then another and another, until the canopy rattled beneath the downpour. Her smile vanished. Anil was still watching her.

“What?” The word came sharper than she intended.

“Nothing. I was just—”

She pulled her hand free. “Why do you always look at me like that?”

“Like what? I was making sure you were okay.”

“Okay?” Her own sharpness startled her. “When am I ever okay?”

“Annie, I didn’t mean—”

“You don’t really want to know. You want me to say I’m fine so you can stop worrying. So we can be okay.” She shook her head. “But I can’t. I can’t even give you that. I only make everything worse. Look—I’m doing it now.”

“God, Anil, why did you have to ask?” The first tear disappeared into the rain. “Why is it raining? Why does it always rain here? Why can’t we lie in the sun, sleep in the warmth, without all of this hanging over us? Why can’t we just be happy? We should be happy—”

Her voice broke. “These are supposed to be our happy memories. This is supposed to be our happy place.”

Anil wiped the rain from his eyes. His mouth opened, then closed. Instead, he moved closer, slowly enough to let her turn away, and rested a hand on her shoulder. She trembled beneath his palm but did not pull back. For the moment, that was enough. Rain poured through the leaves around them. Neither moved. Then Annie flinched beneath his hand.

“Stop—please.” She twisted away, and his hand slipped from her shoulder. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Don’t touch me like that. Don’t look at me like I’m still—” She broke off. “Please. It hurts.”

“Annie, I’m not pretending—”

“But you are. We both are.” She shook her head, wet strands clinging to her cheeks. “We can’t keep wandering through this place as if nothing has changed.”

“I know things have changed.”

“Then why do you still look at me and see her?” Her voice broke. “I don’t even remember who she was. Some days, I can barely remember the night we met.”

Anil fell silent. For the first time, the pain in him did not retreat before she could see it.

“I remember,” he said at last. He looked past her, into the rain. “You sounded so worried when you called to tell me you’d missed the train. After we hung up, I kept hearing your voice. For four hours, I stood there holding on to it, replaying it until I almost forgot the cold.”

He paused.

“It was gray that night too. It was always gray in the city.” He almost laughed. “Then you came around the corner in that long black skirt, billowing in the winter wind, and for a moment, it was all I could see.”

Before Annie could ask him to stop, the rain behind Anil began to glow. The storm-dark sky melted into the warm yellow light of the cramped Thai restaurant tucked into a corner storefront on Fourth Street. Eye contact had always been difficult for Annie, but by her second glass of sangria, the evening had somehow skipped ahead in time. Before she could make sense of what she felt, they were already speaking with the entwined tenderness of two people months deep in love.

At the next table, another couple had dawdled over the same half-full pitcher of sangria all night. The woman rose, still laughing, and disappeared down the hallway toward the bathroom. The man watched until she rounded the corner, then turned toward Annie and Anil and leaned in.

“Can I tell you two a secret?” He glanced once more toward the hallway, barely containing his grin.

Annie and Anil exchanged a look, then leaned closer together. The man lowered his voice beneath the clatter of dishes.

“I’m going to propose to her tonight.”

“Tonight?” Annie whispered, smiling.

The man nodded. His grin held, though his fingers trembled beneath the corner of his napkin.

“I’m terrified.”

Anil joined her smile, and together they congratulated him in warm, giddy whispers. When Annie turned back, he was already looking at her. The same gleam shone in both their eyes, tinged with something bittersweet.

The memory ended there. Annie could no longer remember the woman returning to the table, whether the man ever found the courage to ask, or what she answered if he did. All that remained was the look she and Anil had shared. As the restaurant’s dim lights trickled back into the rain, Annie searched his face, wondering whether he, too, had just returned from that night.

“I can’t hear any more of it.” Annie’s voice scarcely carried above the rain. “It’s been almost two years, Anil. How can you talk about that night as though nothing came after it?”

“Almost two years?” He waited, as though she might correct herself. When she didn’t, his voice softened.

“Annie, my love, we haven’t even known each other for a year.”

“Please—stop.” Her voice cracked. “Why are you pretending not to remember?”

“I’m not pretending.”

“Then why would you say that?”

“Because we met in February. It’s May.”

Anil stepped closer.

“Look around. It’s still spring. The flowers are only just beginning to bloom. See?”

Annie looked above her, beneath her, between the trees. There were no flowers. Only gray. Her knees folded, and she sank into the moss.

"I'm sorry." She looked from Anil to the trees, then down at the earth beneath her hands, as though apologizing to all three. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I—" Her fingers closed around the moss. "I don't know what I've done."

The tentative rain tore open all at once. Thunder rolled through the canopy, water coursed down the bark, and the forest's lull contorted into an inhuman scream. Through the clamor, Annie thought she heard her own voice carried on the wind from somewhere beyond sight. Then Anil's—fainter, farther still. She wheeled toward him, but he had vanished behind the ash spiraling upward from the sodden earth. Annie staggered back against a tree. The voices drew nearer until they seemed to sound from within the wood itself. Rivulets raced down the trunk like waves breaking over driftwood, blurring its grain and bleeding blackness into the night. She wished the water might seep into her memory as well, welling within its rifts until they closed.

"Anil?" Annie called.

She waited.

"Anil—answer me. Where are you?" Her voice broke as she reached blindly through the darkness. "Please—come back. I'm sorry."

The only body her reach met was that of a tree trunk—its rough bark softening beneath her palm into sea-soaked wood. Light flickered over yellowing strands of moss that now hung from the branches like kelp. A dim horizon inched closer, revealing a forest drowned and desiccated all at once. Annie blinked and found herself seated atop a fallen cedar half-buried in sand. She spun around. There was no forest, no midafternoon—only an empty beach late at night.

A hand brushed the back of her arm. She turned. Anil sat beside her on the same damp log, staring into the distance as though the storm had passed through Annie alone.

"Anil..." Annie clutched his sleeve. "I'm sorry about earlier. Everything returned at once, and I couldn't—" She swallowed, her teeth beginning to chatter. "I watched it all fall apart again."

Without a word, Anil gathered her against him. He held her there in silence. When he finally spoke, he was looking past her, into the sea.

"There's something about the ocean at night," he said. "It frightens me."

He watched the water as though the words he needed lay somewhere beyond the horizon.

"It isn't like the forest. The forest closes around you. This has no edge, no end." His eyes moved slowly across the black horizon. "It just keeps opening... opening and opening still."

Annie lifted her face toward the white iris of the moon. A long while passed before she could bring herself to ask.

"Anil?"

"Yes?"

"Is it only the ocean?"

"What do you mean?"

"The fear." She hesitated. "Is that all it is?"

Her hand rose to the hollow beneath her ribs.

"Something feels strange. Not exactly wrong, just..." She searched for another word and found none. "Just strange. Like something important has already happened—something bad—and we don't know it yet." Annie drew a long breath, curling her fingers against her ribs as if she might reach through the bone and find the feeling lodged there.

"I'm starting to feel crazy," she said. "My stomach keeps sinking, and every time I think it can't go any lower, it drops again. Like something horrible is about to happen—something I should already know—and every second I don't, I'm losing another chance to stop it."

Anil stayed quiet.

"Are we going to be okay?"

He moved closer. "Of course we are." Annie looked at him, unconvinced.

"You're scared. You've been scared for a while." His voice softened. "And being here—the water, the dark, all of this—maybe it's bringing back things you haven't let yourself feel."

"But what if it isn't only fear?"

Anil hesitated. "I don't know." His fingers found hers in the dark. "But even if we lose sight of each other for a while, we'll find our way back."

For a moment, even Anil seemed startled by his own certainty. Then he bent and kissed her temple.

"Even when we make each other miserable, we stay. We sit beside each other for hours without saying a word." He paused. "Annie, I love you. We've gone days—weeks—without speaking, and I still catch myself saying it to you in my sleep."

Anil turned toward her fully.

"When I imagine dying, I never see when or where or how. I don't see what comes after. I only see pieces of us—blurred, almost too far away to make out. But in every one, we're both here." His voice lowered. "We're together. We're home."

Annie could hardly look back at him. For a moment, she wondered whether the weight that had been sinking through her all night was not fear at all, but desire—the terrible weight of wanting something badly enough to become afraid of losing it. She had never wanted anything more than what he had just given her. She had never feared death until she imagined it without him beside her.

"Annie—what's wrong?" Anil's voice drew her back. "Why are you shivering?" Anil gave a puzzled grin. "How are you even cold? It's almost July."

"July?" The word felt warmer than the night around them. The air seemed scarcely above freezing. When she reached for the date, she found no recollection of it.

Anil slipped off his jacket and draped it around her shoulders. The next frigid gust bit into her cheeks, and she pulled the jacket tighter. The unease hollowing her stomach rose into her throat and closed around her voice. She could not explain how the moment seemed already to be receding from her, though she was still inside it. Wave after wave broke and re-formed in the darkness, and still not a single word came.

When she looked up again, the storm had torn the sky in two. Wind lashed across the beach, flinging sand and splintered wood as the sea drove itself deeper into the forest's edge. Annie clung to Anil, his arms the only proof that he remained beside her while the world convulsed around them. When the tempest thinned to a drizzle, she did not let go. Several breaths passed before she realized that both sea and forest had vanished entirely.

In their place, Annie and Anil stood in an alpine meadow floating above veils of cloud, range after range of mountains dissolving into silvery-blue haze. The fury of the sea had dissipated, but the alpine air cut just as sharply. Annie's dread remained, sharpened by the vertigo of the heights. At the cliff's edge, Anil stood untroubled, face lifted to the wind, already lost somewhere beyond the horizon.

"This reminds me of your dream," she called, leaning into the wind as she came to stand beside him.

“My dream?” He turned toward her, one hand raised against the gusts. A buoyant smile swept across his face. “Which one?”

“The waterfall. The one you’re always talking about.”

His brow furrowed, though the smile remained. “Annie, I honestly have no idea what you mean.”

“Of course you do.” She nudged his arm, still half-convinced he was teasing. “You were beneath a waterfall, climbing through the spray and over all that slick rock until you reached a cliff like this. You stood at the edge and looked out over everything—the falls, the valley, all that endless space.”

Anil followed her gaze toward the panorama below but said nothing.

“Remember?”

He considered it a moment longer. “Suppose you’re right. What happens next?”

“Well, that’s the thing—nothing, really.” She hesitated. “You always said it wasn’t about what happened. It was the feeling.”

The playfulness left her voice. “Anil, you’ve told me this so many times. How can you not remember?”

“I believe you,” he said, gentler now. “I just can’t find it.”

“None of it?”

He shook his head. “But you can.” His smile softened. “Tell me.”

Annie took a deep breath and closed her eyes, searching for the cadence of his late-night retellings, each more vivid than the last.

“It was the cold,” she began. “You swore you’d never felt anything like it—sharp, dry, almost piercing. The wind seemed to have no direction. One moment, everything was still; the next, it struck from every side before you knew it was coming.”

She opened her eyes and held his gaze.

“You said that was what you loved most—the fact that you could never brace for it. Something in the cold felt immense—absolute. You couldn’t look away.” Her fingers tightened around his sleeve.

“That was when you began to love the cold—why you’ve been obsessed with it ever since.”

She paused, searching him for some sign of recognition. When none came, she pressed on.

“Like Multnomah that November. Everyone else was shivering, hurrying back to their cars, and you just stood in the freezing spray. Perfectly still.” She almost smiled. “I couldn’t stop watching you. I asked what you were feeling, but you only smiled. It was as if you had slipped into some hidden psychic realm—as though the wind and cold were speaking in a language only you understood.”

He listened without interrupting. “I still can’t place it,” he said at last. “Not one detail.” He turned back toward the horizon. “But listening to you, I can understand why I loved it.”

Another gust swept the hair from his forehead.

“Doesn’t this feel like it? As though the wind has been traveling forever to reach us, carrying something from beyond these mountains?”

“Maybe.” Annie looked out over the valley. “It feels impossibly far away and close at once.” Her fingers slackened around his sleeve. “But it was your dream, Anil. How can I be the one remembering it?”

“I still don’t understand.”

“Then stop trying for a moment.” Anil took her hand. “Close your eyes. Really feel it—the bite of the cold, every shiver, every gust that nearly knocks you over.”

She saw herself waltzing from tree to tree through every season, then sitting beside him on the forest floor, rhapsodizing about evergreens and the silken drift of mist while he listened with that same

unhurried attention. She watched their love deepen, darken, then slowly recede. Still, they returned again and again, as though the forest alone could resuscitate what they had lost.

When Annie opened her eyes, Anil remained at the precipice. Though he had not moved, he seemed already farther away.

“Well?” She stepped closer, her voice hushed by the wind. “What are you thinking about now?”

He did not answer until she rested her head against his shoulder. Only then did he seem to return to her.

“It’s strange.”

“What is?”

“I still can’t see the dream—not when it happened, not where. Nothing.”

Annie lowered her head, her expression turning serious. “Then why do you believe me?”

“Because something in me recognizes it, even if my memory doesn’t.” He turned toward the valley. “Not the details. Only the feeling. I can’t see it, but I feel it in every gust—in every surge and recoil of the wind. I keep trying to piece the dream together from this place, from today...” He paused. “But perhaps this is how it returns.”

He laughed softly. “Listen to me. I’m beginning to sound like you.”

Annie smiled, then shivered.

“And you?” he asked. “Do you understand it now?”

“I’d like to.” She paused. “I always thought standing here would be enough.” She tightened her grip on his hand and closed her eyes as the last cold gusts of the storm swept across the ridge.

They descended from the ridge through valley and forest, hands still clasped—their only tether from one realm to the next. Anil remained buoyant well into the night. Beside him, Annie felt a solace she had not known in years. Neither knew the night would be his last.

At 5:46 a.m., a doctor entered the waiting room. Annie knew what he had come to say before the first low, careful words left his mouth. She had never known exactly how it would happen, but for years she had imagined this day coming—had tried, in a hundred different ways, to imagine what it would do to her when it did. None of them came close. The scream that tore from her sounded almost inhuman. Afterward, she could not remember the sound of her own voice.

She drove six hours through relentless rain, searching for some sliver of meaning and finding none. Their first night and his final hours replayed as she fought the urge to sink beneath the ocean and never resurface. Instead, she packed what she could carry and boarded the next flight three thousand miles home, desperate to banish the memories, silence the flashbacks, begin again. Within months, she promised herself, she would wake into another life, and this one would seem impossible—a nightmare she once mistook for reality.

For nearly three years, Annie hid from her grief. It terrified her—its sudden ambushes, its merciless dreams, its power to swallow entire hours without warning. She cried herself to sleep each night and woke already afraid of what the day might bring back. No matter how fiercely she tried to forget him—his soft voice, the shelter of his height—the forest kept returning with him. The first year, she buried every memory she could; the second, she built her days around keeping them buried. By the third, the hollow of his absence had widened beyond anything she could contain. At last, in late May, Annie returned to the peninsula alone.

As she steps off the plane, Annie braces for the rage she has spent years expecting to rise within her—but it never comes. When she enters the forest, the warm weave of leaf and earth gathers her in, and for the first time in years, she allows herself to be held.

That night, beneath the pallid wash of moonlight, Annie returns to the beach and makes herself face the sea. The tears come, but this time they do not carry her under. Along the ridge, cold wind scours her face, drying the salt from her cheeks. She draws the cold deep into her lungs until her head swims, and for one bright, breathless moment, life passes through her again.

“Well... what about now?”

Annie does not turn.

“Annie.” The voice comes again, nearer this time. “The cold, the wind—does it feel different?”

Annie closes her eyes. At the next gust, the fine hairs along her arms lift. The wind moves around her, through her, within her, until she can no longer tell where her body ends and the air begins. She feels herself thinning, almost translucent, drawn outward into the night. A wisp of mist threads through her, stitching her to his voice, the stars, the trees and moss, the sea and darkness, until every seam between them disappears.

“The place hasn’t changed,” he says. “The wind is just as cold.”

He waits.

“Do you understand it now?”

An ecstatic smile breaks across her face. Bright and buoyant, she turns and gathers him into her arms. No words pass between them. Hand in hand, they descend the slope, gliding along leaf-strewn paths and weaving from tree to tree. Near the forest’s edge, Anil’s silhouette begins to wane, thinning into mist and light until his hand grows weightless in hers. When at last it disappears, Annie does not claw after him. Later that week, Annie returns home only long enough to pack her bags and say goodbye. One final time, she moves three thousand miles across the continent.

In the years that follow, Annie returns to the forest again and again. Her life still tilts between green and gray, riverbed and cataract, hope and sorrow. In sun and rain, warmth and frost, she follows familiar paths through old groves and wild hinterlands, searching until she knows the peninsula in every weather. Days blur into dreams, memories into moments, beginnings into endings, until she can no longer remember what she first hoped to find—or why she began searching. She knows only that somewhere within that impenetrable maze, she found it. In time, Annie settles on a modest plot of land in the heart of the peninsula and, with her own hands, builds their home. To this day, she and Anil wander the surrounding woodlands, waltzing through the wilting gardens of a forest without end.