

Travellers' Tales from Possible: Part Two

The Garden of the Commons

(as told to Starhawk)

May, 2004

Our story so far: Alice Stickly, a hardbitten science writer for the New York Times, has fallen into an alternate reality on her way to cover a biotech conference in San Francisco. Desperate to get back to her highly competitive job, her ailing mother, and her fiance, she is searching for the mysterious Wizards' Collective, aided by her hostess Mercedes. They begin at The Garden of the Commons.

I had arrived in the dark, but now as Mercedes and I headed down her street, I could see more clearly what kind of place I had come to. I felt oddly dislocated, as if something were missing, and finally I realized what it was--the comforting hum of traffic and the familiar dull tang of their fumes. I can't say the streets were silent--bicycles whirred by us in a menacing fashion, pedestrians' feet clomp clomped and their voices echoed. But the little golf-cart-sized vehicles that darted here and there made no sound at all, as if they were designed to sneak up on you. The air was obnoxiously clear. My New York lungs rejected it, and I began to cough.

"Have one of my homemade horehound honey drops," Mercedes said, handing me a candy. It tasted vile but it did soothe my throat.

Dooryard gardens lined the streets, planted in wine barrels, plastic tubs, and what appeared to be old bathtubs transformed with mosaics. Images of frogs predominated on our street, changing to hummingbirds on the next block. There were bright murals on almost every blank wall, so many that it took me quite a while to realize there was no actual advertising whatsoever. Even the streets were painted with bright mandalas in intersections. We rounded the corner, and entered a big garden that took up most of a block. The north edge was planted in redwood clumps, curving around the sides to form a bowl that trapped sunlight. In front of them were madrones and tanoaks and other natives, fringed with wild lilac, elderberry, huckleberries, filberts, raspberries, thimbleberries and salal. Mercedes proudly identified the ones I didn't know. Bordering the wild zone were some large, graceful fruit trees, apples and plums and cherries, and in front of them were semi-dwarf pears and peaches. The fruit zone was delineated by a double row of espaliered apples, with an arbor above supporting grapevines and a glorious blossoming of climbing roses, white and pink and red. Little groupings of sculpted benches were inset under the arbor, where people sat deep in conversation or playing chess on a mosaic board inset into a table. A cluster of geodesic greenhouses stood nearby, and I could see people inside watering and puttering.

That still left plenty of sunlight. In the brightest corner, children were playing with a water pump that splashed into a sand pit where toddlers made mud pies. Their elders seemed to have kept their fascination with that material, as around the playground were benches made of the stuff and adorned with mosaic tiles. Giant mud dinosaurs reared above a small forest of tree ferns, and children climbed the steps inset in their legs and slid down their backs.

In another corner stood a small stand, made of what appeared to be sculpted clay and straw, with a mosaic surface, faucets that dispensed cold or hot water, a row of mugs hanging on pegs, and mason jars full of teabags. Beside it, a wooden cabinet with glass doors, painted with the legend "Community Book Exchange." It was filled with paperbacks and magazines. On its back was a large bulletin board, and I was interested in the range of notices posted. "Community Garden Day," "Come plant the Maize Maze!" "Neighborhood Assembly Meeting," "Mosaic Magic Workshop," "Summer Solstice Celebration," and "Cob Building Workshop," "Lost Grey Cat!" "Spanish Conversation Potluck," "Belly Dance Cabaret," "Food Co-op Workday."

In the center was a large plaza of flagstones with thyme and chamomile growing between the cracks, where vendors had set up small booths or displayed wares on blankets. A sign said, "Free Market" and I was happy to see that capitalism was still alive and thriving here, until I noticed that beneath it, in parentheses, the legend "Really, Really Free Market." There were no prices marked on any of the goods, and as we walked by, a smiling young man offered us a basket of plums.

"Don't tell me," I said to Mercedes. "By 'free market,' you can't mean..."

"Everything is free," she assured me.

"But Mercedes, that's...that's impossible! People can't live like that! No society can survive. It's...unrealistic. It's just wrong!"

"Welcome to Possible," she smiled at me. ""Seriously, we do have shops and stores that take our local currency, but once a week, we hold a Really, Really Free Market. Everyone brings something to share, something they no longer need that's still nice, abundance from the garden, artwork they want to give away, whatever represents a surplus. Then we redistribute it."

"Don't you people have to work for a living?"

"Of course. Everybody works--everybody wants to make their contribution to the community, and be appreciated and respected for it. It's a basic human drive, you know--maybe even more basic than sex. We spend a lot of time growing food, and building things and fixing things, and taking care of the sick and the old people, and teaching the children. I welcome visitors, like you, and take care of them, and I cook for parties and gatherings and our neighborhood restaurant. But probably my most important work is making tinctures and herbal medicines from the plants we grow. I'm a trained herbalist. We don't have all the jobs you have in your reality that don't really produce anything people actually want or need, that just service the big machine of your economy. And without them, it's amazing how much free time we have."

"But what about lazy people?"

"Sometimes people don't do a whole lot, and don't seem to have much energy. We look on that as a sign of sickness--usually something is wrong with them and they need more rest. But if someone truly doesn't work, or do their fair share of the harder jobs, people don't think well of them. But that isn't much of a problem."

"But who takes out the garbage?" I asked.

Mercedes laughed. "What garbage? We don't produce any. Everything we make can either be reused, recycled, composted, mulched, or fed to the chickens or the worms. But enough of the economics lecture. Let's go see the Oracle."

"Oracle?"

"To find out about the Wizards."

It was clear that the market was a social occasion. Our progress was slow as Mercedes was stopped every ten feet or so by someone who greeted her and had a lot to say. It was a very multicultural crowd--people of every shade and every conceivable fashion statement all mingling happily together. The plaza was dotted with small stages. In one, a young poet was pacing back and forth, chanting a hip hop spoken word piece. In another, a flamenco guitarist strummed. Toward the back was a larger, elevated main stage where a dance troupe was rehearsing for a performance later that evening, Mercedes told me.

"There's something going on here just about twenty-four hours a day," she said. "We have late night concerts, and then the young people have even later night concerts after the old folks go to bed. The trees absorb a lot of the sound, so it doesn't disturb the neighborhood."

Tucked among the redwoods was a small amphitheater enclosed with straw bales, for all-night drum circles. According to Mercedes, the straw absorbed the sound. Each year in the spring, they mulched the old bales and rebuilt the structure in a neighborhood festival. Nearby stood the community altar, a massive structure built of the sculpted mud Mercedes called "cob" It was covered with dripping candle wax and flowers, and full of niches and shelves and boxes, where statues stood of every sacred image from the Virgin of Guadalupe to Kali.

Behind it was a small enclosure, screened by hanging vines of jasmine, honeysuckle, and passionflower. A small sign informed us that "The Oracle Is In."

"Who is the Oracle?" I asked.

"Whoever dreams about being the oracle the night before becomes the Oracle Du Jour," Mercedes said. "Some will read your cards, some look into a crystal ball, some just seem to know things. But anyone who has a problem, or just needs someone to listen, can come and get advice."

"I don't suppose you have a qualified psychiatrist in this reality," I sighed. "Or a place I can refill my Prozac prescription if I'm stuck here forever?"

"We have healers and doctors for those who are truly mentally imbalanced. But we know that most of the depression people suffer in your reality comes from the fact that--how do I say this politely--your reality is really toxic and rotten. Here everyone has abundance, community, and real security, and there just isn't so much to be depressed about."

Mercedes pushed aside the vines, and we entered. A small, white-haired, very dark woman sat perched on a giant, cupped hand made of cob sculpted into a throne.

"What's that?" I whispered to Mercedes.

"It's the Hidden Hand of the Market," she whispered back.

"What can I do for you two lovely women?" the Oracle asked.

"We need to find the Wizards' Collective," Mercedes said. "Alice here has Slipped into our world from the Bad Reality, but she needs to get back. Her mother is ill."

"Ah, not easy," the Oracle said. "But could be the Wizards can help." She closed her eyes, leaned back in her seat, and seemed to contemplate some inner vision.

"I see children," she said at last. "I see pools of water. Cattails. A swamp. I'm sinking, sinking..." With a start, she pulled herself up. "Whoo, nearly went too deep!"

"Children and a swamp," Mercedes said thoughtfully. "Could it be the Children's House in the Wetlands Block?"

"The Wizards do like to pop up now and then and tell fairy tales to the young ones," the Oracle said.

"Thank you so much," Mercedes said. She pulled a small vial out of her pocket, and gave it to the Oracle. "Feverfew tincture, for your migraines."

"Thank you!"

We ducked through the vines again, and blinked in the sunlight.

"The Wetlands block, that's quite far from here," Mercedes said. "We'd better get on our way."

To Be Continued

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