

# Plato's Garden

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(drothstein@alum.haverford.edu)

Harold stretched his legs as far as he could and felt the mud squish around his toes. He opened the pores on his feet and drank thirstily, and the water seeped into his legs and flowed through them to the rest of his body. He felt rejuvenated, and with a grunt and an “oomph” he poked his head through the dirt until he saw an opening, and then with one extra shove he was through the hole and onto the surface.

There was dirt in his mouth and over most of his face, so much that he could hardly see anything. He spit it out and shook it off his head as best he could, and then started sneezing violently. When the dust finally settled, Harold looked around at his new world. Everything was bathed in a light more radiant and beautiful than he ever could have imagined, and it was so bright that it took a while for his vision to adjust. When it finally cleared, he saw that he was staring into the sun, a brilliant yellow golden sun splayed out against the bluest of blue skies. Not a cloud was in sight. He had read about the sun and the sky in picture books, of course, but seeing them for the first time in person, the colors were sharper than he ever would have guessed, and the warmth of the light was more nurturing than any poet could have put into words.

Harold was standing there, face upturned to the sun, marveling at its beauty, when he heard a voice behind him.

“Good afternoon,” it said, crisp and nasal. “My name is Claudius.”

“I’m Harold,” said Harold, never taking his eyes off the sun.

“I felt obliged to introduce myself,” said Claudius, “since it appears you’ve decided to emerge about one *inch* in front of me, which means that by the time you’re grown you’ll be taking *all* my sun.”

“I’m quite sorry,” said Harold, “but I didn’t have a choice. This is where I was born, and this is where I had to grow up. That’s just how it is,” he said hopelessly.

“Well, at *least* you had better be careful not to get your legs tangled up with mine. *I* was here first, and I have *many* legs, twenty-two of them as of today, and they extend out to a radius of three *inches* from my waist. All the ground within that area is rightfully *mine*.” Claudius had a habit of emphasizing every important word he said, which from his point of view was almost all of them.

Harold thought for a moment. “But,” he said, “if I’m only one inch away from you, and your legs extend out to three inches, why is that I haven’t run into them already?”

“Are you *implying*,” said Claudius, and he was so mad that Harold would have seen him gritting his teeth, if Harold had been able to turn around to see him, and if

Claudius had had any teeth to grit, “are you *implying* that my legs are *not* as long as I say they are? Are you *implying* that my legs are short?”

“Quiet, Claudius,” said a voice from far behind both of them, in the distance. It was the wrinkled and heavy voice of an old woman, a voice which Harold immediately trusted. “You have no need to be afraid that Harold will take your sun. And you have even less a need to speak to him in such a rude manner.”

“You’re right,” said Claudius. “*He’s* so short and stubby that there’s no *chance* he’ll ever grow as tall as I am and block *my* sun. Why, he’s the *ugliest* little person I’ve ever *seen*.”

“What do I look like?” said Harold immediately, for he had spent his entire short life above ground staring at the sun, and of course had no way to turn his head and look at himself.

“Well, your *skin*,” said Claudius, “is green, not a *bright* green, but sort of a *sickly* lima bean kind of green, with little white *spots*. Your two arms are *just* beginning to poke up above the soil, but your left hand is *jagged* and cut and *scarred*. And of *course*, there is the most *hideous* yellow splotch across your *back*.”

Harold’s mind shook at the thought of this, but the voice of the old woman cut in from far behind him. “Stop,” she said, in a voice that was almost stern but not quite. “Claudius, you are lying, and for that there is no excuse. Harold, you are a fine-looking boy, and you will grow to be a fine man.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Harold, not quite sure how to react.

“I am the oldest person in the patch, and I am also the furthest back,” continued the woman. “I can see all the people who are here now, and I have watched many come before you and die before you. Surely you are one of the most promising young men I have ever seen.”

At this, Claudius laughed, a short, jaded laugh which ended in the sound of a sneer. “What you have *seen* is perhaps not all that there *is*,” he said.

Harold tried to ignore Claudius, but he did not like the sound of his laugh. There was a long silence.

“Please ma’am,” said Harold finally, “I don’t believe we’ve been introduced.”

“My name is Olga,” said the old woman, and that was all she said.

Time passed, and the sun began to set. Harold’s head followed it dutifully, mechanically, his short little neck bending to soak up as much of the sun’s rays as it could. As Harold’s head moved down, he could eventually see the horizon, and then the land. He was looking out onto the most beautiful field he ever could have imagined. The grass and the trees were a dark, rich green, and they swayed slightly in a summertime breeze which seemed to lift their tips up to the sky and set them gently down again. Deer and mice and rabbits raced across the field and behind the trees, and off to the left a

brook bubbled quietly, its surface glinting red in the sunset. Harold took a deep breath and inhaled the fresh air.

Suddenly, off to his right, Harold noticed that there was someone standing in front of him.

She stood there proud and tall, out of the soil from her waist up, her neck arched forward in a graceful curve, watching the sun set over the trees. Her skin was a bright and pleasant green, her leaves were round and full, and her stem was smooth and shiny, leading up to a bright pink flower which adorned the top of her head. She was the most beautiful girl in the world, Harold was convinced. She was also the only girl he had ever seen.

“H-h-hello,” Harold said. “I’m Harold. Pleased to meet you?” His voice trailed up as if asking a question, but it was only due to nervousness. Talking to this girl was the most daring thing he had ever done.

“Hello,” she said simply, “I’m Cindy.”

“Well...” said Harold, since he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Well,” said Cindy.

There was a long silence. The sun began to fall beneath the horizon, and the world began to dim.

“So,” Harold finally said, “how’s the view from up in front there?”

“I suppose it’s quite nice,” said Cindy. “I don’t really know what to compare it to, since it’s the only thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I think it’s nice too,” said Harold. Another long pause. “You know,” he said, “you’re the only person among us who I can see.”

“I can’t see any of the others,” said Cindy. “They tell me I’m the front-most person in this patch. I talk to all the others, and listen to what they have to say, but I don’t even know what any of us looks like.”

“Well, *you* look beautiful,” said Harold. All his shyness was gone now.

“It’s getting dark,” said Cindy. “I think I’m going to go to sleep now.”

The days went on, and Harold began to grow tall and strong. His waist pushed up above the soil, and he began to feel his arms grow and spout leaves, which were either big and beautiful (if you believed Olga) or small and crumbly (if you believed Claudius). He stretched out his legs more and more beneath the soil, every once in a while bumping up against a short root which he assumed belonged to Claudius, and pushing it delicately out of the way. Claudius began to complain that Harold was growing too tall and getting in the way of his sun, but Harold soon learned to ignore Claudius. He began to talk to the other people, and got to be friends with many of them – people with names like Bob and Katie and Henry and Judy – people who were behind him to the left and behind him to

the right, but people who he could never see. No matter how many people he met, though, he always kept a special place in his heart for Olga and Cindy.

Cindy and he had become great friends, and they used to stay up late after everyone else had gone to sleep and look at the field. Being in the front, they had a better view than anyone else. On moonless nights, the sky sparkled with the light of a thousand jeweled stars, shining and reflecting off the surface of the brook, shimmering in the chill air above the grass, and Harold could almost taste the dewdrops as they formed on the field in front of him.

The more Harold grew, though, the more restless he felt. He thought back to his days in the seed, where he had read all the books his parents had left him, the books which told him everything he would need to know for the world above the ground. Something now seemed different about the world he was living in, something not quite right when compared to what the books had said life would be like. It was true that the sun and the sky and the field were beautiful, but the more he thought about it and the more he looked at them, the more muted their colors appeared. Though the sun was warm, it did not seem *quite* as warm and nourishing as he had remembered reading, and though the air was fresh and sweet, it was not *quite* as fresh and sweet as he thought it should be. Harold began to feel lonely, for he noticed that although the deer and the mice and the rabbits ran around between the trees and through the grass in the field in front of him, they never came over to his part of the field to play.

Harold awoke late every day, his head pointed straight up at the noontime sun, his neck throbbing for want of light and warmth. Sometimes he would dream that the sun was up in the middle of the night, a pale white light all around him, the sun's rays spread and stripped of their richness – but then it would be dark again, and so he would go back to sleep. Though Harold's legs never wanted for enough water to drink, he nonetheless felt distant from it, and even when the sky rained on the field in front of him, he couldn't feel the water falling on his arms and around his waist.

“Olga,” Harold said one day, for Olga was the wisest of all the people in their patch, “why are we here?”

“That is a difficult question to answer,” Olga said.

“Do you ever think that there might be something more to life?” asked Harold. “Something that none of us knows about, that all of us are missing?”

“I am not naïve enough to think I know everything,” Olga said.

“Cindy can only see the field in front of her,” Harold continued, “but she cannot see beyond the field, and she cannot see behind herself. I can see Cindy, but I cannot see beyond the field, and I cannot see behind myself. Claudius can see both of us, but he cannot see you.”

At this Claudius laughed his sneering laugh. It came from right behind Harold's ear, and Harold was surprised to hear how close Claudius was growing towards him.

Harold paused and was deep in thought. “Olga,” he said, “you can see all of us. But are there things that you cannot see?”

“Of course there are,” Olga said.

“Are there things behind you?” he asked.

“There may be,” she said.

“What are they? What are they like?” Harold asked.

“We have no way of knowing,” said Olga. “They could be anything.”

“Could there be other people behind you?” asked Harold.

“I don’t know,” said Olga. “If there are, none of them has ever talked to me.”

“Perhaps there could be things *other* than people behind you,” mused Harold, almost to himself.

“You are not the first to think of this,” Olga said simply. “There was once a great philosopher who lived here. He used to say, imagine if you were a blade of grass, living underneath that big tree out in the field. The tree would block your view of the sun, and all you could see would be its shadows. You would think that the *shadows* were the real objects, and never know that the sun shining on the trees and on the bushes was what caused the shadows to appear. Only if the tree were removed could you see behind it to the sun, and know the world for what it really is.”

Harold thought he understood, and tried to imagine what it would be like if he could somehow see behind him to where Olga was, or in front of him beyond the field. He looked out at the bubbling brook, watched its surface take the field and the sky in front of him and send it back to his eyes, twisting it, distorting it into fragments, into broken pieces of light which floated on the surface of the water. Harold tried to put the pieces together in his head, closed his eyes and squeezed and concentrated and tried to make them form into something new, something besides the shapes and the colors he had seen in them before. But try as he might, Harold could not put them together any other way, could not imagine what might exist beyond the trees at the edge of the field, or behind the patch in which he lived.

That night, Harold woke up with a start. Something was pushing up against the back of his neck.

“Claudius?” he said.

“*Please* be quiet, or I will have to *sock* you,” Claudius said right into his ear.

“Sock me? What are you talking about? You can’t sock me. Why are you touching me?”

“I’m *growing*,” Claudius said, and it was true. With all his might, Claudius was sucking the moistness out of the soil from beneath his legs, and Harold could feel the ground going dry beneath him.

“But why?” Harold asked.

“Because *you* are in my way,” Claudius said, “and *I* want to see the *sun*.”

Claudius sucked in more water and pulled himself a little more out of the ground, and suddenly Harold saw a big green face, with large yellow splotches, pop in front of him from behind his ear. It was the ugliest thing he had ever seen.

“Stop it,” Harold said, but Claudius ignored him, and as he grew he began to wrap his neck around Harold’s and pull tight.

Harold had to fight back. He began to suck up as much water as he could, but Claudius had taken most of it, and Harold could not grow nearly as fast as he wanted to. Claudius locked their necks a second time and began to pull Harold back, out of the way.

As Harold’s head turned, the moonlit field in front of him began to rotate out of view. The field, which had been there in front of Harold as long as he had been above ground, was now leaving his eyes, and was being replaced by – what? The more Claudius pulled, the more Harold’s head turned, and the more his head turned, the more he saw. At first, he saw more people, people who looked almost like Cindy, people with purple and red and orange flowers on top of their heads. Were these his friends? Which ones were Bob and Katie and Henry and Judy? He did not know.

The more Harold saw, the less he understood. A white rectangle rotated into view, with large black rectangles on it, then more rectangles, sharp lines and colors which he had never seen or dreamed of before but which all seemed muted and drab under the glow of the pale moonlight. Behind the other people, Harold saw more shapes, more lines and rectangles and boxes and circles, cold and evil in their precision. The soil, which Harold thought would go on forever, ended less than a foot away, circled in by something the color of the sun. Beyond that were the shapes. What was going on?

Suddenly, behind him now, he saw another rectangle in the distance, brighter and shinier than the others, and in that rectangle he saw another group of people. No wait, it wasn’t another group of people – it was him! Just as the surface of the brook reflected the sun and the trees out on the field, so did he now see himself reflected in the rectangle – himself and Cindy and Bob and Katie and Henry and Judy and all the other people, bunched together, inside a small yellow pot, sitting on a windowsill. Behind the windowsill, through the pane of glass, was the field.

Harold looked down from the mirror to the mass of plants, which were now in front of him. The rearmost plant lifted her head, slowly awakening from sleep. She was an old little cactus, aged spines sticking out from her sides, and she stared directly at Harold in surprise.

She could not see what he was looking at, and never would. All she could see was the look of horror on his face as he stared past her. From below, she heard Claudius cackle knowingly, as the moonlit field glowed from beyond.