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## French Dirt (Prologue and Chapter One)

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"One of the most charming, perceptive,  
and subtle books ever written about the French  
by an American."

—SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

# French Dirt

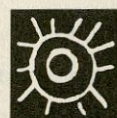
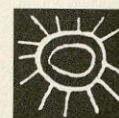
THE STORY OF A GARDEN IN  
THE SOUTH OF FRANCE



BY RICHARD GOODMAN



FRENCH  
DIRT : THE STORY  
OF A GARDEN  
IN THE  
SOUTH OF FRANCE



RICHARD GOODMAN

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2002





## PROLOGUE

THIS IS A LOVE STORY. Like most love stories, it has its share of joy and passion, of loss and pain. Like most love stories, it also has its moments of melodrama, of emotions run amok, of suspicions, worries, anxieties, of pride and panic—of jealousy, even. And, like many familiar love stories, it has times of great pleasure and bliss, only to end, because fate or the gods willed it, cataclysmically.

In this case, the object of my love was not a woman. It was a small, rectangular piece of land in the south of France.

This is the story of my garden.





## INSPIRATION

I HAD A GARDEN in the south of France. It wasn't a big garden. Or a sumptuous one. Or a successful one, even, in the end. But that didn't matter. It was my garden, and I worked it hard and lovingly for the few months I had it—or it had me. This little piece of tan, clayey, French earth, nine meters by thirteen meters, (thirty feet by forty-three feet), was in fact the first garden I ever had. It taught me a great deal about myself. "Your garden will reveal yourself," writes the wise gardener Henry Mitchell. It did. It taught me that I am generous, impatient, hard-working, sentimental, boyish, stubborn and lazy.



Having a garden also connected me to France in a way more profound and more lasting than any other way I can possibly think of. Part of me is still there. And always will be. Even though my friend Jules Favier has recently written to me from the village that "only one of the four boundaries of your garden remains standing," I'm not upset. What does that matter? The garden is in my heart. Having a garden gave me a *place* to go in my village every day, a task to perform and a responsibility. You cannot ask more of a land in which you are a stranger. To feel the French earth, clear it, plant seeds in it, despair over it and, ultimately, to take from it, that was a precious gift.

Gardeners are born *and* made, I believe. "There are no green thumbs or black thumbs," to quote Henry Mitchell again. "There are only gardeners and non-gardeners." What makes a gardener is two things: the desire to garden and a piece of land with which to satisfy that desire. The first can certainly exist, and often does, without the second. As I said, I never had a garden of my own until I was forty-three years old and living in a little wine-making village in the south of France, near Avignon. All my life I had wanted to have a garden. But I'd always managed to find myself living in large American cities in which that desire was thwarted, where every morsel of free earth was either a park or was snatched up by some developer to build a new skyscraper. The desire was

always there, though, smoldering, ready to explode into being.

I live in New York City now. A good friend of mine has a house in rural Pennsylvania. I am her official gardener. Because we both know and love France, we have given me the nickname "Le Nôtre," the name of Louis XIV's famous gardener. There in Pennsylvania, I dig her wild dark ground, dislodge the hundreds of stones, then plant and weed the kind of flowers that will grow in her shadowy back yard—impatiens, marigold, so on. When I'm in New York, I yearn to be back there. I can spend an entire day working in her yard, easily. Even though the land is hers, I'm content. Ownership does not always provide freedom. In her back yard, I am lost. I am lost in my work.

I love to garden for the obvious—but, because of that, no less meaningful—reason: to feel connected to the earth and its moods, to its weather and its seasons, to its eccentricities and surprises. I love to bend and dig and pull and haul. (Just look at those words! Short, simple words. Not a prissy, ten-dollar word like *decorate* among them.) I am always searching for ways to make myself simpler. Gardening does that better than anything I know. It reduces me to who I am. It casts off the superficial and the artificial. It leaves me with the essential, the economical, the no-frills me.



I grew up in southeastern Virginia, on the ocean. I had a boyhood full of intoxicating smells, of the soft spray from the ocean, the forceful perfume of gardenias, the scent of ripe figs wafting into the open window. In the summer, it was very hot, but often there was a wind from the ocean to make the heat bearable. Everything was more intense in the sun-drenched summer: roses, the crisp grass dehydrated by the heat, fat bees languidly treading air, even the mockingbirds. Before I was old enough to go to school, I walked around barefoot from May to October. I knew every plant and bush and flower, everything that grew near our house, from all sides. There were no barriers between me and the earth. I *was* the summer.

The first gardener I ever met was a black man. His name was Ford, and he worked for my grandmother. When she came from her house in Norfolk to stay with us during the summer, Ford came, too. I was never happier than to see him arrive every May. He was a quiet, hard-working man with lovely, peat-colored skin who spent long hours in the fierce summer sun working on the plants and shrubs and flowers in our yard. He was both a father and a mother figure to me, tolerant and accepting. I used to follow him around for hours in the hot Virginia day. Remembering how hard he worked and how thoroughly—I can still see the sweat dripping down his neck and cheeks,

## Inspiration

the small veins bulging on his forehead, a bandanna curled around his neck—I'm sure I was a distraction, if not a downright nuisance. But he never excluded me. He made me feel a part of his task.

What fascinated me about Ford even as a little boy was the boldness with which he worked. He snipped and cut our peach tree so deftly and rapidly it frightened me. "Won't that kill the tree if you do that, Ford?" I asked him as he pruned the tree. "No, boy. This is going to *help* this peach tree." Branches and twigs flew off the tree with a blinding rapidity as his scissors darted here and there and everywhere. There might have been a logic somewhere, but I couldn't find it. "But, Ford, how do you know *what* to cut?" I pleaded. He bent down and cut off a huge branch. He'd cut too much! I squealed and looked down in horror at the large crooked arm, leaves still on it. Ford stood back up. "I just know, boy."

And, indeed, later that summer we had big fat pink peaches, globes hanging everywhere from that tree. And they exploded with deliciousness.

Ford taught me that life can be enhanced by death, that injury is not necessarily injury in the world of plants. But I learned something more important from him, even if I didn't quite understand it completely at the time: that there is a difference in nature between what grows purely wild and what has been tamed. And that gardening is a collaboration. Somewhere, even after I left Virginia and moved into a



succession of big, earthless metropolitan centers, I kept those lessons deep inside me, along with the primal memories of sun and heat and dirt and the scent-soaked summer air.



## CLEARING

I DID NOT BEGIN my garden until I had been in France for six months. It wasn't until I had made a few good friends—and one special one—and had worked on land belonging to others, and had been more or less accepted in St. Sébastien. But by April I had acquired my own little plot of land. It was about a mile away from the village, near a stream, and it was waist-high with weeds. I thought it was beautiful, but it needed to be cleared.

The day that my benefactor Jules Favier came with the tractor to clear the land was a momentous one for me.