

Spring onions

The ones bought in the supermarket and planted as an experiment to see what would happen, are ready. Little green soldiers stand to attention, grown plump with waiting to be plucked.

They're less pungent than the wild ones I discovered while playing by the edge of the woods. Thinking I had made a wonderful discovery, I dug up the little white bulbs, fascinated by the way their roots spread out in the soil. In a fervour of excitement a magical garden appeared in my imagination, and I ran up to the house on a quest for guidance from the higher authorities.

The wings of child imagination are frail when confronted with the realities of the adult world, and bursting into the house with a handful of smelly weeds, and muddy knees, the only adults I encountered were an alarmed and irate Nana and Grandad.

Grandad was a little scary, but he would let me read the comic strip from the papers, which Mama disapproved of. Nana stood me in a chair to wash the dishes. She smelled funny, her apron always dripping. They were some of the temporary adults in my life, my stepfather's parents.

On weekends we would sit on the steps waiting for Daddy to collect us. It always seemed like hours before he arrived. When he did, our world was filled with him and nothing else mattered. That weekend he took us to the beach and showed us how to select flat pebbles to skip across the water. I collected some round white ones to plant in my garden and while I waited for them to grow, the onions seeded and turned brown, and then we moved away. First to California, then to Spain.

The Spanish onions that Tito grew in the orchard were huge and sweet. Tita, would cut them into thin slices and sprinkle vinegar on them for me to eat. Tito and Tita were my adopted grandparents. They lived and worked on my father's estate in southern Spain. There was a slightly sweaty smell of labour when Tito came in from the fields. He had spent the day bent over, hoeing, opening and closing the irrigation ditch while the water circled around the plants. I would watch him sometimes, with the old feeling of wonder, but I knew not to disturb him.

I pluck out my spring onions, their bulbs fat and white, with a tangle of roots that carry me back to my first garden somewhere in Maine.

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