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A Good One

Mary just couldn't get over the patch of scorched grass in her otherwise perfect garden. It started a few weeks ago, as a sprinkle of brown. Then it spread, and the earth below dried up, and the grass looked downcast. When Mary asked about it, Jonah looked into things—he always looked into things—while more of the garden shriveled. Mary took the task upon herself. She tried everything from weed-killers to fertilizers to overwatering to underwatering to tearing handfuls of it off and planting them anew. She even flirted with the idea of installing some synthetic grass but that was too much, just too much. The horror in all this was that it wasn't recovering: nay, it was getting worse.

She took a step back from her worries for a contented smile: boy did she enjoy those old-fashioned yeas and nays. She felt so powerful, so historical, when she said them. Why was it that she didn't wait until she keeled over in her seat like her good friend Tom Hughson (R-New York)? Was it the kids? Was it Jonah, and that love of his, too often, well, insatiable? Oh, it was that joke she told, and people's skin turned out to be too paper thin to take it in good spirit. And it was such a good joke. Jeez.

Now, about that grass. Mary dropped slowly to the ground, and sat trowel in hand with her left leg stretched out and her right leg at an angle. She stared at the damn thing. She could swear it had doubled in size since last night. She looked at the hyacinths that had marked the spot's boundaries last night. Okay, it didn't double double, but it did spread its flanks a little. Mary applied her trowel to the dry earth, which crumbled into sickly clumps. With sickly blades of grass latched on to them. Look at that green, too: no way to call it green anymore; at best, it's a grudging, say, ochre. Like the moustache of that ridiculous Will Weiner (D-Florida), God what a ridiculous name, too. What *was* his vote on the third bank bailout? It was a tiebreaker. It was so important back then; everyone gossiped and gasped about it. And the media, oh yes, the media. What *was* that bloody vote of his? Well, who uses a moustache nowadays? Sure, aside from Jonah, I mean. One of these days I will, I swear I will, use the garden scissors to clip it right off when he's taking that dumb 10 a.m. nap of his. Who takes a 10 a.m. nap anyway?

A man comes up to Mary. She didn't see him walk in. Lord, she didn't even *hear* him walk in with those ears of hers that can snatch a whisper from across the room. She looked up and there he was. A black man. No hair. His bald head shining wetly under the midmorning sun. He's wearing one of those libertine jeans two Maries could fit into. A white T-shirt. The strap of a brown bag loops around his shoulder.

It is the angel of death. Coming to take her away for her sins. Mary drops the trowel, frightened. Horrified. Take her where, take her where? Has it been enough, all she's done, to tip the scales in her favor?

"Good morning, Mrs. Wren," he says. "I'm Angel."

Mary wants to drop before him and beg for mercy. She wants to stall him, to filibuster him until she's had her chance. A fair chance. Her due process.

But she just stares.

Angel offers his right hand. Mary scrutinizes it, the bleached palms, labyrinthine with crevices. The sun comes into full view suddenly, and she is blinded. Blinded and sweating and feeble.

“Now?” she mumbles.

“What do you mean ‘now,’ ma’am?” he asks, smiling. He’s grown diffuse.

She swallows, and drops her hand into his. She feels spent. And wicked. That dinner, she thinks remorsefully, that fancy dinner with the pharmaceutical people. It will destroy me. My soul, cast away over foie gras.

Angel shakes her hand and helps her up. She closes her eyes.

“Your husband called me,” he says. “Martin is sick.”

Martin, or Mar-tín or whatever it’s like down in Ecuador, is the usual gardener. Mary now looks at this Angel straight in the eye. Or almost straight in the eye. He’s taller by a full head. But never mind. She is furious. She could, you know, destroy him. I’ll know your boss’s boss from somewhere. He’ll owe me favors. If, well, he remembers me. Damn it. What ever got her to leave in the first place?

“Oh,” she says, back to the war room mentality. Too bad she didn’t get a proper war to room in about. She would’ve been stellar. Her biographies would’ve used that word about her, stellar, just like they said of Kristin Jones (R-Kentucky) and her own war room antics. The walk, the talk, the foresight. But nay, all Mary got was that hazy war on terror. So messy. No countries to push buttons against. Just her luck.

“Well, here’s the thing,” Mary says, pointing at the soiled patch. “What’s your take on this?”

“Hmm,” Angel says. He hunkers down, and feels the lumpy earth with his fingers. “Hmm.”

Is it some sort of, whatchamacallit, Native American thing? Come to think of it, her son’s wife says some very funny things about the earth and sticks her unwashed fingers in her servings of lentils and, yes she does, she hums, she hums weird songs at every perfectly wrong time. Maybe it’s some American thing now. Mary sighs.

“I’m going to have to dig in,” Angel says, smelling his fingers. “Where’s your shovel?”

“Right in that, umm, shed behind you. There’s two of them, but only one works. You’ll tell which is which.”

Angel goes and picks them up, and comes back with the one that doesn’t, oh, what do you know, it does work.

Angel starts to dig. After less than a minute, the ground caves in, and a hiss is followed by a dark broth that geysers up three feet at least and splatters grime everywhere.

“Holy shit,” Angel says, recoiling.

“You watch your language in my house,” Mary snaps back. She frowns. There are fumes rising stickily from the hole. “You reek of death, mister.”

“Umm . . . of *your* death, ma’am.” He’s covered in it. A maze of filth on him.

Mary is revolted. She checks her clothes, her limbs. Not a spot. Thank goodness.

“Obviously your sewage system broke, ma’am,” Angel says. “It’s probably been seeping into the ground for a while. We’re going to have to call a plumber. But, umm,” chunks of it dropping on the hyacinths as he speaks, “do you have some place where I could clean up?”

Mary points to a hose. The hole in the ground growls. Just her luck. Where is that useless husband of hers anyway? Angel leaves a trail as he walks away. Oh, it was such a good joke, too.