

Audrey Thomas / GREEN STAKES FOR THE GARDEN

His voice came first, by itself, propelled by the lazy afternoon which twitched like a sleeping dog and made a quick, spasmodic statement of how it felt about having the summer stillness interrupted; irritated, it flung his words out of the deserted street and over her garden gate — “Lady can I cut the grass?”

Long before, or what seemed long before his head and neck declared themselves over the top, tense and with as yet unexplained desperation, as owners or desperate keepers of the runaway voice which was saying again, perhaps had not paused at all except to take a breath — “Lady can I cut the grass?” Faded red plaid flannel shirt (and some part of her mind thinking flannel on an afternoon like this!) and faded skin, too, grey, sidewalk, city-coloured; but the eyes quite different, gas blue, flaming with desperation as the gate swung forward under his weight and a part of her mind thinking, even then, we really ought to have a latch, as he shot, stumbled, flung himself across the grass as though he, the keeper of the runaway voice needed no apology or warrant or by-your-leave in his precipitous rush to recapture such a desperate and dangerous thing. “Lady can I cut the grass?”

She was startled and not startled, said automatically “Mind the teacups” without raising her voice and hardly her eyes after that first, automatic, glance — behaved much as she would have behaved if one of the children had rushed in slightly off-balance with excitement, explosive with news of a dog-fight, a dead bird or the imminent possibility of an ice-cream cone, “Mind the teacups,” in her professional mother’s voice. So that for how long? five, ten, fifteen seconds they remained silent, their bodies confronting one another, but she not yet acknowledging his existence as stranger and intrusion, holding determinedly to the scene in the garden before his abrupt and apocalyptic entrance, thinking to herself if I don’t look maybe he’ll go away, while her companion who had been stretched out lazily in the other deck chair sat up with a “What the hell?” And at the sound of *that* voice, slurred, rough, as though wakened abruptly from a sleep,

she became aware, really aware, of the stranger's presence and regarded him dismayed, not because she was really afraid but because his precipitous entrance had indeed smashed something as delicate as her grandmother's flowered cups and saucers; and the thread she had been spinning so carefully between herself and the young man sprawled beside her dangled now forlornly from her fingers (and a part of her mind said isn't that just my luck!)

She adjusted the chair two notches forward so that she could sit up straight and with one hand reached forward, palms outwards, towards the stranger, warning him that he had come (gone) quite far enough. With the other she unconsciously pulled her skirt below her knees.

"Are you accustomed to come barging into other people's gardens uninvited?" (Yet even as she said it she knew she had adopted the wrong tone, could sense rather than see the young man look at her, puzzled as though she had picked up, somehow, the wrong script. This made her even more resentful; why should *she* be in the wrong! While the strange man simply stared at her as though she had replied to him with gibberish.)

"Listen," he said, "I gotta have work. This grass here," he made a wide proprietorial sweep with his arm, taking in the tiny garden. She noticed his nails had been bitten down so low the tips of his fingers extended, naked and greyish, a quarter of an inch; so that he looked deformed, spatulate — with those naked pinky-grey pads at the ends of his fingers instead of nails. Horrible. "This here grass, I could cut it real nice for a coupala dollars." He swayed back and forth a few feet from the end of her chair while she gave him another long, careful look, still taking him in as a visual fact — a drastic rearrangement of the landscape of her afternoon. (And why should she feel bothered when he said what the hell in that funny tone of voice? Because that too was out of place.) The back yard seemed to have contracted so that they were practically on top of one another — she, the young man and the stranger — were eyeing each other, panting, and would soon leap forward with a snarl, the three of them rolling over and over in the hot dry grass. Over and over, crashing into the border and crushing the flowers underneath them in their terrible animal-like resentment. Even the temperature seemed to have shot suddenly upwards ten degrees, although she and the young man had been saying to each other (only five minutes ago?) that this must be some kind of record.

The two chairs underneath the apple tree, the teacups, the plate of little cakes, the sprinkler moving slowly, gently across the border — it had all been so carefully thought out; had given her such *aesthetic* satisfaction. No one, she thought miserably, would ever understand that aspect of it. How, for instance, she had carefully selected just those little cakes and no others — and just that number — to go on just that plate. And even remembered to buy three over so there wouldn't be any trouble at lunch. And how the whole day had seemed, (until now) inspired, each little detail working itself out so beautifully that it was only natural to think in terms of plays and paintings. Even the green stakes had been a stroke of genius.

Yet now it was all animal-like, smouldering; she could smell the stranger's sweat from where she sat. What was she supposed to do? Get up and offer him a cup of tea? (She thought of those queer spatulate fingers curled around one of her grandmother's teacups and for the first time felt afraid.)

"There's no work for you here. Please go." He never moved, never changed his movement, stood swaying back and forth and back as though he had a pain, or was still recovering from his incredible journey through the garden gate.

Her companion spoke. "You heard the lady, didn't you?" He swung one lean brown leg over onto the grass, but she motioned him back.

"No," she said softly. "It will be all right." "(And a part of her mind thinking it's all very well for you to play Sir Galahad now! And again that slow smouldering resentment flickered between them.) She arranged her face in a smile.

"I'm afraid this isn't a very good neighbourhood for yard work. We all do our own. Why don't you try the church two blocks over? They might have something you could do." The smile hurt and she put her hand to her face in a desperate effort to keep it in place. What time was it?

The children would be back soon; the afternoon was nearly over. And it had all been so perfect after the first awkward moments, hers not his, for she had never seen him awkward, had thought of him to herself as somehow lacquered or varnished — always shining, always "ready for company" as it were. And there she was, her voice fluttering around him as though he were some lacquered brass lamp and she a moth impatient to embrace her doom. But the green stakes had saved her.

"How would you like to lend me a hand with the garden?" And he, amused, skeptical: "I'm not much of a gardener."

He had held out his lean brown hands and she had marvelled at the nails, so regular, a faint pencil line of white above the smooth shell-pink. But strong hands, golden brown of a colour that made her think of chickens roasting slowly on a spit. She had a sudden impulse to reach over and bite into one of his hands, was quite dizzy with the desire to simply take one up and bite it; they looked delicious.

"Oh, neither am I," she cried. "But I bought some stakes to prop up the snapdragons this morning. I feel terribly guilty about them, poor things. The children said they'd help but I really hate putting it off another minute." She had literally run into the garage for the stakes and garden shears and twine, cried gaily, busily, "I'll hold them if you'll tie," thrusting the ball of twine into his skeptical golden hands.

They had moved slowly up the narrow border, careful not to step on the other plants and flowers. The snapdragons were bent over or lying flat. They appealed to her: strange little puffs of colour, lemon, mauve, raspberry pink, like summer sweets or summer dresses. Cool. Reminiscent of childhood. And yet their paradoxical shape, labial, curiously exciting, swollen and stretched. She lifted the stalks carefully, holding them tight against the stakes as he snipped and tied, snipped and tied, the sun strong on his golden arms and hands.

"Look how twisted they are," she mourned, caressing the tip of a blossom with her finger. "I've been promising for weeks — and now I'm afraid they're crippled for life."

She really meant it, bent over her poor, pastel invalids, felt genuinely guilty about the thing. What was so beautiful was that he had understood, had kept silent and snipped and tied, looking quietly into her eyes as they reached the end and she took the garden things from his firm, brown, polished hands. "I'll get the tea."

"I'll wait under that nice apple tree of yours." Then it had all been understood between them, just like that; so that she had run up the back stairs like a girl and giggled when she nearly dropped the sugar bowl.

And she had lain back gratefully in the long chair, sipping lemon tea, surveying the border through half-shut eyes, her heart reaching out to those brave, brave snapdragons, so desperately erect — like old and wounded warriors on parade. While his firm brown fingers moved lazily up and down her leg and she had felt at any minute she might begin to purr.

So that she was actually smiling at him, lips parted, when the stranger started in again, holding onto the picnic table now, bent over as though over a basin and she became quite terrified as she used to be as a child in the midst of nightmare knowing she was dreaming, straining to wake herself up. He spewed forth words and cries, not looking at her — looking instead if looking at all down through the slats of the table at the grass below as though it were personally responsible for his fate.

“You never give a guy a chance you bastards think you’re all so goddam smart she said and don’t come back until you pay at last for what I’ve given out for free I must have been a nut and them in the corner laughin to beat hell you gotta give me what’s a coupala dollars. I’ll trim the hedge real nice for free your hedge needs trimmin too and she just layin there with nothin’ underneath saying where’d you think the money came from? Why don’t you listen to me lady why. . . .”

So that the silence was even worse when for a brief moment sound was shut off and all she could hear was a dull thud as though something overripe had fallen, quite near her, off the tree; and all she could see was a blur and thought my God I’m going even deeper. When her vision cleared and the stranger gave her one last pleading look out of the blood grotesquely red against his face, unreal, outrageous as though some spiteful child had crawled a crayoned obscenity across her pastel world.

And then her would-be lover’s hands reached out and caught the stranger once, grasping his shoulders hard, the knuckles white, so that all she saw was the back of his head as he went back out the way he burst in, muttering and sobbing to himself out of the garden gate and up the outraged street.

And she, “My God, My God,” giving the flowers one last despairing glance as she picked up the tray and headed for the stairs. All along a part of her saying isn’t that just my luck!