The Drought

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I've shut my eyes because I don't want to see them. No matter how hot or muggy it is, the two old ladies weed, cultivate, mow and rake. It's like they've entered some perfect yard and garden contest. Jack says I shouldn't be so critical; it's the only thing they have to do. I guess he's right, but their house is right on top of ours and watching them work is a little like eating a bowl of fudge ripple ice cream while someone exercises in front of you. Besides, once they're done in their yard they'll be over asking if they can work on ours. And this afternoon I'm just not in the mood, so I've shut my eyes.

"Taking snooze?" The younger one, the one in her eighties, Adela, leans over the fence. "Are you all in?"

I smile and lie. "Yeah." I rub my forehead, a pained look on my face.

"Your back?" Her wrinkled face grows more wrinkled squinting into the noon sun.

I nod, swish my hands around the kiddie pool and sit more upright against its side.

"Mind if I cultivate your garden?" She already holds a hoe and bucket.

"Sure," I say and shut my eyes again.

The truth is, I don't feel all that well. I am tired. Last night Jack and I went downtown to some gallery openings. We hadn't done that for a long time. I guess I'm just not interested in that scene anymore. It was fun though. Not the paintings—mostly office art—but running into old friends, old acquaintances. We ran into Mike and Diane, too. Maybe that's why I'm so tired.

"Say, do you have any lawn bags?"

I shiver a little. Adela is standing next to the pool, sweat running down her face.

"Did I scare you?" She laughs at herself.

I don't give her the satisfaction of an answer. "Lawn bags?" I wrap a towel around myself and check in the garage.

As I hand the black plastic to her, she says, "A lady came by the other day to look at our garden. She asked if you had kids."

I look at our Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck pool and step back into the shallow water. "Well, it keeps me cool." I smile into the water and then at the woman.

"You should put your feet in here sometime. It really cools you off."

She half-smiles back, shakes her head.

"When it's hot like this, it's the only thing that works." I splash water over my arms.

She laughs and walks away. "Sure would be nice if it would cool down a little."
Over ninety again today. I can’t even remember a year like this.”

I push a rubber ball down in the water and try to catch it with my feet as it catapults up.

The old ladies were mortified when we dragged this pool into our yard—not because of the water shortage, they don’t let that bother them, but because it ruins the look of the point we share. I don’t think Evelyn, the other neighbor on the point, cares all that much for the pool either, but she’d never say anything even if it did. Not to our faces anyway.

They’d be even more upset if we did have kids. “They’re so noisy and dirty,” I’ve heard them say a million times.

They don’t have to worry, though. The thought of having kids has never appealed to me. I’m just not the motherly type, and besides, the idea of actually carrying one makes me ill. It used to make Diane sick, too, but apparently she got over that.

I didn’t think she looked all that bad for having had a baby six months before. Her hips were a little wider, and she had a small pot belly, but she didn’t look anything like the bowl of rising bread dough she’d envisioned two years ago when we’d talked about kids, sex, whatever, over too many cigarettes and whiskeys. I knew Diane would never look like that anyway. She was too vain to let that happen. Secretly I had hoped she might.

“Your garden’s just like concrete.” Adela drops the bag of weeds in front of the garage door. “Do you want me to put your sprinkler on?”

I stand up, and suddenly feel embarrassed and fat in my bathing suit.

“No, I’ll do it.” I wriggle my shorts over the wet suit.

“Your pants are getting wet.” Adela points.

I turn away, raise my eyebrows. I wish I were wearing flip-flops. This summer, instead of the soft carpet of green Jack had planned this spring, we’ve ended up with a hot stretch of needle-sharp weeds and crunchy grass.

As I round the corner, Agnes, the older sister, opens her kitchen door. “Jane...Jane...” Agnes’ voice sounds as solid and rigid as her body looks. “Evelyn is coming over to have some afternoon tea. Come have some with us.”

I start to say no, but give in. The woman only hears what she wants.

Agnes and Adela pull out their white wrought-iron chairs and their newly purchased floral seat cushions and we sit in their driveway waiting for Evelyn. Their yard is an oasis in the crust brown of this summer; rows of purple, orange, yellow, and white spill over onto the golf-course green grass, and birds sing again when they discover three birdbaths set in the perfectly manicured shrubs.

“Did you see everything Adela did in your yard yesterday?” Agnes takes a piece of pumpkin bread, fills a tall blue glass with tea, and holds it in her out-stretched arm while Evelyn makes her way up the long driveway.
Baron

Evelyn always looks sickly. I have heard the sisters tell her she looks like a bag of bones, that she needs to eat more, but she always says that everything she eats goes right through her. Personally, I think she looks so skinny and old because of her worn, out-of-date clothes, especially when she’s next to the sisters.

“Did you see all Adela did in your yard?” Agnes asks again. She hands the iced tea to Evelyn before she has a chance to sit down.

Evelyn speaks as loud as her faint voice allows. “I wish you would have waited...”

“She clipped your hedge and raked your yard and cut back all the suckers on that lilac.” She waves an arthritic hand. “Oh, that thing is so awful looking. You ought to take that out, you know. I think a pine would look nice there, don’t you? Have a slice of bread.”

Evelyn shakes her head no, wrinkles her forehead. “I wish you would have waited until I got home. I would have...”

“Doesn’t that triangle look nice?” Agnes sips her tea. She always calls the point “the triangle.” She says, “Points are on water. This triangle goes into a wood.”

It’s a relief to find out that the sisters’ “helping hand” bugs other people, especially Evelyn. The three of them are supposed to be such good friends.

“I think it’s beautiful.” I say to keep from laughing, and wipe my forehead before taking the last piece of bread. Even in the shade the heat is unbearable.

“Especially that circle of flowers next to your garage, Evelyn.” I point to a small round of red protruding from the crisp lawn.

“We gave Evelyn those funkia over there.” Adela sets her empty glass on the tray and flips her hand toward the side of Evelyn’s house. “And just look at them, they’re all brown. They’re too dry. You need to water.”

Evelyn looks at her hands.

Agnes holds up the pitcher. “Do you want more?”

I think she is talking to Evelyn.

“Do you want more?” she says louder.

I smile and say, “No, thank you.”

“What?” The woman leans closer. “What did you say?”

Adela hits her sister’s arm and moves her lips pointedly. “She said she don’t want any. Gosh you can’t hear anything. Ain’t it ‘hit’ today?” She fans herself with her hands.

I give her a funny look.

We’re Swedes you know. ‘Hit” means hot.” She gives me a kind of smug smile.

Agnes leans toward me again. “Say, are you going to wash your windows today, Jane? Maybe Adela and I should come over and help after we finish
Evelyn’s yard.”

Before I can answer, Evelyn’s skinny arms pull her forward in her chair. “What do you mean? There’s nothing left to do in my yard.”

“Oh, yes there is.” Agnes waves her hand as if to say, ‘you’re crazy.’ “There’s all those weeds around your shrubs and the back side of your house looks like a jungle. We though we’d come over and...”

“I’m not going to be home this afternoon.” Evelyn fidgets with her paper napkin.

“Oh, that don’t matter. We’ll just do it.” Adela pours herself more tea. Agnes looks confused.

“Listen, you really don’t need to do that.” Evelyn’s voice grows softer.

“Oh, of course we will.” Adela says.

“Yes, we really enjoy helping our neighbor as Jesus instructed us to do.”

I raise my eyebrows. It’s always a surprise when Agnes participates in a discussion.

“But I don’t want you to.” Evelyn shifts uncomfortably and speaks to Agnes the way Adela had earlier. “You better be careful or I’ll get mad at you....”

“You better not get mad at us.” Agnes gathers the plates onto the tray. “You don’t have anyone to help you with all that work, except your son, and you know he’s not going to do nothing.”

Evelyn looks into her iced tea. Little beads of sweat run down her face.

“Do you want more tea?” Agnes holds the pitcher toward her.

I hear the phone ringing at my house and excuse myself. Sometimes I hate the phone, but not today.

It’s my mother. She wants me to return a shirt pattern I borrowed but never made. I hang up the phone and rack my brain trying to think where I put the stupid thing. I hate to sew, but occasionally get big ideas. I have a vague recollection of shoving it somewhere, maybe upstairs in the expansion.

As I look through the junk-cluttered highboy, I run across a photo. It’s a picture of me and Jack and Diane at a fancy party Mike threw three years ago for Diane. Diane and I have our arms around each other and we’re laughing. Jack is half out of the picture and Mike looks like he’s ready to pass out. I turn the photo over and read the note written on the back. ‘To my “sister,” with much love, Diane.’ We always pretended we were sisters after we saw a movie about two evil sisters.

I flip the picture over again and study it. Diane is wearing an old dress of my mother’s. It’s pure silk, skin tight and would never fit me in a million years. I fixed Diane’s hair and makeup that night. She was supposed to do mine, too, but we ran out of time, so I look pretty much like myself, just in a fancy dress.

We used to love to dress each other. It started when we first met. Diane had
six brothers and knew everything about sailing and baseball, but nothing about fashion. I know a lot because my mother is a clothes horse, and it didn’t take Diane long to pick up on things. It really fried me, though, when she turned out to be better looking than me.

“She won’t be for long if she keeps drinking the way she does,” I say out loud and toss the photo in the highboy. The humidity has swollen the drawer, so it’s hard to shut. I wonder if Diane and Mike drink as much now that they have the baby. I make a note to ask Pat.

Loud voices come from the yard. I look out the window. Evelyn is standing at the edge of the sisters’ driveway holding a broom.

“Why are you watering?” She shakes the broom. “Don’t you read the papers? Don’t you know there’s a water shortage? The Mississippi’s drying up!”

Agnes holds a weed in her hand. Gosh, it’s dry, isn’t it?” She bends over and pulls another weed. “The ground’s just like concrete.”

Evelyn moves closer to the old woman. “If you’d read the papers once in a while, you’d know how bad things are.”

Adela comes around the corner.

“You’re not supposed to water your lawn.” She shakes her broom at the sisters. Sweat runs down her face. How’s it feel knowing that you’re taking drinking water away from other people? You’re so damn selfish.” She glares at the sisters.

Neither one has an expression on her face. “Don’t you think you should give your funkia a drink?” Agnes smiles and extends her weed-filled hand toward Evelyn’s yard.

Evelyn turns away and goes back to her house.

I feel embarrassed for the old ladies, and because I’ve eavesdropped.

After dinner, I go sit in the pool again. It’s still ninety. I notice that even the leaves on the trees are hanging limp tonight. Some show their undersides. Grandma used to say that was a sign that a storm was on the way, but there aren’t any clouds in the sky.

The two sisters are out in their driveway, but Evelyn is not there. Agnes leans over the fence and curls her finger at me. I step out of the pool and go to her.

She nearly whispers. “Did you hear what she said to me?” She points her knotted branch of a finger towards Evelyn’s house. “She called me selfish. Why, I’ve never been selfish a day in my life. I’m always giving and doing for her. Some people just aren’t grateful. I’m not selfish, am I?”

I pat the old woman’s blue-streamed hand. “No, she....”

“Adela says I should forget the whole thing, but can you imagine?” She wipes her forehead and touches her hair. “And after all we’ve done for her. You know
her son is no good. And for her to say we’re taking other people’s drinking water...."

“Well, the river is low, you know. But maybe it will rain tonight. The leaves are showing....”

I hear my phone ring. I tell Agnes I’ll talk to her later and run in to answer it. It’s my mother again, wondering when I’m returning the pattern. I tell her I’ll bring it right away.

I forgot to take it out of the drawer, so I go back up into the suffocatingly hot expansion. The drawer jams when I pull on it. When it finally jerks open, half the stuff inside flies out. I gather some of it up and toss it into a drawer. I look at the picture again before I throw it back. The heat seems more oppressive than a few minutes before. I grab the pattern and decide to pick up the rest of the junk on a cooler day.

As I start downstairs, I look out the window at the old ladies. The sisters are sitting on their wrought-iron chairs in their driveway, staring into the woods. Evelyn has pulled an old mangled metal chair onto her burnt lawn and sits swatting flies and looking occasionally at the sisters. Adela gets up and moves the lawn sprinkler to a part of her lawn that is spotted brown.

Evelyn points at her and says something just loud enough to be heard, but not loud enough to be understood. She folds her hands over her chest.

Adela sits down and the two sisters sit quietly and expressionless again.

I stare at the three of them for a second, and then search the western sky for clouds.