

Yard Work

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Martin Morris and his daughter, Maggie, sat at the table in the middle of the dining room. Cracks of morning sunlight broke through the blinds that hung haphazardly over the old, drooping windows. He was midway through the sports section of the newspaper when she broke the silence and asked him if he was planning on attending the annual family vacation with her and the rest of the extended family.

"Hawaii? Why would you want to go to Hawaii?" asked Martin. "There's nothing to see in Hawaii that you can't see here, you know."

He shook his head and took a sip of his coffee, snickering at the mere suggestion of spending money on plane tickets and gaudy beach-themed hotels. Martin turned the page and glanced over the daily box scores, his eyes scanning the loosely assembled network of numbers and abbreviations common to the game of baseball.

"Sox lose again. Unbelievable," he lamented.

Martin slowly withdrew from his reading ritual and realized that his daughter was still sitting at the table silently with her hands folded politely out in front of her. He cleared his throat and looked up in an attempt to salvage the dead-end conversation, reluctantly noticing that she hadn't spoken in several minutes. Her sad, defeated gaze was locked on to some nondescript spot on the wooden surface of the old family dinner table where a happy family used to sit and eat. Maggie was young and beautiful, and as her father always told her, too smart for her own good. As they finally made eye contact, Martin felt the troubling sense that his daughter was going to scold him; or worse, employ a guilt-ridden tirade that he was no stranger to receiving. Quickly, as if he were trying to beat

her to the punch, Martin grabbed his coffee cup and held it up.

"How about I make you a cup? You look like you could use it," he said and motioned to the coffee maker.

"No, Dad, I'm OK. Thanks, though."

Although some caffeine would have been a welcome treat, Maggie had always hated the way her dad made coffee. It tasted like it was brewed with dirt and tap water and he never used any cream or sugar to mask the putrid flavor.

"Well, I don't know, Dad," said Martin's daughter, quickly re-routing his attempt to change the subject.

"There are great beaches. The culture is a little different. It's a great place to relax. I think you'd love it. Besides, when was the last time you got out of this house?"

They both gazed up at their surroundings. Martin's house was built in the 40's and looked like it hadn't changed a bit since then. The ceilings were covered in stucco, the walls paved in a faded beige paper that transformed the otherwise normal residence into a geriatric fun-house. It smelled like a bouquet of different fragrances from the homemade candles her father would patch together using the wax from the old, burnt out ones.

"Oh, you know me," he said. "I don't need to go anywhere. I'm perfectly happy here."

"Doing what?" Maggie laughed. "Yard work?"

The phrase had become an unspoken joke of the family for years, because it was the way that Martin released his obligations to anything or anyone but himself. "Yard work" had become synonymous with his absence, because even when he was working around the house, in the garden or on the lawn, he always had more yard work to do.

"Well, yes. You know, Maggie, the yard's not gonna take care of itself. Why do you think it looks so good all of the time?" said Martin, his pompous tone caused Maggie to wince as the words went in and out of her ears.

In truth, however, it did look good. The beautiful green lawn was perfectly edged and mowed every other day, and on the other days it was fertilized and watered by hand. The driveway and surrounding sidewalks were swept and sprayed. The flower beds were lively and colorful. Butterflies bobbed about and got swept aside by the warm, gentle breeze that passed through. The raised vegetable garden was beaming with pumpkins, cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes, eggplant and okra. The yard and the garden were his only pastime, and unlike anything else in his life, they brought Martin an immeasurable sense of pride and joy.

It made Maggie sick.

She wished that her father, now approaching his late-middle age, was more outgoing, more daring, more available for adventure. Instead, he loafed around his house and spent his time in the yard, pulling weeds and meticulously spot-watering.

"Don't get upset, Dad. I was just thinking it would be nice to finally see you enjoy yourself on vacation," said Maggie. "You know, despite being a total homebody, you're still a part of the family. We'd love to have you there for once."

"Listen, Maggie, I'm not—"

"It would make everyone really happy if you could come," she interjected. "You know, you wouldn't even have to pay for your plane ticket."

At the mention of this her father slammed the paper down onto the table, his anger and frustration finally getting the best of him. He got up, spun around, and stormed over to the large bay window in the kitchen. He put his hands on the edge of the sink, drew his breath, and exuded a long-drawn-out sigh like a child who didn't want to eat his peas. Maggie could see that her father was staring longingly in the direction of the garden.

"I'm not going," he said. "I don't know why the hell I would fly all the way to Hawaii to relax when I can relax and

be happy here. I've got a ton of work to do and I wouldn't be able to enjoy myself knowing that the yard needs to be taken care of."

Realizing that there was no way that she could convince her father to change his mind, she finally relented. Out of respect for the man that raised her, she talked to him for a few minutes about things like sports and finances. He surprised her when he briefly asked how her mother was doing.

"She's fine," said Maggie, knowing that her father didn't actually care and had probably stopped listening. "She's happy."

After all avenues of possible conversation had been exhausted, she hugged him tenderly and she said goodbye, then hopped in her car and drove away. Maggie had this conversation with Martin every year. She would beg him to attend the family vacation and he would refuse, making up some excuse that usually had to do with him taking care of the house. He had become stubborn in his older age, nothing like the carefree and spontaneous man she had known as a child.

Martin waved goodbye and walked back in the house, relieved that his daughter had left. She had become so indignant and fussy since she had returned from college, a far cry from the quiet girl he raised. Sometimes he wondered if she hated him, but this thought was as fleeting as a rose in bloom. Without wasting any more time, he grabbed a Coke from the fridge and walked into the garage to grab his knee pads and gardening gloves. They were caked with dirt and grime, truly the unsung champions of the yard. Outside, the sun was warm on the back of his neck. The constant hum of leaf blowers and lawn mowers reminded Martin of all the money his neighbors were wasting only to have someone else enjoy the best part of homeownership. At this point in his life, Martin was sure that having a yard and garden to tend to was the great reward that all good men should strive to

achieve. There was no profession noble enough that could not afford a man some land of his own to mold.

Martin wandered down the small path that wound through the backyard. He stopped at the bougainvillea, captured by its intense and rugged beauty. He put his hands on his hips and stood there in pure admiration of the giant flora, inhaling and exhaling in a deeply satisfying and congratulatory way. Six months ago, the unruly plant had been wrapping itself around the west wall of his home, which was clearly the domain of the birds of paradise. He spent a few weeks manicuring the great bush until it crept back to the southern wall where it belonged. Martin loved the way the plants behaved, because unlike children, they do as they are told with proper care and attentiveness. Sometimes he wished his daughter would be more like the bougainvillea.

He continued down to the garden, past the hibiscus and the fig tree, down around the ferns and the lavender until he came upon the crown jewel: the vegetable garden. Martin's vegetables were absolutely exquisite in their quality and presentation. The peppers were spicy but equally sweet, the tomatoes were juicy and flavorful, and the pumpkins were massive and ready to be made into pie. The okra wanted to be washed and fried. The cucumbers begged to be pickled. He conversed with the plants as he fed them, laughing and giggling like a child playing with his toys. In his retirement, he had taken to spending hours working and talking to his plants like this every day. He seldom left the comfort of his own home, only making short trips to the bank and the supermarket and sometimes the home improvement store if he decided that he needed new gardening tools or yard decorations.

Martin worked the soil and pulled weeds, stopping every once in a while to drink from the garden hose. As the sun began to set, Martin gathered his things to take back up to the shed. Before leaving the garden for the day, and as casually as he did anything in his old age, he

put the tip of his finger in his mouth, sucked on it a bit, and then plunged it deep into the dirt. He pulled it up, inspected the soil covered digit for a second, and then put it back in his mouth. He swished the dirt and saliva around his tongue and then swallowed it. He sat there deep in thought, and then, seemingly satisfied with its taste, stood up and began to walk up the path towards his home. He could remember the first time Maggie saw him performing the “taste test”.

“Dad, tell me you didn’t just eat the dirt,” she had said.

“Honey, I’m not eating the dirt. I’m tasting it to see if it’s too acidic. You know, you can tell a lot about the health of your plants if you taste the dirt around them. It also shows them a level of trust that you have in them. They appreciate it,” said Martin.

The following morning Martin woke and went about his usual routine. He made himself a cup of coffee, retrieved the paper from the driveway, and then walked around the side of the house to spend some time in the yard. Outside, the morning air was unusually chilly and the sun was just peeking out from over the distant foothills. Dew speckled the plants and the grass and the multitudes of bugs were beginning to emerge to begin their various tasks. Martin continued down the path to the garden, smiling as he stopped periodically to inspect the foliage. His roses, which guarded the eastern border of the property, were about ready to explode. They had been pruned perfectly and the flowers would be in bloom any day now.

He arrived at the little clearing that housed the vegetables. The dirt was wet and the garden was glowing with excitement. He knelt down and began to plot the next round of crops that he would tend to.

“Peas there, butternut squash here. Oh, how nice it must be to be a vegetable!”, he thought to himself.

Just as Martin began to put on his gloves, the

telephone in the kitchen began to ring. He begrudgingly returned to the house but in no rush to actually answer the call. He would have to allow the yard to heat up a little bit before he would begin his work on it, anyways. Today was mowing, edging, and trimming the bushes in the front, and of course, working the garden a bit. As he walked to the kitchen to refill his mug he saw that the caller had left a message on his answering machine. He knew who it was from, as only one person still called him on the phone anymore. He approached it and pressed the glowing 'play' button.

"Hi Dad! Just wanted to let you know where we'll be staying and how you can contact me if you need to. You're probably out back and you don't need to call me back. We don't leave until tomorrow—so, if you changed your mind, we could see if there was a way to get you there? I know it's a long shot. Anyways, Dad, here's the address and the phone number..."

As Maggie read off the information like a droning hound, Martin pondered the idea of planting radishes. He dreamed of growing yellow onions and sweet corn. He thought about different methods of irrigation and perhaps transitioning to a 100% pure organic fertilizer (he loved the smell of fresh manure anyways). The machine suddenly stopped and emitted a loud beeping sound to signal the end of the message. Martin would write down the information later, though he really didn't know why he needed it. His daughter would be fine. She needed to stop worrying so much about him.

"Leave me alone and let me do my work!" he proclaimed to the empty house. As he returned to the garden, he felt a wave of jealousy for the vegetables that didn't have nagging daughters to deal with.

By noon Martin was completely drained of energy. He was dripping wet with perspiration and his clothes were covered in dirt and grass stains. His skin was slightly burnt and his stomach was yelling at him, letting him know that

he was hungry. Martin, in a fit of jealousy, dreamed of the wonders of photosynthesis.

But the yard looked good.

He went down to the garden to make a checklist for later. Weeds, tilling, spot watering, good conversation were all on the list of things to be done. As he finished writing he gazed down upon the pumpkins, glowing in the sun, the shiny orange rind sitting upon the finely-tuned earth. He suddenly thought about how he didn't want to deal with his daughter anymore, get asked about family vacations, or anything besides be in the garden. It was selfish for his daughter to continue to ask him for things he couldn't provide. As he stood admiring the pumpkins, Martin felt a strange sense of envy arise within himself. It was then that Martin decided that if he couldn't be a pumpkin, he could at least act like one. He figured it couldn't be too hard: just sit there and do nothing. To Martin, there was no better way to spend the afternoon.

After looking to make sure that his neighbors weren't peeking over the fence, Martin removed his clothing, gloves, shoes, and then sat in the garden, right in the middle of the pumpkins. He brought his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his shins to make a tight, compact ball of human flesh that hardly resembled a pumpkin. He sat there in the sun and soaked up its rays, trying to synthesize the light into energy. He pretended that his skin was a tough orange rind like a pumpkin, and that his guts were long stringy fibers that produced seeds.

"Maybe if I feel like a vegetable, I can be a vegetable!" he thought excitedly.

Every day for the next few weeks, Martin sat naked with the pumpkins. It had become a ritualistic endeavor. He stopped making his coffee, he stopped reading the paper or checking the box scores. He even stopped going to the market and the bank, which were his only few connections to the world that existed outside of the garden. He stopped checking the answering machine

and never bothered to call his daughter back, and in fact, forgot about everything else entirely. He would wake and go immediately to the garden where he would sit with the pumpkins. His skin began to turn dark orange in color, and the constant abuse of the sun was scarring his flesh, causing it to become tough and thick. He found that sleeping inside the house was becoming much too uncomfortable to get proper rest, so he tried putting some soil from the garden in between his sheets, but even that felt even more suffocating to him. Martin stopped sleeping in the house altogether, as he couldn't bear the thought of leaving his garden even for a second. Eventually, without his constant and delicate care, his other vegetables started to die and rot away. The bugs came and ate the decaying food, the flies laid their eggs in the flesh of the plants and maggots began to appear and crawl around the dying lot. But vegetables didn't care about anything, so neither did Martin. He sat there without moving until he forgot he was human.

A few weeks later, Maggie parked her car in her father's driveway. She felt refreshed and energized after returning home from the tropical vacation with the family. Her newly tanned complexion shined vibrantly through the light covering of her Hawaiian sarong. Although she hadn't spoken to her father since she left, it wasn't totally out of the ordinary for him. She knew he was stubborn and she tried to give him his space, even if it was just 'yard work'. As she walked up the path to the home she noticed that the grass on the lawn was overgrown and there were leaves strewn across the sidewalk. The flower beds were green with the new growth of weeds and it looked as if the mail had been piling up for weeks. The sight of the unkempt yard caused Maggie to become a bit frantic and, after knocking on the front door for a few minutes, convinced herself that her father must be in the backyard working. She walked around the side of the house and opened the gate, quickly making her way down the path through the

yard. She continued past the bougainvillea and the birds of paradise, and the roses and the ferns, and the flowers, and finally came upon the vegetable garden where she stopped, petrified in horror.

Amongst the insects and the piles of rotting organic matter sat a large and hideously deformed pumpkin. It was bulbous and grotesque yet magnificently ripe, and from the spot on the path where Maggie stood screaming, it almost resembled her father.