

The Wangs

From his wide and boundless porch, Fanchion Gundula watched his lawn growing, measuring in his darkened retina the sharp fickle blades of fescue rising slowly to pluck out the wisdom of the sun. His seven year old was playing quietly with a doll on the porch swing of the large, Victorian-style wood house that he and his wife Shelia had bought two- years earlier. A large dark sedan – the windows darkened as well – drove leisurely by in the street, gravel cracking under heavy wide tires, and for a moment he thought he recognized the car but decided a few seconds later that he was mistaken.

He leaned against one of the porch pillars and gazed up into the sky.

The night before there had been thunder and a trickle of lightning, but no rain, and now the lawn was beginning to bake. On either side of him, the neighbor houses had fifty-year-old elms and oaks casting deep purple slashes of shade, but in front of his house was just a stick beech tree he had planted the spring before, and now the thermometer nailed to the post next to the rock porch steps was reading close to a hundred degrees as the afternoon sun bent down on his lawn, turning the greenery into mirrors of burning light and scorching every blade of his prized lawn slightly browner that it had been just an hour earlier. He stepped off the porch. Sweat bubbled on his forehead. In the backyard next door where the James lived, he could hear the boys, Gus and Jimmie, playing basketball. A delivery van rattled by just then, the driver hunched over the wheel intent on finding a certain address, his hands large wrenches. Fanchion waved at the driver, but the driver never saw him so the wave was not returned.

At first, Fanchion had not been keen on moving here. All of the houses were from a different era; old, sure breeders of steady maintenance, and he felt he had neither the time nor the skills to keep up. The thought of having to deal with a ruptured hot water tank in the middle of the night caused him to cringe, or climbing a ladder to make repairs on a leaking roof just after a hailstorm only because the roofing companies were too busy to do anything right away often made him lose sleep. It was never anything specific, just little horrors prancing around in his imagination; still, he felt haunted by what he considered an over-the-hill “old lady.” Nevertheless, after the first year and not a one of these

imagined fears materialized, he began to settle in, to feel fear giving way with the realization that the old lady was holding up pretty damn well.

The James boys – he could hear them as he strolled along the walk studying the different blades of grass – were making a big game of their play. They were natural achievers, leaders, strong and indifferent to what life might throw out at them because they confidently believed that in the end, the day would always be theirs. This steely ideal emanated from their father, who was even taller and more gifted than his children, and who sometimes joined them in a game. Clyde James was a resourceful and respected attorney with long-arm political connections, a successful businessman, and a rancher envied by many; just last fall he was elected the town's mayor, and in January was invited to the White House along with thirty-one small town mayors. On CNN, he caught a brief glimpse of Clyde W James shaking the President's grateful hand.

Partway down the concrete walk he stopped, surveying the length of the lawn with a confused stare. The sun seemed hottest here, a dooms day machine roasting the lawn's vitality, shriveling the blades of fescue right down to the roots. Just last week, before the heat started, and after a lengthy period of measured and careful feeding and watering, the lawn grew so fast he was having to mow every third day, and sometimes that wasn't enough. Even the owner of the local garden store was impressed, and the Avid Bloomer, a gardening column in the Trinity Times, did a piece on him. "Lawn Success Story," the author T. B. Barnes called it, and mentioned Fanchion's name eleven times. *Eleven times!*

Now, disaster? The heat wave (as he well knew) had a forecast of 107 for today, and for tomorrow, it could break even that. He had increased the Rainbird's capacity, but the way the heat was zeroing in, he was not even sure that would save it, and so he had called the sprinkler company for their advice. He must have sounded frantic over the phone, and soon one of their technicians came out and readjusted the sprinkler heads and declared his belief that unless the earth spun dangerously close to the sun, Fanchion had little to worry about. Still, he couldn't help worrying, as he was doing now, pacing the sidewalk and glaring up at the angry boil high in the sky. He wanted to yell at the sun, "Go away!" But the cloudless sky painted an endless vista of dryness that the TV meteorologist on Channel 11 said could go on for several more days before there would even be a hint of rain.

The boys were jostling hard for the basketball, and for a moment his eyes hovered on them, watching their lengthy muscular arms making it look so easy, just the way their father did. Molly still played on the porch with the dolls, arranging them in a row so she could keep an eye on each one and making sure they were all behaving as they should, though sometimes she had to wag a finger at one of them just the same. She called them by their names, but he was too far away to hear any of them clearly enough. Restless, he went back and forth on the walk, his chin down, his eyes hooded against the hot stifling air.

Just then, the other neighbor, the one who lived in the large red brick house south of his own, came into view. He knew his name was Wang. He was tall, probably over six-five, with a balding scalp and jet black hair that gleamed, even at night. Wang never waved, hardly spoke. He lived with his wife and no one else. A childless marriage, Fanchion assumed. Wang's silence, his standoffishness, bothered Fanchion. Now, the man stood next to a hedge, smoking a pipe, indifferent to the heat.

Wang kept adjusting the pipe in his mouth as if unsure how to smoke it; perhaps this was his first time, and he was trying different angles to see what felt the best against his lips, his gums, the teeth. Fanchion stayed still, sweat dribbling like mountain streams down his leathery hard neck. He disliked Wang, but always felt an impulse to make friends with him somehow. He just didn't know how. Oddly, he wasn't even sure if Wang was the first or the last name. They had an unlisted phone number. That too seemed odd. The wife was a small woman who walked with her arms in front of her as if cradling some object. She had pale, thin skin, and dark auburn hair that was cropped short. She smiled, waved, and never spoke. She kept her distances too.

The basketball game, he noticed, had fallen silent. And Molly, he knew, had abandoned the dolls for the cool of indoors.

Wang stayed put, now puffing hard on the pipe, sending up wave after wave of light gray smoke as if signaling the wife that all was well. Almost out of habit Fanchion started towards where the man stood, but stopped, reversed course, and trudged slowly back up the walkway. His short brown hair lay like woven mats soaked against his scalp, his Polo shirt clumped under armpits sticky with uncontrolled drainage, his mind floating in the hotness up under his skull. Lightly, he went up each step, crossed the wood flooring of the large trellis porch, and went inside, the coolness like an arctic storm hitting him in the face.

Thirty minutes later, he reemerged into the lighted kingdom. Standing on the porch steps, he surveyed once again the lawn, his eyes jumping with minutia to each green stem shooting up out of the ground, and this time things looked differently, improved, and he wasn't sure why, so he went down a couple of steps and just stared. Yes, he could be right. The grass had rebounded somehow; it was greener, steadier, healthier, or was he just imagining things now? He eyed the neighbor's yard and saw that things were darker, richer in color. James always used the best, and it was showing. Next year, he reminded himself, he would budget more, purchasing the more expensive stuff, paying out the nose for the best advice, since no longer would he just be a junior law partner at Huxley, Dickson, & Watts, the law firm where he had been employed for the past three and half years; his workload could then include more high profile, satisfying cases, like the Clarkson lawsuit the firm worked on last spring. His eyes traveled away and stopped just below where the house and porch became a stony wall and where bushes, lilacs, syringe, and a large number of roses and azaleas unfolded arms of dark shrubbery like beggars vying for every ounce of light, and then, only a little more than halfway down the porch steps, a glass of iced tea still pinched firmly between forefinger and thumb, Fanchion Gundula came to a stop, muscles flexing but not moving as from out of the corner of the eye he could see Wang again, standing farther out in the yard than he had been before, bending over, and then unexpectedly the sharp rattling of a lawnmower engine.

From his vantage point Fanchion saw all of this as a wasp zinged past only feet from where he stood. The lawnmower turned its growling down into a smooth chopping sound. Wang straightened, his long frame casting an even longer shadow, and then the mower suddenly went quiet. Wang was bending over again, his forearms busy with something on the gas engine, perhaps doing an adjustment, though he hardly seemed the type who could understand the workings of a gasoline engine. When again Wang stood, he stepped back too, head titled in an inspecting mode. The mower sat there, looking new. He had never known Wang to mow his own yard; he had seen a lawn company doing the work before. Now, a new mower, yellow with bright green wheel spokes, stood there instead.

Wang jerked the mower back into life and robbed the engine's angry start-up into an almost inaudible droning sound. Fanchion stepped completely free of the steps, ignoring a second wasp as it too buzzed by. Wang had stopped and was looking back up at the house where a window shade quietly went closed. Taking a few steps more, Fanchion glimpsed a nest of wasps in the far high eaves

of Wang's house, watched as they dive-bombed, rolled, and seemed to be coming straight for him. Wang was pushing the mower, his head shaded by a ball cap, his big boned back curved as he followed the machine's self-propulsion. The wasps disappeared into thin air as Wang reached the property line, pulled frantically at the mower, and then headed in the other direction. By now, Fanchion was at the end of his walkway, nearer the street, and watched as Wang moved away from him.

Wang was oblivious as he followed the course of the mower, his ball cap pitched forward over his large forehead, his slender fingers gripping the handle, his large feet falling down to earth and then lifting up like a herd animal heading towards a watering hole. When he was finished with the swath, he stopped, pushed the cap back, and again looked towards the house. There was nothing to see. The curtain did not move, and with nothing happening Wang directed the mower on a new course and began following it, each foot repeating what earlier had occurred, until a second swath had been nearly completed. Fanchion, at the curb, glass still in hand, stared. Wang was coming directly towards him now, but his eyes never left the mower, his feet rising and falling, a strange countenance about his face.

Fanchion started towards him, stopped, and waited. Wang came to a stop as well; he stood straight but never looked in the direction of Fanchion – instead, his eyes went towards the house, and again, with nothing to see, he turned the mower around.

A third swath completed, Wang took away the cap, wiped his scalp, and looked up into the sky. A few weak clouds cluttered, bounced off each other. Wang's mouth screwed up tightly and he spit something out. Heat and grit stained his long face. He bent forward, his shadow becoming a ball on the lawn, his breath reduced to shallow gasps as he struggled with something on the mower. Fanchion walked towards the house, sunlight a tidal wave in front of him, the less-than-mechanical-minded Wang down on knees, his position obviously aching with fatigue. Fanchion went up the steps and down the porch, putting aside the iced tea, and from here he could see Gus James making a few, carefully placed free throws. The ball, still in the air, was slowing down as it approached the basket, and then sank cleanly through and died with a thud against the concrete below. Seeing Fanchion, Gus waved, extended an arm to retrieve the ball, and went for another goal, his feet leaping high off the court that also served for playing tennis. Behind Gus glittered the smooth blue-green surface of a swimming pool as this shot too went through the basketball sock.

The routine blended so well together like fine knitting that Fanchion didn't bother looking because he could hear the lawnmower once more, and looking back caught sight of Wang struggling to keep up. He gritted his teeth when he saw that this time dust and debris were flying about as Wang moved along. A deep *twang* signaled another basketball falling perfectly into the loop while Fanchion – alarmed at what he was seeing – began hurrying in Wang's direction.

Wang was on the other side of his yard, a dust cloud filling the air as the mower blades cut into raw earthy flesh. Behind him, a swath of ripped and torn grass seemed to smolder amid deep, torn ravines; black topsoil rose up above the butchered shards of Wang's lawn, and now he was turning the mower around, ball cap shoved back, his face almost too dark to really see. "Wang!" Fanchion called out. "Wang!"

By now he was almost alongside him, running. "Wang!" he screamed. "Stop, stop this!"

Wang ignored him with a blunt expression. He spat out into the air something Fanchion couldn't hear, then wheeled around for another run, the mower turning at nearly full speed, the air filling with dying, mauled roots and tiny bits of earth, and for a second Fanchion thought he heard them dying in agony over the loudness of the motor. Wang left him there, his face contorted, deep-set eyes glassy and wild, the mower plowing into the expansive, well-manured lawn as occasionally Wang glanced up at the house. Fanchion waited a full minute before running towards Wang, waving his arms, and crying as hard as any man could for him to stop, but Wang motioned him away and proceeded ripping a path of destruction and – goddamn it, Fanchion could see it now – grinning up at the house.

Fanchion glanced around for help, but at this hour of intense heat there was no one else to be seen. Wang's house, meanwhile, remained inactive, nothing moving, as Wang wheeled the death machine for another swipe. Fanchion watched him, a hopeless, helpless feeling crashing into his gut. When Wang passed for yet another kill, Fanchion rushed towards the house, ringing the doorbell and frantically pounding the door. When it opened, she stood there, arms folded across her chest, her face directed at him as if he really had no business being where he was. "Your husband," he blurted, hardly able to speak,

“your husband is killing the lawn, tearing it up. See! Stop him, stop him please!”

The wife’s eyes were stoic, unflinching. She looked past him at her husband, threw out two tiny frail hands in disbelief, and silently closed the door. Now, Fanchion could see the heavy smile on Wang’s face. The lawn was already half-killed, pulled up by the roots, sliced apart in heaps of blackened earth. He charged then, tossing his full weight against what Wang was doing, yet Wang was amazingly strong, his right arm coming out like a ramrod hitting Fanchion squarely in the chest. Fanchion instantly lost balance and tumbled down hard, sprawling like a wound-up towel to lay for a moment on the ground, gasping hard for air, Wang’s lawnmower biting the ground as earthly bits hit him even from that distance, and then he heard Wang’s wife, her voice shrill yet far away, floating like apple blossoms, the voice now rising and falling like a summer tide drowning in her laughter.

The End

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