

The Cheerful Spectator

Merle leaned on the railing of his sagging porch, careful not to put too much pressure on the rickety wooden spindles as he craned his neck to catch the conversation between the young couple next door, the tone of which had become decidedly terse. He grunted as the railing sighed but held under his impressive weight. The porch was built with his own hands, with love, nearly thirty years ago for his wife, Edie, so that they could sit and watch Merle, Jr. play on their neat little plot of grass that dipped sharply into a street pocked with gravel and holes. He hadn't bothered with painting it, though. Paint it once and you'll be painting the rest of your life, he'd explained to Edie and she, always so practical, had agreed.

He moved as quietly as his frame would allow, careful not to interrupt the heated exchange taking place just over the border between the yards. It was late afternoon of a Sunday quiet. Lawnmowers had been stowed for the week and children were being called in for dinner. Merle had been lost in thought in the frayed nylon seat of his dented aluminum lawn chair when the trouble started next door. It was where he spent a great deal of his time these days, and the once cheerful orange and yellow stripes had faded to a nondescript rust color. Across the porch from him rested an identical chair, though not nearly as worn, for it no longer served its purpose. He was lulled by the lengthening of the shadows and the occasional scents of kerosene and grilled meat as they wafted across his porch.

He knew by heart the customs of Sunday suburbia, even if he no longer played a role. Sundays no longer held any great meaning to Merle, not since his wife's passing

seven years before. Merle, Jr., too, made his departure not long after his mother and now lived out West and was busy with his own family and their Sunday dinners. Merle didn't blame his son for not visiting. He understood that it wasn't much of a home anymore without Edie. Her death had revealed a curious awkwardness between the man and his son that made them uneasy in each other's company. The occasional phone call suited them just fine, and after several moments of polite questions and answers, the men hung up, satisfied and grateful for another reprieve. Visitors were a rare occasion, and the tedium of the sameness of his life had awakened in Merle an unabashed delight in eavesdropping. It wasn't often that anything of interest was observed, relatively speaking, but it seemed that this day might prove the exception.

Careful to avoid splinters, he strained an inch further, his belly hanging over the edge. The couple next door certainly appeared to be discussing something of importance, causing the husband, Merle thought his name was Jeff, to push his hands through his lank, fair hair.

"Hmmp," Merle grunted, pulling a toothpick out of his mouth and scratching his belly under his sweat stained undershirt. "What are those two getting up to now?" He squinted at them in the bright July sunshine, trying to decipher the theme of their conversation. "Too close for comfort, but not close enough to hear," he grumbled.

Those young upstarts took over the Gleason's home six months ago and they'd been making changes ever since, he thought with a sort of befuddled annoyance. Perfectly nice house, Gleason's was, too. Hell, the Gleasons had lived there since before Merle and Edie had moved in with Merle, Jr. forty years before. Not a lick of work was

done to that house in all that time but those two yahoos moved in and suddenly nothing was good enough.

“Dang hotshots,” Merle muttered as he made his way gingerly down the whimpering wooden steps, careful not to step on the rotting board. He shuffled towards the overgrown hydrangeas that bordered the two properties, a choice spot for viewing and hearing without being observed.

If a sense of uneasiness had ever accompanied these types of actions, if he had at times considered that Edie most certainly would have felt horror and disgust at such unchristian behavior, he had long ago stifled his shame and given in to a sort of spinsterish nosiness. Always a good and decent man, he had succumbed to the perils of his situation, had shrunk in his thoughts and actions. The emptiness of his existence, his sense of being in some sort of grinding limbo, had chipped away at his principles.

He thought he might have to climb into the Hydrangeas to hear the two of them. The woman, Livvy, or was it Libby? She was right up in her husband’s face – Jeff, wasn’t it? Jeff was speaking to Libby or Livvy in a high-pitched voice. Merle inched a bit closer to hear.

“Lindsay, I cannot stress to you enough how important this dinner is for my career. To *us*! I need you . . . I really need you to just impress the pants off Mr. Kirby. I know he’s full of himself, but he’s my boss. Please, just promise me you’ll reign it in a bit for this one dinner?”

“Jesus Christ, Jeff! I can’t even believe you’re laying this on me. I really *cannot* believe it at all.”

Merle squinted through the foliage, seeing the wife's face flushed with indignation. Well, well, well. What have we here? Merle chuckled to himself. A little trouble in paradise, is it? The perfect world is crumbling?

“Lindsay.”

Merle recognized the tone Jeff was now using with just that one word. It was controlled but strained, exactly how Merle used to sound when he was reprimanding Merle, Jr. for not doing his chores.

He only ever had to use that tone once in a great while, though. Merle, Jr. had always been a good boy, he thought with something like nostalgia. And now he was clear across the country and only called home once in a great while. Well, well, he couldn't blame the boy. With his mother gone, home just wasn't the same.

Merle trained his ear back on the conversation across the hedge. The two were still sparring in the manner of an adult arguing with an adolescent child.

Not surprising, really, he reminded himself. From his limited dealings with Libby or Livvy, Merle had developed an impression that there was something a bit off about the pretty young woman. Simple, maybe? *Nothing in that head but fluff and dander*, Edie might have said if she were still alive. Merle continued to listen.

“You know you go overboard when we go out, Linds. And it's fine, it's usually no big deal, but for this dinner it *is!* Look, I just can't have my boss thinking there are issues at home or that I'll be distracted from work because I have a wife who can't. . .” His voice trailed off, probably at the expression on his wife's face, which looked, to Merle, a helluva lot like outrage.

“A wife who can’t what, Jeff? Who can’t what, exactly? You know what? You can go fuck yourself! Don’t worry about your pathetic wife who can’t hold her liquor! I’ll knock your little boss’s socks off. That I can promise!”

Merle watched in delighted disbelief as she stomped off, all irate curls and swinging hips. He didn’t know she had that in her. And that language! What had he been missing all this time? These neighbors were proving to be far more interesting than he could have imagined. And interesting was a welcome relief. He ever so gently parted the branches for a clearer view, making a mental note to trim the Hydrangeas just as soon as he could.

Jeff was standing still with his head down, in exasperation or dejection it was too difficult for Merle to comprehend. He watched as the young man walked, shoulders sagging, up the freshly painted steps of his little frame house and quietly shut the door behind him.

Chuckling again, Merle carefully returned to his perch on the porch in the rickety metal lawn chair. Little boss, indeed! He never would have thought that woman had it in her.

A while later he watched their snappy little sports car reverse down the drive, the two figures staring straight ahead. When their taillights had disappeared down the road, he edged slowly down his steps again, through a break in the hydrangeas, and over to the eye-level windows of the Gleason house, now painted a bright cheerful yellow. Peering in, his eyebrows hefted deep creases into his forehead as he surveyed the unfinished paint job in the living room, books scattered on the floor and an empty wine glass sitting guiltily erect on the smeared glass coffee table.

Well, this was certainly unexpected. He'd been too busy watching their feverish work on the façade to pay attention to what was going on inside, which clearly was far more pleasing. Edie would have noticed it, if she'd been here. Hell, by now she'd have had Libby or Livvy running over every day to have a chat. Edie was like that. Tough as nails, she was. No nonsense, that woman, but she was always kind. And she had a soft spot for misfits. Yes, indeed, she'd have straightened out that young woman 'lickety split, and then some. Merle sighed.

When he pushed back home through the hedge and stepped onto the crabgrass of his own property, the thrill of discovering the young couple's strife ebbed away. He saw before him the shabby remains of a life, and the realization that it was the detritus of his own nearly took his breath away. He was overcome with the vertiginous feeling of time passing too quickly. He had once been a young man, with a job and a wife and a son, and now it was all gone and nothing of substance remained. He clutched at the branches with one hand and swiped an arm across his damp face, clearing the sweat that stung his eyes. His house stood before him, a shell, the heart gone out of it, and it touched a part of him that he forgotten existed.

He closed his eyes and for a moment he saw it as it once had been: a tidy frame home with a well-tended plot of grass where a fair haired boy in overalls played with a little toy airplane as his parents looked on, side by side, from a wooden porch so new it still smelled of pine. Merle filled his lungs and closed his eyes, holding the moment.

Several hours later, Merle sat up straight in his porch chair where he had been dozing off and on since his visit to the Gleason's. Headlights were approaching,

announcing the young couple's return. He watched their car pull slowly down their driveway. He was positioned in such a way as to be hidden in the shadows yet still able to view the full front of the house and lawn and even a little bit into the living room. Even so, he stood for a better vantage point.

Craning his neck, he saw Jeff's upright figure in the driver's seat, motionless, and in the seat next to him the slumped form of his wife. Jeff's expression was inscrutable until he wearily opened his door and the car's interior light illuminated his pale, grim face.

Stepping slowly towards the passenger side, Jeff glanced towards where Merle stood in the shadows. When he opened the passenger door his wife's arm flopped out towards him and he gently folded it back onto her brightly patterned sundress. He lifted her up and set her on two unsteady legs. He wrapped one arm around her staggering figure as she mumbled something incoherent and then directed her in an unsteady line into the house, leaving the passenger door wide open behind him.

"Hoo-boy," Merle whistled quietly, his heart thumping. Through the window he saw the light go on in the living room and Jeff help his wife towards the couch, where she immediately disappeared from view. Jeff stood over her for a moment. She must have said something – Merle saw her arm rise up towards her husband and then drop. Jeff stood above her for another moment and then, shoulders sagging, wandered out of the room.

Merle sat back down into his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, thinking of the young man's stricken face. It reminded of that time little Merle's mutt got hit by a car right there in front of the house. He'd run into the kitchen where Merle was reading

the evening newspaper while Edie fixed dinner. The boy's face was as white as one of Edie's starched sheets and he just stood there with his hands hanging at his sides and his mouth wide open, almost like he was choking. Edie just dropped the pan she was holding, dropped it right there on the floor and grabbed the boy. Hugged him tight until he cried it out.

Merle stood again and looked from the house to the car, its feeble overhead light puddling onto the gravel drive, and back at the house again. He narrowed his eyes. That overhead light would drain the battery dead as dust in no time if Jeff didn't get back out there and shut the door. The boy usually left for work right at 8:30 am and waiting for a tow truck to give him a jump could take hours. Merle whistled softly again, thinking about the boss. Hell, if Jeff was late to work after what had surely been a disaster of a dinner? That would be the nail in the coffin, yes sir it would.

Merle absently chewed on his toothpick a moment longer, until the lights went out next door. Then he felt his way down the groaning steps, pushed through the break in the hydrangeas, shuffled over to the car and very quietly shut the door. He looked up at the house for a minute, taking in the freshly painted siding and the pots on the steps with the bright pink geraniums and spilling ivy.

He didn't bother going back home through the bushes. Hands in his pockets, pulling his shoulders back, he rambled down the drive to the sidewalk, back up the protesting steps and into his house, turning on the porch light before gently closing the door.