

## KEEP OFF THE GRASS

Lola doesn't particularly like her father, but says she's learning to tolerate him. Gerald doesn't particularly like her either, and he learned to accept her. Accept all the traces of her mother in her— the sturdy frame flinching under conciliatory hugs, the pinched sighs whenever he scream-yawns off an early shift, the endless impatience for something less lacking to fill his space. He sees it all, yet presses on, a stubborn thistle matted into Lola's world.

And so, today is a special day for Gerald. Wimbledon is in the works – three weeks away, and it's the final stretch of straightening out the grounds. Well, he isn't actually part of the grounds staff. No, he's *just a gardener* and not even part of the full time annual team at that. *A sub*, Lola would spit to a fellow ball boy or girl who dared proffer a curiosity at the man sullenly waiting for her after training sessions. He'll feebly wave hello, his soil stained palm crumpling as she rolls her eyes and lurches off with the rest of the chosen ones of last years' crop.

But today is different, Gerald can feel it. The new season's hiring process is underway, and he is in the last round. He practiced all year long to qualify, the back laundry closet of the flat exploding with troughs of ryegrass and fescue in all stages of growth, from germinated seedlings to wispy ruddy tipped bolts, endless shearings littering the linoleum tiles. He stress tested the various controls near the dryer, by a drafty window, under a leaky pipe, in the dim corner of the corridor, and even inside the frail part of the wall where the neighbours' shrill singing parses through. Tennis balls, each of varying give, lined the window sills, and seven hand grippers hung on available ridges, taunting him into dexterity and strength drills. He's ready, all variables

neutralized, his reflexes trained to respond to the slightest spin of the elements. No one would ever again question the decisiveness of his slice, or whether his left eye was too lazy to see.

He was on the A team once before, back when Middle Sundays were never played, the grass courts allowed to rest and bounce back. Back before all of the millions of pounds funneled through the Sports Turf Research Institute delivered *superior product* with the *utmost resilience* and the sod was more art than science. Back when there was a poetry, a wistfulness, a lust for the strawberries and not the photos.

He was a mere scamp in those days, a rare twenty-three year old granted an apprenticeship with the grounds team. Yet it wasn't surprising, really. Planting was his life. *Work the soil, work your soul*, as his father would say. Of course, his father was more of the potato stock, following in his father's footsteps, who followed his father's father's footsteps, and so on and so on all the way back into the days of the king's privilege and such. At the turn of the century, Gerald, inspired by the regale of a new millennium, tirelessly read every and any gardening tip issued by the Wimbledon Head Groundskeeper for insights into its elevated world. His resolve rose him over those ivy frocked walls and he promised to flourish.

His two years of apprenticeship were the *most electrifying years* of his life, Gerald would often belch to any lingerer at the bar unwittingly blinded by the fading sun while facing him. That's where he met her mother, *yer know*. Tereza, *Czech for harvester*, she would smile. *Reaper, more like*, he would later snort between lagers. He spotted her first, snuggled amidst strawberries, callously flinging cream at stiff patrons, all the while tutting gutturally under her breath "do not understand...I would not pay

more 10 koruna, pah, get it in my garden!” She captivated him, her round, pillowy figure, straight straw hair and wide teeth shining brighter than all the starched customers and their coins. He hung back at closing one fateful July evening, and as she struggled to heave a soggy rubbish bag into the dumpster, he swooped in, catching the mushy bottom before it fell to the asphalt. She glanced at him quizzically, eyebrow aloft, then shrugged and let go. She watched this wiry man lug the remaining refuse up and over the edge, eventually asking with a hand on her hip, “Do you like honey?” They spent the remaining evenings of the championship under the stands, exchanging apple crunches for sweet kisses.

The romance was short, the pregnancy quick, and the relationship severed by his failures. Lola was barely trotting before Tereza, humiliated by her husband’s flooding of the Centre Court in 2009 –*They build you roof and you ruin us still!* – was swooped away by a Serbian grandmaster who saw an opening on the grounds. She ran off promising to bring Lola to Monaco once settled, only to never recall the thought again.

And so, Gerald slowly rebuilt his esteem over the past decade, getting odd jobs here and there with local neighbourhood landscaping crews, tending to hope with the excruciating intensity of a desperate and unrepentant man. When Lola’s private school opened tryouts for ball boys and girls, he funneled her into the aperture. He was thankful the years and money spent fighting to fit in left her with a spine reinforced by spite. She towered a league apart from the over-logged full tuition girls, neck daringly firm, shoulders gripped back. Her intense focus and utmost respect for authority, built out of endlessly ignoring and snubbing him, made her a natural for the post.

And of course, so did her reign over the three inch bounce.

The elusive three inch bounce.

Many a teen crumbled when the Scherzinger missile glided past the proper height, to be then annexed to the wings and eventually off the grounds. Yet Lola held the record for consistency, alacrity and speed, gathering the ire of many a rival. The animosity in the ranks peaked last summer when a renowned Belarusian force held Lola's gaze in admiration for more than four seconds, and even, as legend had it—asked her for a fresh towel mid-match so the camera may linger and broadcast the talent. The girl, without missing a beat, nodded in assent and delivered what many credit as the game-saving sweat absorber.

Yes, Gerald is proud of his progeny, yet deep in his bowels he still feels the regurgitations of past scorns and longs for absolution. For the past four years as a probational seasonal gardener, he honed his craft, circulating between the two hundred and four hanging petunia baskets with his wand, quenching window boxes so fastidiously that he finally was granted a chance at the most essential of the Wimble-scaping garden tasks: shaping topiaries. Typically this was reserved for the finesse of the full time team, but Head Gardener Bertie, having once served on the courts with him during a particularly dry summer, remembered his grit and gave him a bone.

One topiary.

Nestled in the back corner of The Hill, near the Ticket Resale booth, was a scrawny hedge. Gerald nursed this shrub back to health and saved it from the chopping block, tenderly pruning and shaping its wayward fronds into what became reputed as the best backdrop for a quick snap when waiting for a friend by the toilets. Due to the

miraculous recovery of this shrub, Bertie put in a kind word to Head Groundsman Milbourne as they looked for two new staff to complete the thirty five for the new season.

And so, today is the day. The day to settle the doubts on his manhood, the day to outcompete. The day to one day roam the gardens a head above the gnomes and swagger over the courts chiding “Keep off the grass! Staff upkeep only!”

The first two rounds of the interview were simple; a written test to check basic knowledge followed by a visual identification round to determine the chlorophyllic ailments of patches of ryegrass and prescribe necessary remediations. The final heat, however, is the most excruciating.

The 8mm snip.

Not a millimetre more, or you’ll have to face the racket slamming wrath of a newly defeated reigning champion. Not a millimetre more, or your head is on the chopping block.

This round starts like every other— small, dimly lit room. Shuttered windows. Cold, steely silence. The Head Groundsman sits behind a fold up table while three mobile patches of grass are parked in the middle in descending order of height, from half a meter to 13mm. Strange, the command these blades hold over men far more ruthless than he.

Gerald seizes the mower wordlessly. The hours, days, months, years spent snipping grass by hand to “get a feel” for the look of 8mm pulse in his muscles. He kneels briefly, thumbs its undercarriage to check its sharpness, and pats the steed acknowledging its might. He straightens and with an exhale pulls the motor cord.

He pushes the sputtering horse over the first unruly patch. *Ah, easy. There's extra – room for error.* He swipes up in the opposite direction for the stripe. *Good. Easy does it, girl.*

Without bothering to look up at his evaluator, he moves on. No need, perfection is the expectation. No “good job” here, just do what you’re supposed to. The next patch is 5cm. Tricky, irregular. He takes a deep breath, steadies his left eye, and pushes through. Looking down, he hesitates, *did I miss a blade*, but fatefully recognizes the ruse of a swinging lamp’s shadow. Another stripe, another set.

And now, the 13mm. Not that the off season length doesn’t have its merits, but the grass must be tapered to tournament standards. Holding his breath, he hovers the mower over the lip and—

“KEEEEEEEEEEEAAW!” A screech from the pigeon-preying Wimbledon hawk Rufus pierces the walls and Gerald falters, the machine swooping to the right with his buckling knee.

Head Groundsman Melbourne snaps his binder shut, pushes his chair from the table, and leaves the room. The two head apprentice groundsman file suit, casting an eye at Gerald wilting on the floor in disgust.

\*\*\*\*\*

On the tenth day of the tournament, Gerald was by the strawberries and cream booth, watering one of the majestic hydrangeas. He watched the water dribble down the planter, not caring if it touched the leaves and potentially opened her up to sun scorch.

*KEEP OFF THE GRASS*

He didn't care when he set the watering can in the middle of the entrance of Court No. 9. He didn't care as Lola fastidiously served the young American tennis star bounding to great heights. He didn't care when he saw Lola briefly turn her head and stare past him, a fleck of dirt that somehow got past the crisp whites in the stands.

He didn't even care when he noticed Jenna, green-eyed second ball girl in command, trail half a pound of grass seed over the court as she handed Lola a ball, a sound so slight, morsels so minute, yet so weighted in the echoes of his memory. Lola straightened back into her determined posture, and he noticed a hair was out of place. The summer was proving itself to be a scorcher, validating the weatherman's theatrics.

He does start to care when he notices Lola's gaze faltering from the heat, avoiding looking at anything directly.

He cares a bit more when he notices a gradually building flock of pigeons cooing over the lip of the railing.

He definitely cares when this clay flock begins to circle the court.

And as the first pigeon swoops in at the tennis star's feet, Rufus' screech pierces the stadium— "KEEEEEAAAAAAAAWW!" – shattering Gerald anew. The young American, in the heat of battle, does not notice the swarm above or the vermin below. She bounds after a volley only to buckle backwards over a smug pigeon. She smacks her head into the net post, racket soaring into the rafters, torso thudding into the court.

A frenzy of opportunistic birds erupts at the scene, competing to peck up any remaining morsels, the order out of order, while the same smug pigeon settles into the crook of the unconscious American's clavicle to clean its toes.

“KKKEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAWWWWWW!!” Rufus pierces louder, closer, faster.

Gerald double sprints to the court as Lola, caught amidst the tizzy of duty and squawking, valiantly tries to save her post, arms flapping, skin scratching. Amidst the flurry of feathers, she glimpses her father bounding towards her, eyes glinting, mouth gaping, pits sweating.

Within an instinct, she bounces a lime green missile to him.

Gerald loads his dexterous right hand, follows Rufus’ descent straight into the heart of America and lobs it.

“KEEP OFF THE GRASS, VERMIN.”

\*\*\*\*

Later, the young American tennis star would widely proclaim on the news that “a British groundsman saved me within 8mm of my life,” and the newly anointed Head Groundsman Gerald would smirk at her enthusiasm. He’d pace his august purview nobly, scrutinizing each sliver and slice. And, when he undoubtedly found yet another young apprentice lacking, would let the most conclusive call in all of Wimbledon reign forth: “Please. Keep off the grass.”