

The Yellow Bowl

Bettina poured a glass of lemonade. She always associated the taste with her father treating all the children to precious lemons in the summer when times were hard, and now lemons were so easy to come by. Well, if you have the money they are, and she stretched her Social Security as far as she could. Some things she allowed herself, though, simple as they were, cinnamon sticks in the wintertime, lemons in the summer, foodwise.

What she spent on her garden was outside reason, a necessity. Food was food, but when it was time to get her garden going again each year, she would eat less in the Spring months, so she could buy her damned prescriptions and get fertilizer. Since her brother Bob had gone into the nursing home and lost his farm, she had lost the free manure. She had her own compost pile going all the time, but ate so little, it was a piddling pile by Springtime, but rich in nutrients, and she would spread it on the ground and turn it in before planting her vegetable patch.

She was always dizzy now, between the heat and the little energy she could hold together to move forward each day. But everyone said the gardening was good for her and she didn't know what she'd do if they said it wasn't. She'd do it anyway. But she could hold onto the glass and hold on steady in her skimmer house shoes, until she reached the door, and she slipped them off, preferring bare feet for the outside. Marco, her cat, had learned to not trip her up, but followed along and waited for when she was still again, to rub against her shins and miaow.

The screen door slammed behind her. The early morning sun was on the front of the house now, so it was cool enough for her to tend to the back yard. She set the lemonade down on the wrought iron table and slowly sat down on the chair beside it. Just that walk from the kitchen to outside had winded her and she had learned to go slowly, but determinedly, about her gardening. Besides, from her chair she could both enjoy the Summer in late season, and decide what she needed to do first. There was always so much to do, that she had to pick one or two hard things and then a few easy ones, and leave the rest for another day. Some things were too hard for her but the grandson of Mr. Hendricks, who used to cut all the yards in the neighborhood, would still come by and help her out for a few dollars an hour. His name was Richard. Just last week he had helped her move the biggest limbs from the a storm, and then last night, another storm had sent limbs showering down over the whole yard again.

The Casablanca lilies needed staking again, after last night's storm, and she held herself back from running to them, where they stood at odd angles to the ground.

She needed to pick up the branches that had fallen in the storm, and rake. There were cherry tomatoes to pick, and she needed to spray for cutworms. She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Mixed in her breath was the scent of the lilies, the smell of the damp ground and wet leaves, and cool and humid air still fighting it out like it did this time of year. The ice cracked in the lemonade, and she watched the beads of sweat forming on the outside of the glass. Marco jumped up on the table, and started licking his paws, wet from the grass.

Well, the lilies first, of course, then the tree limbs, although some of them were very large and her back and knees made it hard to reach and then carry them. She could get the wheelbarrow out of the shed for that. And then harvest the vegetables and herbs. Then spray for bugs. Then time for an early morning rest and reading. She took a long drink from the glass of lemonade, because she had learned that the more fluids she had in the heat the longer she would last. Then, up on her feet again, despite the pain in her back and knees, and she was off toward the lilies.

The phone rang and she stopped. She let it ring, thankful for her daughter buying her that answering machine. Long past were her days of rushing to the phone, and she liked listening to the messages over and over again, if they were calls from people she liked. So, while the phone rang, she walked on the wet grass. Her housedress stuck to her back between her shoulder blades, and she even liked that. She loved the heat, loved the Summer, always had. Other people would complain about the heat, and usually she would stay silent, because people found it odd for someone to love the heat so much, but she did. She grew up playing in the scorching heat and humidity of Georgia, and looked forward to the Summer every year, although she had grown to love the freshness of Winter, the coziness of people in the wintertime.

Bettina reached the lilies and stopped to look deep inside the face of the closest one, getting her own kind of drunk on the smell. She shook her head, a little dizzier, but happy like a child. She loved how Summer could make you feel like a kid when you were 84. She loved being 84 and wouldn't go back and relive a thing, hard as it was, good as it was.

Her fingers ached, but she was used to doing what needed to be done in spite of that, and it was a sweet kind of pain to lift each lily from askew to straight again, and then retie the ties around the stems until they were all upright again, bright white faces shining at her. She imagined that they were thankful, that their circulation was better now. She reached down and picked up limbs that were among the base of the lilies and threw them toward the middle of the yard. That was fun. She was happy.

The mosquitoes were biting a little, not phased in the least by the Skin So Soft her daughter, Denise had given her at the beginning of the Summer, fearful of those West Nile mosquitos, but knowing that there was no keeping her Mother indoors. Well, well, no one had gotten it in this part of the state, so a little itching, big deal, that's part of Summer. She was a little tired already, but she went to the shed and got out the wheelbarrow and put it in the middle of the back yard, and then went back to the chair to rest. As she sat, she wondered who had called. At first she didn't really mind, but then curiosity got the better of her, so she went indoors to see who.

It was Denise, who was going to the store for a few things and wondered if she needed anything, and she did. Ordinarily, Denise would get things for her once a week, but today Bettina craved strawberries. She picked up the phone and went to the living room to sit down and call Denise from there, in case it took a while. Bettina was a woman of few words, unless she was talking about her garden, and had found a fellow gardener. Denise was one of those people who seemed afraid of silence, so even the simplest communication would take fifteen minutes. Bettina wondered often when Denise was able to breathe, or really if she did breathe, but that was just the way Denise was, nonstop, even now that the two children were grown.

Denise picked up the phone and began explaining the day's events and all the things she needed to pick up at the store and did she need anything from the store while she was out. Bettina smiled and said, if it's not too much trouble, could you pick me up a pint of strawberries? Of course, Denise said, and began repeating all the things that needed to be done and picked up the store. While she listened to Denise and waited for her to lose steam and realize that she was repeating herself, Bettina looked at the yellow glass bowl on the end table beside the couch. She didn't have many nice things, and it really wasn't such a nice thing, except to her. The color always reminded her of a dress she had had in high school, the way it felt when she put it on each time, how she felt like she was glowing and bright as a daffodil when she did.

Her family hadn't had much, like most people she knew, so special dresses were few and far between. She and her mother had picked out the fabric and her mother had sewn it from a drawing Bettina had made. It was simple and clean and smooth. It was a beautiful shade of yellow that reminded her of Summer, too, the brightness of the Sun, with white buttons. Things were so hard for the family all the time, it made her feel like she was lighting up the place wherever she went, and people would always smile at her even more the days she wore the dress.

Her husband saw the yellow bowl in New York when he went there one time to see his brother who had found a job there. It was in an antique store and he had walked right past it, but then he walked back because he remembered the yellow. It had reminded him of the dress. Bettina and he had gone to high school together and he loved it every time she would wear that dress. Some days he would hope that she had washed it the night before so she could wear it two days in a row. By that time, she had outgrown the dress and she had packed it up carefully in the attic.

The bowl was about the size of two hands cupped together, with lines cut into a star pattern in the bottom. The outside was handpainted and it glowed a sunny yellow. When he gave it to her he knew he had chosen well, because she beamed at him and they both remembered the dress and had a laugh.

Her husband was long gone now but she had beautiful memories of their life together. The bowl was one of the most favorite gifts he had ever given her, just simple and sweet and cheering.

Denise had never really been very interested in the dress when she was old enough to have worn it. It really didn't suit her personality, neither the style nor the color. Denise was always worrying or going off about something and Bettina had never really understood her temperament, but had always patiently encouraged her and supported her, loved her just the same. Denise had finally reached her point of closure on the phone and Bettina drew a sigh of relief. Okay, then, are you sure you don't need anything else? Okay, then we'll be by this afternoon. Bettina put down the phone after she heard the click and had a laugh and then thought about the strawberries and smiled.

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Marya saw the yard sale sign on her way to a new plant nursery she had heard about. The sign looked like it was made by children, the kind she liked. It was one of those that had arrows and pointed to other signs with more arrows until she had made four or five turns into neighborhoods of older and older houses. When she saw the last sign that said "This is It!" she parked her car. The familiar pounding of the heart started and she smiled, but she also knew that sometimes she would be disappointed, so she opened her mind to anything. There were a lot of cars around and a lot of people rummaging through things on the front lawn. There was a woman talking nervously on her cell phone and moving from one person to another making comments on this thing or that.

"This just happened so suddenly – we still can't believe it – this is all just so sudden – we can work with you on the price of that lawnmower – it still works but I know

you could get a new one, I mean technically it's an antique but I know you could get a new one – that mixer sure has made a lot of cakes over the years – of course you could get a new one, but ... “ The woman seemed very kind but Marya walked past her quickly and went into the house.

The house was very simple but very warm and classic. This was the kind of yard sale she loved, where there were nice, simple things that were well cared for. Marya looked admiringly at the shining coffee table, the sheer white curtains that were clean and let in lots of light, the solid teal couch with curved wooden arm rests and elegant feet. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the yellow bowl. It seemed both out of place with the color scheme and like a jewel at the same time. It seemed to be glowing with internal light, although it was not in the path of the light streaming through the windows. She picked it up and suddenly flashed on a garden. She turned her head and looked through the living room to the kitchen and saw that the back door was open, except for a screen door, and that there was a garden there. She smiled.

She had a strong feeling that she sometimes had in yard sales like these, where someone was no longer living in their home and hadn't wanted to leave. She greeted the entity and sent her best wishes. In return she felt a wave of excitement and again the rush of images from the garden.

She carried the bowl with her, definitely deciding to make it part of her life, walked to the screen door and stopped. Sure enough, it was the garden she had just flashed on. It was in disarray, but only slightly. She could see the structure and care its former owner had taken with tending it. She felt the presence of the entity even more strongly, warmly and excitedly. A cat came up to the screen door, looked up at her and miaowed to be let in. Marya opened the screen door carefully and the cat came in and began rubbing her ankles with quick side passes. She held the door open and walked halfway through and then let the cat decide whether to go in or out. The cat decided to come out with her.

Marya walked from one corner of the garden to the next, admiring the old timey flowers like Black Eyed Susans and Daisies, Tiger Lilies and orange field lilies, and the huge hydrangea bushes with white snowball blooms. She remembered the field lilies she had seen while driving out in the country, proof of a house being there a long time ago. Overhead the old trees arched and swayed in the breeze. The vegetable garden was full of unpicked zucchini and tomatoes and one of the tomato cages had toppled over. Marya righted the cage and felt as if she had done a friend a huge favor. She didn't want to leave.

Marya lived in an apartment and had been looking for the right house for a long time, saving her money, looking at house after house and not finding the one that felt right, knowing that one day one of the houses would. She took a deep breath in the dappled sunlight and reached out the tip of her foot to move a leaf off some deep green moss under one of the trees. Yes, this one felt right. She took another deep breath and steeled herself – maybe the house wasn't for sale. She had to be open to that possibility, too.

She walked back through the house and to the front yard where the woman was still on the cell phone. Marya got closer to her and indicated that she would like to talk. It seemed like the woman couldn't seem to finish her conversation, and then the person on the other end seemed to abruptly interrupt and say they had to go – “Okay, well, if you're sure – okay, okay, I'll see you tonight then.” The woman quickly turned to Marya and said, “Hello, can I help you with anything?”

The house was for sale, after all. And it was reasonable. Marya would be able to afford it, she thought. She and the woman made a lunch date for the following Saturday to talk about it further. The phone rang again and the woman was spinning off again into a new conversation. Marya grinned and took a deep breath and went into the house again, feeling this lovely presence in the air and the cat rubbing up against her shins again. She picked up the cat and walked out the back door, to sit in the chair by the table. Marya put the yellow bowl on the table and it shone in the sunlight. She breathed again. This place felt perfect. “Kitty, do you want a new Mom?” The cat kneaded her legs and began to curl into a ball. “Guess so,” Marya said, still grinning, hoping that the cat came with the house.

Amy Jackson
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