

## Happy anniversary

Harvey's love for his lawn was pure and unconditional. He maintained it with unwavering diligence. After dinner each evening, he quietly slid his chair back from the table, placed his napkin neatly beside his plate and disappeared without a word into the darkness. Alice peered out through the glass sliding doors and saw his blurry form pacing up and down the yard, head down, looking for blemishes or inconsistencies. He sometimes retrieved his head-torch from the shed, where it hung on a hook marked 'head-torches', and she could see the pinprick of light moving back and forth, like a beacon in the inky blackness.

Alice woke every morning to find the other half of the bed cool and empty. She stretched out her arms and legs and lay beneath the duvet like a starfish, thinking of Harvey in his dressing gown, gently removing rogue weeds with his soft hands. She looked out their bedroom window and saw him there, pale in the morning light, and wondered if he had ever come to bed at all.

When the weather was warm, he unraveled the hose and stood, as if in a trance, as the water cascaded across the lawn, pooling along the edges and around his bare feet. He sometimes hummed while he watered, and, when the window was open, she lay in bed trying to work out what song it was.

At the breakfast table, she poured his coffee and patted his hand.

'I'm not sure how I feel about the climate change rallies,' Alice said brightly, as though she was talking about a birthday party or a wedding. 'All those young people loitering about in the city, when they should be at school.' She buttered her toast and then passed the butter across the table.

'Ahh,' said Harvey.

'But, I do like the thought of them caring about the planet. And some of their signs were very funny. I saw one on the news that said 'Fossil Fools'. Rather clever, I thought.'

'Hmm,' responded Harvey. He gazed absentmindedly at the newspaper, took a sip of his coffee and looked out the kitchen window.

'I'm thinking of trying a different fertiliser. There's a new one on the market. Rodney's tried it and says his garden has never looked so good.'

'Lovely, dear,' Alice said briskly, smoothing out the white, brocade tablecloth. 'Wonderful idea.'

'It's risky. No doubt about it, but I just don't feel the lawn has been looking its best lately.

'I'm sure it will be fine.'

'There's nothing obvious, but the colour is a bit off. The blades of grass are not as thick as they once were. It's quite concerning.' He furrowed his brow and looked out the window, scanning the lush yard with half-closed eyes.

'Well, if anyone can sort it out, it's you, my love. I was just telling Patty, while she was doing my hair, what a marvel you are in the garden. She'd been down to Green Thumb Nursery to purchase some plants, and the lady there told her she had commitment issues. Imagine the cheek! Apparently, she'd gone in there looking for mature specimens, and they tried to talk her into buying new plant stock. Told her you have to have patience to nurture a garden. I've never liked the woman in there. She said if she just wanted a quick fix she should consider buying artificial turf and plants, and sent her on her way. Patty's thinking of paving her back yard now.' Harvey looked across at Alice as though he'd just noticed her sitting there.

'She'll regret that, Alice. Mark my words.'

'That's what I said. Exactly what I said.'

Alice's mind drifted to the week ahead. Tomorrow was ladies' tennis day, her favourite day of the week. Crompton Tennis Club was nestled by the river and shaded by sweeping peppermint trees. Alice and her friend, Edith, had been members there for so long they had been granted life membership. These days, they played on grass, which was more forgiving than the hard courts. They were beautifully manicured. She wondered if Harvey could learn something from the groundsman, but she had never suggested a meeting. Luis was from Portugal, and Harvey was uncomfortable with foreign accents.

Social tennis was a highly regulated affair. They followed a strict routine. Each week, the club posted the fixtures for the day. Partners were assigned randomly, except where there were extenuating circumstances. Alice insisted on playing with Edith. The club social coordinator was particularly fond of Alice's chocolate cream sponge and kindly obliged. When they were rostered to play against the younger players, Alice enjoyed the sideways glances they gave her and Edith. At first, it had unsettled her. Then she had learned to enjoy it, particularly if it ended in a win.

Every Monday, she baked something to take to tennis. An upside-down apple cake. Citrus friands. Rhubarb and rosewater tarts. She liked to bake with the window open and the radio on, and, as she mixed the sugar and butter or sifted the flour, she sang aloud, her voice wobbling out into the garden. Harvey said she should never sing in public. That she should, for the public good, restrict herself to singing in the shower or in the car when driving alone with the windows firmly up. He had not said it with malice, and she understood he meant only the best for her, but it was irritating that he wanted to silence her. She liked the idea of her voice sweeping around the yard and soaring up into the treetops. Sometimes, she would even swing her hips and sway around the kitchen. Harvey played golf on a Monday, so she was not at risk of offending him.

Today, she planned to make chocolate and almond muffins. She could already see herself in the kitchen, gripping the wooden spoon to gently mix the batter. She always looked forward to the moment she presented her baked offering to Irene, the canteen coordinator. Alice would slide it casually across the counter.

‘It’s stunning!’

‘Oh, it’s nothing.’ Alice would look around nonchalantly to see if anyone else had noticed her baked goods.

Sometimes, the younger players in their black shorts and short tee shirts swept in and tried to make changes, as though this was a fluid, fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants kind of arrangement. Only last month, one of them marched up to Irene, flicked her hair back and suggested the club encourage a healthier offering. She mentioned gluten-free. Vegan. Irene didn’t know what to say. Her face froze with her mouth open. She reminded Alice of a goldfish with her face up against the glass of the aquarium. Alice leaned over and looked at the young girl, who was probably not a day over twenty-five, squarely in the face.

‘I’ll have you know we have been baking and eating cakes here for over thirty years. If you young people want to spend your morning eating crudités, then you have come to the wrong place.’ The girl looked as if she was going to reply, but then thought better of it, flicked her hair and waltzed out of the clubroom. Alice wondered if she had overstepped the mark, but Irene reassured her that she had been firm, but polite. Alice thought she might even have used the word ‘hero’.

She realised that Harvey had spoken to her.

'What did you say, dear?'

'Alice, darling, I was wondering if you would like to go out to lunch tomorrow?'

'Tomorrow? Really, Harvey. You know it's tennis day. I don't know why you would even ask.' She felt her upper lip curl, and her tone was more abrasive than she'd intended. Harvey seemed to shrink a little in his seat.

'It's just that it's...our anniversary, and I thought it would be nice to spend the day together'. Alice felt an uneasy weight settling in her stomach, her face drooping like melted wax. Harvey watched her in silence. Eventually he spoke.

'You go ahead and spend the day with your tennis ladies. I've plenty to keep me busy.' His gaze returned to the garden. Neither of them spoke for a few moments.

'No, Harvey. Of course I'd love to spend the day with you. I'll let Edith know I can't make it tomorrow'. Her voice was slightly shrill. She sat quietly, pondering this unexpected turn of events. Even after Harvey left the table, she remained seated, wondering how to resolve this predicament.

That evening, after Harvey had conducted his daily garden inspection, they sat in their usual spots on the couch. Harvey watched Q&A and Alice worked on a crossword. When the show finished, Harvey yawned and flicked off the television.

'I'm off to bed,' he announced. He kissed Alice on top of her head. She sat for some time, mulling over four across and twelve down. She made herself a cup of tea. And then, when the house was still, she quietly made her way through the laundry and out on to the lawn.

The grass was soft under Alice's feet and it stretched out like a velvet carpet. The night was still. She carried a bottle of bleach, which was luminous in the moonlight. Alice thought of Harvey and his painstaking devotion as she looked at the thick, neat turf. She knew she should stop. That she should go back inside and crawl into the warm bed beside Harvey. But she felt reckless. Powerful. She unscrewed the lid slowly and stood for a moment. The fumes burned at the back of her throat. Then she raised her arm like a priest preparing to sprinkle holy water and, with a dramatic flourish, launched the liquid into the

air. It rose up like a flock of birds and landed silently, soaking instantly into the spongy surface. She moved methodically up and down the yard, the way Harvey mowed the lawn, flicking it left and right until it was empty.

The bleach bottle was now light in her hands. She peered at the lawn as if looking for some change. Evidence of what she had just done.

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Alice woke in the morning to the sound of Harvey howling.

‘Alice! Alice! There’s something wrong with the lawn.

‘Whatever’s the matter, Harvey?’ she murmured from within the soft folds of sleep.

‘The lawn looks patchy. Some areas are looking decidedly peaky.’ She sat up.

‘I’m sure it’s nothing.’

‘Alice, this is serious. I’ve never seen anything like it. Something strange has happened.’

‘I’m sure you will sort it out. Happy anniversary, my dear.’

‘And to you, my love,’ he said distractedly. He sat gently beside her on the bed and took her hand.

‘Would you mind very much if we rescheduled our lunch? I don’t think I can go out today.’

‘Of course not. We can always have lunch another day.’ She paused for a moment and looked up at Harvey. ‘I suppose I could always go to tennis, while you tend to the lawn.’ Harvey smiled at her, planted a kiss on her cheek and dashed from the room.

She laid her head back on the pillow, thinking fondly of the muffins she had baked yesterday. She was already imagining the silent applause at the club.