

Keeping Things Alive Is Too Much Work

“We call them blades, but they can’t cut nothing,” Ron says, chuckling at what he thinks is a joke.

Val rakes a swath of yellow grass into another pile; the scratch of the rake blocks out her neighbour’s voice. Mounds of shorn grass dot her wide yard, rustle in the wind. They almost pulse as if under their scruff lies a mulchy beating heart.

“Okay, Ron. Whatever you say.” She wipes a gardening glove across her sweaty forehead. It’s too early for Ron’s nonsense and for it to be so hot, but the right time of day to get work done.

Ron has been watching her since she came out this morning. Not sure what was so interesting about her pushing the mower around in neat lines, about the way she rakes, slower than she used to. And he doesn’t seem to be going anywhere as she admires her grassy hills before loading them into the wheelbarrow and carting them to the alley. And he’s still there to see her uncoil the hose and spray down the dusty flowerbeds, turn on the sprinkler.

“Not looking too good there. Everything looks near dead if you ask me.”

Val didn't ask him and what does she care what he or anyone else thinks. She goes inside, slams the sliding glass door. He better not set up camp outside her front window and watch her watch people root around in other people's storage lockers on television.

She makes herself more coffee, puts bread in the toaster. A splash of water hits the kitchen window. The placement of the sprinkler is slightly off. The house doesn't need watering.

Her granddaughter, Rae, is always talking about the environment, how we're wasting everything away.

“Resources,” she says. “Water. Every time you turn on the faucet the world dies a little. It doesn't just come flowing out of the tap from nowhere.”

Val knows water flowing out of a tap isn't magic. Just because she didn't go to college, dropped out of high school to get married to someone with a decent wage, doesn't mean she's confused about the world. She dumped her husband fifteen years ago. Doesn't need a GED to know it's the smartest move she ever made. Her days are her own. Her life her own because someone doesn't think they own her.

Rae comes by for bottle drives, bikes over with energy-efficient light bulbs, a special box to collect batteries, checks up on people's recycling, and sets up robot-like composters around the neighbourhood. Each one decorated by local artists, painted with vegetable-based paints. At night the composters look

like intruders, something from space ready to abduct humans, crumple their bodies into manure. She spends weekends raising money for clean water in far-away countries by selling organic, gluten-free pastries.

Val's grandson, Justin, is always talking about snowboards. So he's into water too. Frozen water crystals all packed up on a mountain.

"It's best in the powder, Gramma. The board moves so sick."

"I'd be sick if I was swooshing around on a board down a steep hill."

"Are you going to tell me you had to walk to school up a mountain in your day?"

"Nope. I know things are different."

The environment and snowboarding. Both endeavours seem equally taxing to Val. This weekend when they come for lunch, she'll be prepared to talk about it all. She can look up anything on her tablet.

"Hi, Mom. Your yard looks so sad." Her son, Ben, hugs her. Insults always pair best with hugs.

"Yard doesn't have feelings."

"Nice one, Gramma," says her grandson.

"But—" Ben tries to get a word in.

"But, it's smack dab in the middle of summer, and I do my best without a tree for shade out there. Can only water on odd days. Yard's just balding, like you."

He stands at the back window, children on either side of him. The three of them looking out at the dusty brown scraps of grass, shrivelled weeds, bare patches that sprout more evenly than the lawn itself.

“Do you like that? Is it better than television? Staring at an old woman’s failure. Just paint a picture and put it up in your own damn living room. Then you can look at it every day, like some kind of art. Okay, that’s enough.”

She ushers them into the kitchen, huffs until they’re all seated at the table, and pours juice from a plastic jug into their glasses.

Rae says, “I told you to get rid of your plastics that aren’t BPA free. I don’t want you to get cancer.” She examines the pitcher, rotates it in front of her. “There must be some way to re-use this.”

Crisp salad sits in the middle of the table in a metal bowl.

“I’ve got green things for you right here.”

Val points. She brings in chips and a pyramid of triangular sandwiches. Everyone takes a sandwich. No one mentions how unhealthy chips are as they heap handfuls on their plates until there isn’t much room left for salad.

Ten years ago, when the teenagers were kids, Val’s son took her with them on a family vacation to the Grand Coulee Dam. It seemed like everything had to be educational, even a weekend getaway. Val packed a cooler with triangular sandwiches and chips in Ziploc bags.

They all stood on the viewing deck. The cascades of water

looked so beautiful. Photos were taken of all of them standing surrounded by the rich blue water, the crisp blue sky, and the slate grey of the massive structure.

Inside they walked past photographs of construction, the before and after. Rae asked why things were less green, then more green? Justin stared at the rushing water through the window, an almost dangerous level of interest. Val kept coming back to the massive images of the dry dam. When the valves were shut it was so smooth. Concrete slopes looked simple and pristine. Flat lines, cold contours. It was more beautiful that way. Clean. Constructed to harness nature.

When the water burst through, everything became animated, chaotic. Even though it was controlled, the gushing sound was overwhelming. There was a laser light show too. Educational and electric. It was everything the river was not: flashy and colourful, an attempt to take the flow into man's hands.

Val had wished they'd been photographed in front of the grey, empty, curved flumes. So peaceful.

"Time for dessert. It's pie and ice cream. And, yes, I got organic blueberries, dammit."

Val half-heartedly drags the sprinkler a few feet from where it's spraying up against the house on one side and the shed on the other. Water tings and spatters against glass and metal. Droplets dribble down the outside of the window. She likes the sound. She likes the look of it. Streaks blur her view of the inside of her home.

"You're a drip, Val."

Ron's sipping on a Mike's Hard Lemonade through a straw. He's in his same spot, camped out with a beverage on his weathered lawn chair. If it wasn't empty on occasion, it could be said that Ron's moulded to the fabric seat. If he didn't move his hand to his mouth, his arm might be glued to the rest. Beside him is what looks like a new cooler. Blue plastic, white lid, not too big. Easily fits a six-pack, and maybe a box of popsicles. He's always in the chair or not. Just appears and disappears.

"Yeah, you're working real hard over there. You're gonna break your wrist if you're not careful."

"You know I'm only teasing." Ron holds out his Mike's Hard to Val, winks at her.

"Do I?"

There's barely a need to cut the grass anymore. The only yard work is this half-assed watering, a vain attempt to keep some of the lawn alive. It's not working. Everything's brown. Even the clover that didn't succumb to the sugar and water, the corn gluten meal, the chemical poisons. She'd fed that clover perfectly good sugar and perfectly good poison. She'd wanted to kill that clover, and now it was dead. Because everything was dead. And now everyone was on her case about how terrible it looked. They'd been on her case about how terrible the clover had looked too. Ron told her that clover was a sign of low nitrogen or something. Her son gave her lawn a solemn look, gave her the downturned eyebrows of pity.

"It's real hot out, Val." Ron drains the yellow sugary alcohol like a kid drinking a pop.

“Oh, really?” Val’s hands are still gripped tight to the hose. She might as well just shut the whole thing down. Give up. Go inside. Or head to the store and stock up on her own supply of cold alcoholic beverages. Nothing so sweet though. Just regular old beer.

“C’mon, now. Won’t hurt you to wet your throat. Or any other parts.”

“I’m not in the mood for that talk. Ever.”

“Be fun. Come on and have a drink.” Ron opens his cooler, jammed as tight as can be with pastel pink and yellow bottled drinks.

Val yanks the hose toward herself, stands in the spray. Behind her Ron’s caught in the shower too. He drops one drink, gets up, and runs inside. The first time she’s seen him move in years.

Each night it gets worse. Val can’t sleep. Her house heats up like a brick oven, and even with three fans pointed at her she can’t cool down. The blades chop the air. Val imagines each cutting through this thick heat, this stench. She wills each swipe to help her ease into sleep, tries to count the rotations like sheep to help herself stay in control. She lolls for a few minutes at a time, falling into strange dreams. None of it feels like sleep.

She’s standing on a knife-edge, and it’s dangerous but cool. Her ex-husband is chastising her from their old Winnebago, that she’s ruined their house, let it go to rot, but he won’t just drive away. She wakes up in a wheelbarrow full of crispy grass, but really wakes up in bed.

In some gardening magazine her son gave her a subscription to, a subscription she didn't want or care about, she remembers reading that lawns were originally for rich people. Poor people were throwing their shit out their windows into the street, onto other people. They didn't have a patch of green to try not to kill. Rich people had servants to fluff up their shrubs.

Everyone wants to pretend to be rich. That's where lawns came from. Everyone thinking they're better than everyone else. Everyone wanting to pretend they're the aristocracy and not peasants working just to make their life not a terrible, shitty mess.

How the hell did her son get the idea that she wanted a gardening magazine? What did she do that made anyone think she cared about gardening? Just get old? Did she look useless? It's supposed to be contemplative, he'd said. Val was thinking about shit all the damn time. She had plenty of time to think, being a retired woman with a paid-off mortgage.

The clock says four a.m. It's the coolest part of the night. She might sleep until six-thirty a.m. Could plan her day around a nap that'll barely register.

What would happen if people looked into her yard and didn't see green grass? What would happen if she just tilled the whole thing up? If she decided to let it die? What else could live out there so simply? Who decided to put grass out there anyway? Her house isn't Versailles. She Googles it all. Makes a list of supplies she'll need to transform her lawn from the living dead into something else.

“It’s dead anyway,” she says into the sticky air, the whir of fan blades, herself.

“It’s dead anyway,” she says to her son at their next Sunday family lunch.

He’d suggested they eat outside. Val reminded him that there’s no table, no chairs, no umbrella, no fans to stave off heat. He said that’s okay. They can spread a blanket, have a picnic. Rae thought it a nice idea. Val said a flat out no. End of discussion. Justin was out with friends, skateboarding for a birthday or something.

Val opens the curtains so they can look outside, see the backyard in all its faded glory. “I miss the voles.”

“Grandma, they were so cute. Me, too, I hated when Grandpa tried to poison them.”

The voles were cute, like the small mice found at pet stores for snake feed.

“I can’t believe you remember that, Rae. You were barely two years old.”

Those voles used to annoy the shit out of her husband. Oh, he tried to murder them, tried to flush them out with the hose once. He tried everything, but nothing worked. Those voles outsmarted and outlasted him. And yet, somehow, once he left they never came back, moved on to greener lawns, she supposed. Wanting the voles back to ruin her lawn is funny, since she’s already ruined it herself. A sad lawn isn’t a happy home for any self-respecting vole.

She baked Ben's favourite cookies in the middle of the night, and a lemon pie. Insomnia baking. It made her feel useful. Hopes it's useful now. Slicing pie, she gives him the fattest slice.

"Can I borrow your truck?"

"Sure. For what?"

Explaining to her son why she needs to borrow his truck is more annoying that she'd realized it would be. She doesn't need a lawn. She's got a plan. To get rid of the lawn. To tear it up, to smooth it out. Fill the space with perfect unmowable concrete, concrete that won't burn in August heat. Concrete that will shine in the daylight. That she can sweep away dirt from. That she can admire in any season.

"That's not very environmentally sound, Grandma."

"Wasting water isn't good for the environment. And that's all I'm doing out there, Rae."

"That's a big job, Mom."

"Don't need it. Who goes back there anyway? Nobody sees it except for that creep, Ron."

No one does go back there. She was never one for hosting parties, hadn't invited anyone into her yard in years and years. It's all work and no play.

"We could have barbecues. You could start a book club back there."

"Can pretend to talk about books and drink wine inside just fine. Just let me know what days I can have the truck. I won't scratch it. It's a very nice truck. This is what I'm doing.

Keeping things alive is too much work.”

She packs the cookies into a plastic container for him to take home.

“You kept me alive.”

“Yeah, and your sister. And she barely talks to me. Two people is enough to keep alive for one lifetime.”

It’s so hot that she dreams her whole yard is on fire. Blades of grass are tiny tinder that explode into flames. There are dark storm clouds above but no rain. She watches the grey and orange clouds and smoke and fire from inside her house, which is impermeable to the blaze. She wakes up with a rash on her wrist. Scratches it as she continues her research on her tablet, makes a full list of supplies for the next day.

Her number one live reality show fan, Ron, sits in a new lawn chair with a 7up in one hand and a Molson in the other. He observes her moves, rolling the rototiller down the ramp from the back of the truck to the edge of the yard. It sputters before it starts and at first feels like too much for her to handle. But she steadies her hands, braces her arms, and rolls it across her brown and yellow lawn. The richer earth becomes the top layer. Ron yells things at her as she propels the machine, but she can’t hear him, just the roar of domestic destruction. She smiles as she eliminates each crispy blade. It takes all morning just to do one corner. But time doesn’t matter. She’s satisfied.

Once the grass is gone, and it’s just soil, there’ll be one more

raking session. Val is sure Ron will watch that too. Tear up the grass, smooth the soil, move grass and excess soil with a wheelbarrow to the garbage bin. A little bit each day, she chips away.

In the evenings, she comes inside through the basement door after working and makes sure the curtains are shut. She takes off her striped work gloves, her heavy socks and boots, too hot for this weather, her souvenir Mexico T-shirt, stained with rust, the shorts her husband left behind, too big for her but full of pockets. Her wilted bra, her underwear from a drawer of identical underwear, everything striped. Naked, she gathers the mess and puts it in the washing machine, doesn't turn it on. In the windowless basement bathroom, she stands in the shower stall for too long, just cold water washing over her. She forces herself to scrub head and body with a bar of soap. Head wrapped in a towel, she puts on her robe, starts the wash cycle, eats dinner, watches television, and sleeps on the couch.

Preparing the subbase was no big deal, laying the fine grade stone and compacting it. Even building the form and mesh didn't trouble her. Throughout the early stages, it was work, but she didn't notice. Ron was the only nuisance. Getting her yard torn up wasn't easy, but making the cement is hard. She struggles with the bags of cement, with the old mixer. Her arms feel like saggy grocery bags. It takes three days for her to figure out how to angle the mixer. The consistency wasn't right at all, and that took her longer than she wanted it to.

When she finally pours, she wants to make sure she gets it right. Wants it to look as nice as can be. She smooths it out until

it's even. That first section is small but exactly as she pictured it. A test patch.

At night, she celebrates with a couple of beers in the quiet of her living room, television on, muted. The sun goes down, and in the slightly cooler air, she sits in her favourite chair until she's sucked back half a six-pack. She cracks a fourth, one more to help her get some rest. She hears kids running through the alley, the clang of her back gate opening and slapping shut.

In the morning she sees the damage done. Names, initials, hearts, and profanity scrawled. They even left their sticks sitting in the now dry cement. She cracks one off, the nub sticking out, and throws the rest into the alley.

She stretches, puts on her gloves, and fires up the mixer. Ron shouts over the din of the cement mixer, "Can't trust anyone's offspring these days." She can barely hear him. He's a low buzz. She stares at bags of concrete piled near the shed, checks her watch. The hardware store won't be open for two more hours. Time to whip up another batch before that. She'll call Ben to bring the truck and the alarm company to come on Monday morning.

Usually she hits up the smaller hardware store closest to her. They know her and give her what she's looking for, and they don't ask questions and don't play any music. But they didn't carry anything to break up a solid square of concrete.

In this big chain they have everything, including some terrible radio station. She stalks the aisles trying to find the rental desk.

"Do you need help, ma'am?" A young man with a ponytail asks.

“Rentals.”

“Come with me.”

Val huffs and follows him. He points to a desk at the far end of the construction section but continues to walk with her until the two of them get there, like she needs a police escort.

“This lady is looking to rent something, Jim.”

“Thanks, Cary.”

“Glad you two explained everything to each other.”

She drops her elbows onto the desk, and Cary and his pony-tail leave to escort other customers around the store, like a misguided gentleman.

“I need a saw or something to help me break up a slab of concrete in my lawn.”

He stares at Val.

“I’d like it today.”

“Okay. So, is this from a patio or some other permanent structure that you’re getting rid of?”

“No. It’s a piece of my lawn. But some kids vandalized it, and now I need to take out this whole piece and do it again.”

He stares at Val.

“I’d like to get back to work as soon as possible, so something like a chainsaw.”

“Okay. Do you know how to use this equipment?”

“I don’t know what equipment I’ll be renting yet, so I don’t know if I know.”

“Well, some of these tools are more heavy duty than others.”

“That’s what I want. Something that’ll get the job done.”

“Will you be using the tools yourself?”

Val raises an arm. He doesn't move. She grabs for a catalogue of items that's attached to the desk and starts flipping through it. She should have just ordered it up on her tablet if she knew she was coming to this place. Then she wouldn't have to talk to any people. Or stare into this man's face while he decides whether or not he's got more useless questions for her.

“Show me something I can use!” Val shouts.

“Mom? Mom?”

She hears Ben's voice. He rounds the corner with Cary and his trusty ponytail.

“Ben, did you bring the truck?”

“Sorry. Yes. Sorry.”

“Your mother is looking for something to break up concrete.”

“Yes. She needs to undo some damage done. What do you recommend?”

Useless Jim goes back into a storage area and returns with two saws.

“One of these two will do the job well and are a snap to use. It's like slicing off icing on a cake. Sometimes a sledgehammer is good to break up the bigger pieces. And, of course, we also have safety gear too.”

“I have—” Val starts to say.

“She has all the safety equipment. I've made sure of it,” Ben interrupts.

Val slams shut the open catalogue and stomps up the aisle.

“And a sledgehammer.”

“Mom, where are you going?”

“Need more cement. Always need more cement.”

Val hauls as many bags as will fit into her trunk to the till. As she loads them in, Ben wheels up a dolly with the saw.

“Thought it would all be a lot more. Bigger. Don’t need the truck,” she says.

“I can take all of this for you, Mom.”

She takes the saw from his hands and straps it into the back seat, clicks the seatbelt to keep it in place.

“Thanks for carrying it out to the car.”

Val takes the rest of the day off. Drives her rented saw around town. They pass Ben’s elementary school, the playground there already half concrete, for tetherball and square ball next to the basketball court. Up the hill, they cruise by the church where she was married, small and in the middle of a large parking lot. The rink nestled between the river and a parking lot. She drives through neighbourhoods just to feel the pavement under the tires, to watch the shades of grey stretch out in front of her at every turn.

“Excuse me. Is this your house?”

A woman in perfectly creased capri pants mimes knocking on an invisible door next to Val’s shrubs.

“Do I look like I live here?”

“Sorry. You can never be sure who’s a worker bee and who’s not now, can you?”

Val stabs her shovel into the bag of cement. Uses a stick to

check the consistency of what's in the mixer. The woman steps to the edge of the area where Val has freshly poured, looks down into the grey wetness.

“Well, I am a representative of the Neighbourhood Enhancement Committee. And we have had a lot of talk about what you're doing here. And we discovered that though it doesn't violate any bylaws, we would like to know, first, what you're doing, and secondly, if you will stop doing whatever it is you're doing.”

Val shovels a mound of concrete in a pile in front of the woman. A dollop jumps onto the cuff of her capris. Val shovels another dollop. Ruining the smooth finish of her day's work.

“We would really appreciate if you could come to our next meeting and talk to us about what this is.” The woman clutches her purse to her chest, leans back on one leg, and points a circle around all Val's hard work. After her finger travels all the way around, she places her hand on her hip and giggles.

“No.”

“Well, if you decline our offer, again, though it's not illegal, we can petition you to restore your lawn to grass, like all of the others in the neighbourhood.”

“What's that crazy bitch doing over there, Val?” Ron shouts over from his yard, holds up a Smirnoff Ice, and points with his ice cream sandwich at the woman in the capris.

Val slops more concrete near the woman's sandaled feet. Then she fires up the mixer before telling her, “Get the fuck off of my property.”

Once the woman's scoffed and skedaddled, Val arms herself with her steel trowel, fixing her angry mess. Her arms are defined now, and she catches herself watching her arm, marvels at the bulge of her now very visible biceps almost as often as she marvels at the way the grainy mixture turns into an even line. Everything around her is finally starting to look the way it should, and no one seems to appreciate it.

She stands in the alley past the gate, surveys the whole lot. Every space now filled, some still slick and wet, some dry. Something looks wrong. The edge of the lawn along the street is too green, too much life. The shrub along the front street looks absurd. Exhausted, Val leans on the robot-like compost bin. It won't be right unless she does it. She puts her gloves back on and yanks out every plant by every root.

"Val, you're like a machine," Ron shouts, this time an empty bottle his only prop.

Val waves at him. Almost a thank you.

The skies are getting dark, and the man on the weather channel said a forty percent chance of showers. Val drags out thick sheets of plastic, bought just in case of this emergency, and drapes them over the yard. It looks like she's growing something underneath, after all.

She sleeps well. Dreams of clear skies. When she wakes up in the middle of the night, she hears soft rain. The weatherman was right.

It's like Christmas morning. She gets up early, forces herself

to stay in bed just a little longer. To hold out. The rain has stopped. The air smells fresh.

Every inch of former grass an unmoving slab. The wall's not quite tall enough but it'll do. Ron won't be blocked out entirely. But something about that feels okay. Ron's a fixture too. Steady and solid, even though he's not doing anything special, only being annoying. But his voice has been her perpetual companion. Even when she's not looking at him, she knows he's there.

She removes the plastic sheeting like she's unwrapping a gift. Underneath beautiful greys, hard and clean. Let them bring their petitions. Let her son come over any time with his kids, and they can have a picnic here. Let him walk up right now and see her in her cement glory and judge her after it's all done. No one can jackhammer a fulfilled dream.

The August sun beats down. She presses her cheek to the wall. So cool. Rolls her body on the concrete lawn. She lifts up her shirt, the front of her pressed to smooth cement. Skin and mortar, clay. Her heartbeat slows for the first time in years. Beats in a slow rhythm. She hears the rush of water as it cascades down a flume, breathes her to life.