



## Too Beautiful

by Joseph O'Malley

[Home](#)

[Summer-Fall 2012](#)

[Spring-Summer 2012](#)

[Winter-Spring 2012](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

When her father arrived home from his wanderings down between the expressway and the river, and after she had thanked the Misses Johnson and Jackson—the retired correctional officers who lived next door—for finding him, Martha decided to take advantage of the high mid-day sun by trimming the lawn and finally planting those marigolds in the front bushes. Her head was buzzy with nerves and the handfuls of chocolates she'd eaten waiting for “the girls” to find her father again and bring him home in one piece. As usual the police were no help, and how he always got so far with the limp and that ulcer on his leg Martha never knew.

It was her day off from the Doll Hospital where she routinely dismembered and reassembled the limbs of the dear little loved ones of dear little loved ones. She knew she wasn't kidding anyone; it was Martha's idea to scrawl “Doll Hospital” on a neatly trimmed piece of cardboard to hang over the proper “Repair Dept.” sign at her job in the doll factory. The factory sat next to one of several auto parts plants in a windowless brick building perched on the murky waters that sludged past a downriver suburb of Detroit. It had been a year since her demotion from Production to Repair after they'd successfully traced the string of cross-eyed Perky Suzie dolls to her station for the second time, and told her they would place several unmarked “sniffer” employees to closely watch her work in Repair. Whatever powers Martha could summon to spruce up the less inspiring aspects of her life, she used, so when she spoke of her move at work as a boon, and referred to herself as the Surgeon General at the Doll Hospital, Miss Jackson and Miss Johnson were kind enough never to second guess her. In fact, Miss Jackson and Miss Johnson were very, very kind to her; they watched Martha's father on the days she worked, and they refused any pay.

“He keeps us company, is all,” Miss Jackson said in her Kentucky drawl, and Miss Johnson said, “Yeah,” which is about as much as she ever said.

Martha was beginning to take personally the fact that her father only wandered away when she was home; she worried it made her look like a sloppy daughter--careless for sleeping in until eight o'clock just because it was her day off.

When they finally brought him home Miss Johnson calmed Martha's tears with a firm hand on her shoulder. Miss Jackson bent to look Martha's father in the eye. “Stay put now. Okay, Joe?” She leaned in further and placed her pig-pink cheek against his stubbled face for a long moment, then stood up straight and let Miss Johnson lead her home by the arm.

“Good Christ, Dad,” Martha said. “You must be exhausted.” She kissed him on the forehead and led him toward the couch. “Do you want a nap?”

He looked at her with one eye milky from the cataract and one eye bright and slick from his overabundantly lubricated sockets. He hesitated and stared hard at her, his eyes searching for something. Finally he said,

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“Martha?”

“Yes!” she said. “That’s right, Dad, I’m Martha,” and when she laughed, he did too. She sat him down on the couch and let him lie back. She let go of his hand. Another wave of contractions flitted over his face and he said, “Julia?”

“No Dad,” Martha said. She picked up his hand to kiss, then relinquished it to let it rest over his chest. “That’s Mom. She’s been gone for years. I’m Martha. Get some rest.”

He reached his hand up again and held it against her face. Soon enough his focus receded, his arm wilted back into place over his own chest, and he nodded off.

Although she was sure he’d never be able to climb the back fence, she locked and bolted the back door just in case. His capabilities and reserves of energy surprised her more and more, as the morning had proven. Two miles away!

She locked the front door until she’d gotten the seeds, the flats of marigolds, the weedwacker with the extension cord, and the small gardening rake and trowel out of the garage. Then she opened the front door to let some air in through the screen, and in case he woke and wanted to sit in one of the lawn chairs on the front porch to keep her company later.

Even with her head between the bushes Martha could hear her other next-door neighbor rumbling awake. Her name was Kim. “Kimmy, for short,” she’d told Martha the day Kim and her husband moved in three years earlier, and because they were new to the neighborhood where Martha had lived her whole life, and Kim was young and pretty and pregnant, Martha didn’t have the heart to correct her. Now she knew better. Kimmy got away with far too much because of that pouty angel face of hers.

Kim’s three small kids had been out tearing up and down the sidewalk on Big Wheels for hours. Martha heard something being hurled or kicked through the house next door. She tried to ignore it while she loosened the dull smelling earth. She dug down into its soft coolness with her bare hands, crumbled wads of dirt feeling for stones and the roots of weeds. She plopped the stones into a coffee can, and shook the weeds free of dirt before stuffing them into a small plastic K-Mart bag to discard later.

After a while she straightened her back, sat on her heels, and peered over at Kimmy’s front yard. Large yellow-brown spots dotted the lawn. Kimmy’s habit of weakly tossing bags of garbage from her front porch to let them lay where they landed for five or six days until garbage night had leached any sign of life from the crab grass and dandelions that otherwise grew in copious profusion there. When garbage night finally did arrive, she ordered her son, seven-year-old Dylan and his younger sister, five-year-old Heather, to drag the bags to the curb. The baby, apparently, was still too young for manual labor.

Sometimes the bags would break, and on windy days the refuse would swirl about and land on Martha’s lawn. The one time Martha complained to Kimmy about her unorthodox habits, Kimmy twitched her mouth into an electric thin line, widened her eyes, and said, “I’ve got three kids to worry

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about. I don't have a daddy to take care of me, and I don't have time to worry about garbage."

Kimmy's way of saying exactly what she thought without first passing it through an adult filter of civility rankled Martha. She had never experienced anything like it. Martha had heard there was medication to remedy that kind of thing, but she thought suggesting to a neighbor that she seek professional help might be pushing the envelope a tad too far. What Martha couldn't get used to, she tried to ignore; sometimes this method worked and sometimes it didn't. The garbage issue became a sticking point for them.

In her more generous moments, Martha saw that Kim deserved a little sympathy. She was a person just like Martha with struggles of her own, and when Kim and her husband had first moved in Martha had even found her charming. She'd had to admit Kim was a very pretty woman, with her long, straight blond hair, and her body, which was shapely and looked slightly underweight but healthy even when pregnant. On first impression Dylan and Heather were adorable, and Martha knew that for some reason it was wrong to dislike a pregnant woman. The husband had seemed a bit of a goof even then, but Martha shrugged off her criticisms with a sigh and a silent oh well.

Then the hijinks started: the loud parties in the backyard, the drinking, and the smoking of sweet smelling marijuana until all hours. The way Kim had of speaking about "the blacks" in the neighborhood with a nod and a nudge in her voice made Martha blink in discomfort, and there were also the snide remarks about Miss Jackson and Miss Johnson, which especially pained Martha now: she'd laughed heartily at Kimmy's slights, and even offered not only an imitation of Miss Jackson's hunched galumphing walk, but also of the crude way Miss Johnson had of holding a finger to one nostril and blowing a wad of snot out the other onto the sidewalk. Kim's children walked around with bags under their eyes from lack of sleep, became cranky and aggressive. They threw sticks and stones--literally! sticks! stones!-- over the backyard fence and called Martha "Biggie Biggie Lady." Then came the scarecrow-looking people who mistook Martha's house for Kim's and pounded on the front door at three, four, five o'clock in the morning shouting in unintelligible grunts. All this happened a while after Martha noticed her forgetful father forgetting more important things: recent conversations, the names of old friends and relatives, how to tie his own shoelaces.

Two and a half years had passed this way, and now the husband was in jail. With her head bent low to give the impression of shame, Kimmy had told Martha, "for drugs. Hard drugs." Now that the husband was gone Martha finally understood that he had not been solely to blame for the chaos next door, as Kimmy had hinted. The husband had been incarcerated at the beginning of March, and the garbage issue started as soon as spring broke. The first time it happened, the kids stood on the porch crying because Kim had locked them out. Finally Kim opened the door and flung Dylan's Big Wheel out the door over his head. "Garbage," she screamed. Dylan's eyes, the same singed reddish brown color as his hair, watched the Big Wheel fly, but his head never moved. Next came a doll house. Heather, a towheaded blond like her mother, with hair that curled around her pretty face like tumbleweed, watched Barbie's Ski Chateau crack and split apart on the pavement. "Garbage," Kim shouted, and her voice grew more frantic with the trajectory of each object. Although alarmed, Martha did not call the

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police because there was no real crime to report.

Later came the quiet, which lasted all afternoon and into the evening, and Martha relaxed a little. Around midnight, Kim's banshee wail hooked through the night air to jerk Martha awake. Her first impulse was to check on her father to be sure he hadn't wandered into somebody's bedroom or bathroom to catch an unsuspecting neighbor in the middle of a compromising situation. She found her father sound asleep. Martha returned to her own bedroom on the second floor and looked out the window. Across the way she could see into Kim's house. In Kim's bedroom, also on the second floor, all the lights flared up bright as searchlights, and the radio blasted. Kimmy stormed back and forth across the room in a bra and panties, throwing things. The kids continued to cry, Kimmy stomped down the stairs, the crashing noises acquired a rhythm. Martha decided to call the police when she heard Dylan's voice bellowing in what sounded like a response to certain torture. The louder he screamed the louder and more frequent came the crashing noises.

When Kimmy returned to the bedroom, Martha crouched low beneath her sill and watched, hidden, she thought, by the darkness of her own room and the blindness that she felt sure was inherent in Kimmy's rage. But at one point Kimmy spun around to look straight in Martha's direction. She picked up the radio and flung it through her window directly at Martha's head. The radio flew through the small space between the houses, its cord trailing like the tail of a wild animal. Luckily, the radio bounced off Martha's screen to resolve itself with a clatter into a junk heap of sprung springs and cracked plastic on the cement patio tiles outside Kim's back door. "Garbage!" Kimmy screamed, and Martha no longer had any doubt that Kimmy's ire was directly aimed at her.

Martha crawled to the stairs and descended, called 911, and peeked through the front curtains to wait for the police. She had the foresight to open the window in her bathroom just a crack, since that window was directly across from Kim's back door, where it turns out, the police knocked. Martha watched at a safe angle, sitting comfortably on the carpet of her living room floor peering out from under the blind. She could hear everything as the policemen's voices wafted in through the bathroom window.

Kimmy greeted the police in her bra and panties. With her long blond hair and a body more like that of a teenager than of a mother of three, she gave the police her sob story of being a single mother, unemployed, with bratty kids and nosey neighbors. She laughed, and swayed her tight skin against the night breeze for the two tall men in blue.

And guess what? The police were no help. "Well," they told her, "try to keep it down."

After the police left, Kimmy set up camp by the upstairs window, strutting and posing in front of it as though it were a mirror. Martha crouched trembling beneath the sill, yet couldn't help but watch.

"People!" Kimmy yelled staring into the dark between their houses. "People hate me because I'm beautiful. People don't know how hard it is to be beautiful." She shook her head so her hair flew every which way, blurring like the blades in a fan as she gathered momentum with each phrase she

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uttered. "I'm beautiful on the inside!" She stomped her foot. "And I'm beautiful on the outside!" Her hands splayed out from her sides and moved as frantically as her hair. "I'm too beautiful for words. People don't know how hard it is..." She stopped thrashing about and appeared to make an effort to stand still, but her whole body shook in spasms as if she were being electrocuted. "To beee... Sooooo... Beautifuuuuuuuuul!!!" She howled into the night like a cat in heat.

Two days later she was contrite and charming again, but Martha never knew how long her sedate moods would last. Kimmy hung her head in that way she had of pouting her lower lip and looking up between her bangs. The paradox of a truly disarming charm was Kim's most shocking trait, and not only because it contrasted so greatly with her savage moods, which had escalated in both frequency and intensity over the past year. Martha never doubted the sincerity of Kim's gentle rationality when in its presence; it was only after they returned to their respective homes and Martha had a chance to think more about it, to parse out what might be real and what faked, that doubt entered.

The week after the flying radio incident, Kim knocked on Martha's door holding her little girl's hand and carrying in her other hand a box of homemade orange blossom meringues, Kim's own recipe. "Sorry about the other night," Kim said. She handed over the meringues to Martha. "I think you like these," she said, and Martha recalled with a pang the day she'd visited Kim just after the husband had gone into the clink. The full plate of meringues had sat between them, and when Martha left half an hour later she noticed she'd eaten every last meringue off the plate without realizing it. She'd hoped Kim hadn't noticed.

Martha did not want to be taken in again by Kim's charm, or her own sweet tooth.

"About the other night," Kim said. She paused, let go of her daughter's hand to stroke her own forehead. "Migraines," Kim said. "I get migraines and.... Well, I can't describe it."

"Oh," was all Martha wanted to say, but some stupid quality in her that always wanted things smoothed over made her say, "That's okay," even though it wasn't.

After Kim had left, Martha ate all the meringues in one sitting. Only after the sugar kicked in and she could count the throb of her pulse by touching her tongue against the gums at the back of her teeth did she realize she'd missed her opportunity to broach the topic of lawn care—a gentle suggestion to clean it up. Just because they lived in Detroit and were poor didn't mean they had to look and act poor. She knew she should have had the conversation the day Kim apologized, but she'd missed her chance, and in the month since then Kim had kept herself cooped up in the house. Martha saw her only once that month, when Kim and the kids carried groceries from the car to the house, their heads bent low to keep from having to say hello.

She had half a mind to clean up Kim's yard herself by stealth in the middle of the night, but Miss Jackson and Miss Johnson cautioned against this.

"She don't care," Miss Jackson said. They stood talking on Martha's porch

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one day after Martha returned home from work.

"Nope," said Miss Johnson. "Not a nit. Don't care."

"She'd just expect it anyways if you did it for her."

"Surely she will. Just make it worse."

Martha's father, hand transferred firmly from Miss Jackson's hand to Martha's, looked around and over his shoulder at something, or for something, it was always hard to tell. The three women looked over at the tangled mess of Kimmy's yard.

"Damn shame though," said Miss Jackson.

"Mmnn!" said Miss Johnson.

"Shameful," Miss Jackson said again.

They shook their heads, jangled the keys on the chains that attached to large black leather wallets in their back pockets, and returned home.

Martha truly respected neighbors who recognized the importance of lawn care. Miss Jackson and Miss Johnson kept their lawn like they kept their hair: trimmed to within an inch of its life. It was they who had taught Martha the pleasures of the weedwacker to keep the borders of the lawn militarily precise, but they didn't go in for flowers. Instead they opted for berry bushes that skirted the perimeter of their house, which was painted completely white. White shutters, white rain gutters, white siding, white porch. They'd even painted the cement walk that led up to their porch white.

On each side of Martha's porch three evergreen bushes shot up almost as high as the windows. She trimmed them thin to showcase an array of tall and short flowers between the marigolds, which kept away the mosquitoes.

An orderly row of marigolds under the evergreens would have been attractive enough on its own, but the rest of the flowers brought vivacity to an otherwise drab neighborhood; she surprised and delighted herself and her neighbors with the wild combinations of flowers that popped up as the season wore on into summer. She knew she set herself up for ridicule by taking pictures of her full-blown garden and bringing them in to work to show to her coworkers the way other people brought in pictures of their stupid children. Every year she fought the impulse, and every year she lost the fight, took two rolls of pictures, and when she heard people laughing, then saw the way they abruptly stopped and looked at her with their breaths held when she walked into the room, and saw the pitiful expressions on their faces--pitying her!--she renewed her vow, tore up the pictures, and scattered them out the window over the highway on the drive home from work.

Still, one had to have pride.

Martha rehearsed many subtle hints she could give Kim in regard to yard care. If she really thought she was beautiful on the inside and beautiful on the outside, she could show it in the way she kept her house. "Show some pride," Martha thought she might say to Kim, but since that implied the

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opposite, she kept her own counsel. In the end, she thought it best to lead by example.

So she got down on her knees and began.

After an hour of weeding, her sun bonnet drooped, wilted by the considerable sweat collecting at the rim, and her arms and legs blotched red despite the sunscreen. She tried to wipe away the sweat that had gathered in her eyebrows with the back of her arm so she wouldn't smear dirt all over her face with her hands--she never completely succeeded in this. She'd successfully blocked out the rumbling noises from next door, but could not quite escape the agitation looking at Kimmy's yard caused.

Martha had once seen on a television nature special a hawk pouncing on a desert rat, and the sudden scream that rang from Kimmy's house sounded just like that. It scared Martha half to death. She lifted her sun-bonneted head slightly from the bushes to listen.

"I told you NOT to eat that in here. Now you've dropped it on the carpet. Peanut butter on the CARPET! Look at it. LOOK. AT. IT. If you think I'm going to clean that up, you're crazy."

Kimmy burst through her front door onto the porch wearing a pastel pink and green bikini. She pranced off the porch and got down on her hands and knees in front of the patch of dirt next to it filled with coarse bracken and thistle that never flowered. She began to yank and to yank and to yank, with a little scream accompanying each yank. The sun bore down directly on her, having no tree or bush to filter it.

Martha felt she had taken enough chances watching Kim. She burrowed more deeply into the bushes contemplating the mixed blessing her example seemed to have wrought. At least the girl was making an effort. Martha's knees sank into the dirt she'd just cultivated. She grabbed for the spindly clover and a weed with big jagged leaves that she wasn't sure wasn't poisonous, but oh well, you take your chances in this life.

Kimmy's yelps submerged into a long, low growl punctuated by an occasional shouted word, and it was the occasional word Martha hoped to catch. Martha slowed her progress through the weeds and stared at the soil beneath her in an attempt to concentrate on what Kimmy was saying.

"Mind," Martha thought she heard, or maybe it was "Mine." The flats of marigolds were lined up in a row on the lawn behind Martha. She reached back to get a flat and caught a glimpse of Kimmy. The girl didn't even have the sense to shake the weeds free from dirt before flinging them behind her. Great clods of dirt rose, flew, and dropped. Martha distinctly heard the word "Fat," and a short while later "Father," and her back stiffened. She could straighten, stand and confront Kimmy, or she could let it slide "like water off a duck's back" as her father used to say. She decided to let it slide.

Because Kimmy was throwing the dirt behind her, the silty residue settled, mingled with her sweat, and ran in muddy streams down her shoulders and back making her look more and more wild.

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"Minding my own business," Kimmy muttered. "Yard." In a singsong lisp she said, "Beautiful flowers."

Martha finished the weeding and prepared the soil on both sides of the porch for the potted flowers and the seeds. "Police," she heard Kimmy say. Martha moved to the northern side of the porch, the side nearest Kimmy's house, to dig the holes she needed to transplant the marigolds. "Trying," shouted Kimmy into the dirt. Out of the corner of her eye Martha saw her sit up. Kimmy spoke to the front of the house as if it were an altar and she was giving witness. "Some people have everything done for them. I have to do everything myself!" She growled, actually growled.

Martha finished her hole digging quickly and moved to the other side of the porch; she figured it would be better to let Kimmy's fury wear itself out without her to fuel it. Then Kimmy's screen door slammed and all was quiet for a second or two. From inside the house Martha heard Kimmy's shouts. "Flowers. Huh! Pretty! That's all." These short, disconnected phrases mingled with indistinguishable mumbles that gurgled from her throat until she finally said, "Big fat face!"

Martha plopped one plant in each hole and strategically scattered the seeds to assure an interesting yield. She had mixed the seeds, but segregated those flowers that grew very tall, which she planted at the back, from those flowers that were typically short, which she planted closer to the front, near the marigolds. She covered all her seeds with dirt and mulch, then went in to make some lunch, check on her father, and rest a little before she edged the lawn.

The sun, though shrinking, threw off heat more intensely as it slid into its three o'clock slot in the afternoon sky. Whatever green had been left in the ragged excuse for vegetation Kimmy had pulled and tossed onto her lawn had finally seeped out; the husks of weeds were beginning to wilt and curl past yellow and were well on their way to dun. All was quiet.

Martha fitted the extension cord onto the weedwacker's plug, threaded the cord through a slot in one of the kitchen's small windows, and plugged it into the outlet there. The machine itself was ingenious; she couldn't thank Miss Jackson and Miss Johnson enough for introducing her to it. She held it by the long handle and aimed the circular wacker with its metal guard at the edge of the lawn she wanted to trim and, viola!, a rather long strip of plastic or nylon with a knot tied at the end flew out like a cutting tongue and slashed the jagged ends off the edges of the lawn; the end result not only looked better than if she had done it with a spade, but it took about a quarter of the time.

Martha took advantage of the quiet on the northern front. She unfurled the extension cord. A foot path--a strip of concrete about eighteen inches wide that led to Kimmy's back gate--separated Kimmy's lawn from Martha's. Martha wanted to dispatch her side quickly. She revved up the wacker simply by pressing an orange button on the handle. She'd finished the part right near Kimmy's back door quickly, moved smoothly to the part where her own bushes began, and with a sigh of relief was looking forward to the long stretch that led to the front sidewalk when Kimmy slammed the back door and twisted the knob connected to the garden hose. The sprinkler in her front yard, which Martha had not noticed amid the other junk collected there, sprang to life squirting streams of water high into the air and onto Martha

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and her lawn.

Martha turned off the wacker, and Kimmy turned to stare at Martha with her hands on her hips.

“Kim,” Martha said.

Kimmy mimicked her by twisting her face and mouth. “Martha.” She folded her arms and canted one hip. There was not even the pretense of common civility.

“I’m only going to be a minute,” Martha said, trying to remain calm. It felt like talking to a child. “Could you turn the sprinkler off for just a few minutes?”

“MY lawn needs water,” Kimmy said.

“Well, could you maybe not use the sprinkler just yet? I need to get this done.”

“I’m not stopping you.”

“It’s dangerous.” Martha lifted the extension cord and flipped it away from the water. “This is electricity, you know?”

Kimmy toggled her head like one of those nodding toys one sees in the backs of people’s car windows. She was a full-grown child. Martha could see that now. What had happened to Kimmy in her youth, or had not happened that should have, to make her such a basket case of an adult?

“Oh, all right,” Kimmy finally said. She turned off the water, marched out front to unscrew the sprinkler from the hose, and marched back to turn the hose back on.

“Better?” she sneered.

Martha bit her tongue and revved up the wacker.

Dylan stepped out onto the porch with a toy car in his hand. Behind him followed Heather holding a pink parasol with yellow flowers stuck on it. Kimmy pointed at them and shrilled, “Stay there! I’m doin’ the lawn. I don’t want you down here.” Even over the wacker noise, Martha heard Kimmy clearly. The kids made themselves comfortable on the porch and watched their mother and Martha only a few feet apart intently ignoring one another. Kimmy’s back was to Martha. She couldn’t tell if the bones and muscles of Kim’s back were tense or just tight because she was young and thin, but Martha decided she’d take her time, and if the noise of the weedwacker bothered Kim, Martha’s only regret was that it wasn’t louder.

Kimmy lazily waved the hose back and forth over her own lawn while Martha edged her way toward the front sidewalk. Kimmy made some excuse to yell at the kids, and when she did, she jerked the hose so that it soaked Martha’s bare leg and sneaker.

“Kim!” Martha said.

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Kimmy looked surprised, then disgusted. She straightened her posture to accentuate her breasts. "What's the big deal? It's just a little water. It won't kill you."

Martha released the rev button on the wacker, and briefly inspected her wet shoe. Looking pale and feeling lumpen and mean, she noticed the pucker her dirty knees made in the flesh of her legs. She heard her own screen door slam, and turned to see her father standing on the porch.

"Dad," she said. She snapped her fingers, pointed to one of the lawn chairs on the porch. He dutifully sat.

"Daddy, Daddy," Kim mocked.

Martha ignored her taunts and got to the point. "Look, Kim. If you could just wait for ten minutes, I'll be finished and you can water all you like." She heard her own voice losing all authority as it rose in pitch.

"Why should I have to wait for you?" Kimmy said. "I've got a million things to do. I've got three kids to take care of. All by myself. I don't live with my daddy."

Martha looked at her father and pointed to him. "I've got plenty to do, too."

"What?" said Kimmy. "He's just crazy. Poor you, with your crazy papa."

Martha's father stood up and held onto the railing of the porch. "Don't talk to her," he said. With more emphasis, he added, "Her."

"Dad!" Martha said. She was losing patience and waved him down, "Sit down!"

"Oh, leave him alone," said Kimmy. "It'd be better to let him play on the expressway and bounce off a Mack truck. Put him out of his misery."

Martha could understand crazy. There was no doubt that Kimmy was crazy; no sane person could say things like that. What Martha couldn't understand was cruelty. How could someone be so cruel?

The towheaded little girl with the tangled hair twirled her umbrella placidly on the porch looking over the head of her older brother, who seemed not to notice anything other than his toy cars. The little girl watched Kimmy and Martha intently, listened to everything.

Oh little girl! Little girl! Martha wanted to whisper in her ear. What will you remember? Who will you become under the influence of such a mother? Will you rise above or sink below her example?

"Isn't that right, old man?" Kimmy said. She pointed at him with the hose and splashed Martha's leg again. Martha hopped back a step, and Kimmy laughed.

"What, are you afraid of a little water?" She flipped the hose again and glanced Martha's other leg with a few drops.

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“Stop!” Martha said. Her voice devolved into a full-fledged whine, and she felt reduced to a child again on the playground being teased because she was the only fourth grader fat enough to have breasts that bounced when she skipped rope.

“Stop,” Kimmy mocked.

“Kim.” Martha’s heart bumped against her throat, her larynx constricted. “You stay on your side, and I’ll stay on mine. I’m going to ignore you, and I’ll ask that you ignore me, and we’ll get along just fine.”

She pressed the orange button to rev the wacker. Kim had turned her back on Martha, and Martha felt a weak surge of victory, but then Kimmy decided she hadn’t had enough fun. She rhythmically flipped the nozzle, each time sending the water close to the wacker, but not on it. Kimmy wiggled her butt in a weird little dance. She was on the verge of laughter.

Martha’s face itched with heat. She looked up for a moment at the little girl.

“Too close?” Kimmy said.

Martha tried to ignore her. She moved the wacker as smoothly as possible along the edge, watched the grass clippings and the dirt spew out onto the thin walkway. She tried to keep moving and not flinch when the water splattered close.

“How’s that? Huh? What about this? Is that legal distance?”

Finally exasperated, Martha stopped. “Kim, what is your problem?”

Kim looked truly defeated for a moment. Martha thought she’d reached a rational part of her, and that she would even comfort her if Kim began to cry.

“I’m so tired,” Kim said. Her shoulders slumped; her expression changed to reveal a person capable of real engagement, with a possibility for complex human interaction. “You don’t know.” But as her eyes met Martha’s her expression shifted again, and with only a few minor adjustments she traveled the unbelievably short distance between sadness and anger.

“You and your stupid, precious yard, that’s my problem.” She spoke very slowly, and very clearly. The volume of her voice swelled and shrank erratically. “I have to take care of EVERYTHING myself. All you have to take care of is your YARD. It’s not that easy for everyone.” She twisted her mouth into an acrid smirk. “Are you going to call the POLICE on me now for watering my lawn?”

“Kim,” Martha said shaking her head. “You’re not even making sense.” She wasn’t going to say it, she wasn’t, but it came out like a powerful, long suppressed burp, and it felt good: “You’re crazy.”

She saw that her insult hit home, but in the same instant a momentary look of joy lit Kim’s face; the battleground was Kim’s home, and she was welcoming Martha to it. Martha perceived her own mistake immediately.

Kim timed her response like a virtuoso. She let a beat pass in which Martha

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had time to panic, and then said in a slow whisper, "Crazy? Yeah. I'm crazy. Three kids makes me crazy." She smiled calmly. As she continued to speak, her lips snaked through a range of expressions too terrifying for Martha to turn from.

"Busy-body neighbors drive me CRAZY," Kimmy continued. "Living next door to a fat-assed, dried-up VIRGIN who calls the police every time I fart drives me CRAZY."

Kimmy's voice grew more frenzied. She had been in the middle of her lawn at the start of her tirade but had gradually moved step by step closer to Martha, alternately shouting and whispering her words.

"I AM crazy. I'm not like you. I'll never be like you," she hissed. "You're OLD. You're UGLY. You're FAT. You will ALWAYS be ALONE." Neighbors began to appear on porches. Kimmy increased her volume.

"Old virgins go crazy too, ya know. That's what you're really afraid of isn't it? Is that what's going to happen to you? You gonna go crazy, you OLD VIRGIN?"

Kimmy savored the last word, her whole face tensed to spring it with maximum force from her mouth.

"You need a MAN, is what you need. You'll never find a man to fill that DRIED UP OLD HOLE. Squeak! Squeak! Squeak! Isn't that why you're jealous of me? Admit it. All dried up?" With the final taunt, Kimmy's hand twitched, and she pressed her thumb down over the hose's nozzle, forcing the water into a fast stream.

Martha saw the stream, watched Kimmy's elbow bend, as if to lift, as if to aim. Martha blocked her movement with the weedwacker. She hit Kimmy's hand with the metal guard, and it drew blood. Kimmy threw down the hose and came at Martha. Martha stepped back and, in lieu of a growl or a bark, pressed her thumb down on the orange button to rev up the wacker, hoping the noise would be enough to keep Kimmy at bay. At first she held it up in front of her to prevent Kimmy's advance, which it did. The wacker spun between them, two figures momentarily frozen in the impasse of battle, and then Martha gave in to the overwhelming urge, tilted the wacker slightly, aimed at Kimmy's midsection and striped it with welts.

Kimmy backed away with a howl.

Martha moved forward, went for her legs.

Kimmy fell prostrate on the lawn, her screams almost operatic.

Martha found her voice. "Example!" Martha said. And then louder: "Example!" She saw the little girl--wide eyed on the porch--for only a moment, then returned her attention to Kimmy. She lowered the wacker again, this time to Kimmy's thighs. Kimmy jerked and kicked and rolled on the lawn, but Martha followed her. The spinning plastic cord of the wacker striped Kimmy's arms, the backs of her legs, her back.

"Example!" Martha shouted with each application of the wacker. "Example!"

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EXAMPLE!"

She had thought the wacker was relatively harmless, that it would never draw blood, but she found that if she held it in place long enough, at the flesh on the elbow Kimmy raised to protect her face, for example, she did indeed draw blood.

All Martha could utter was "EXAMPLE!" in a voice she didn't recognize, but was satisfying all the same.

Both children hopped up and down on the porch, screamed and cried. Martha's own father howled something as well. Neighbors rushed out into their yards to watch as Martha raised and lowered the wacker, her thumb caressing the orange button. Kimmy writhed under the wacker's touch until, after a while, she merely curled into a ball like a maggot and twitched.

Miss Jackson and Miss Johnson missed most of the action, but on hearing the crying of the children and the inhuman noises Kimmy made, came running out of their house and hopped off their porch. Miss Johnson yanked the extension cord, tore it loose from its plug. The wacker lost its juice, and Martha looked around.

Kimmy lay striped and glowing at Martha's feet, Miss Jackson moved toward Martha with her arms outstretched, but stopped a few feet away.

In the ecstasy of her fury, Martha hadn't noticed that her father had wandered off the porch and was headed down the street. A surge of relief at watching him go complicated her annoyance. The great round earth spun beneath her feet. She curled her toes inside her sneakers as if to hang on, as if all laws were broken and gravity would soon disappoint her too.

When the drone of the wacker subsided in her ears, when her head began to clear and her heart to lift, she saw that half a block away one of the neighbors--an older black man with a pink scar that cut his left eyebrow in two, a man she'd seen before but didn't even know--out of sheer kindness, stopped her father. The man turned her father around gently.

She barely heard Miss Jackson softly repeating, "Martha? Martha? Honey?"

The man didn't have to, of course, but he held her father's hand, both their arms bent at a right angle, the inner sides touching to the elbows, almost like lovers. Martha, her attention riveted on the man and her father, with a flick of her wrist sent the wacker twirling blindly behind her across the lawn and into her bushes. She listened as it hit the dirt with a soft thud, and unclenched her hands. With the whole neighborhood watching, and the sirens whistling in the far distance, this one gentle man walked slowly down the block to lead her father back home into the enduring hollows of Martha's embrace.

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