

“Best Served Cold”

by May Cotton © 2021, 2022

Walking to the mailbox on Saturday, I encountered Neighbor Jim fooling with a sprinkler in his front yard. I’ve had a bit of a beef with Jim ever since we moved here three years ago. The environmentalist in me resents the vast amount of water he uses to nurture his 100-square-foot lawn. His failure to keep the water out of the street results in a goodly amount of damage to the pavement from the standing water along the curb. There is no slope to carry it away, and it must be stepped in or over regularly to get to the community mailbox. With the recent drought, finally officially announced (though it’s been going on for quite a while) I am further frustrated by the daily washing of his evergreens to remove the dust and bugs.

His yard is meticulous, as is his shiny black BMW in the driveway, but the same can’t be said of Jim himself. His body might be clean, but he dresses so slovenly it’s hard to tell. I’ve never seen him wear anything but elastic waist shorts and a tee shirt. His feet are either bare or clad in sandals, though once in the winter I saw him in mocassins with a light jacket over his tee shirt. There was snow on the ground, so the mocassins didn’t really surprise me, but the shorts and tee shirt sure did. One would never guess that he was from the South, Georgia if I recall what he said one day when he cornered me to enlighten me about his illustrious past.

Jim clearly considers himself a martyr, having moved up here to help his wife Charlene care for her aging mother. For some reason he didn’t disclose, they ended up staying, living in the mother’s tiny single-wide mobile home. It is in front of this rather ugly abode that Jim nurtures his Kentucky Blue Grass. When the rest of us are overrun with dandelions, there’s nary a one in Jim’s grass, though the 10-foot square garden between our houses, in which he grows vegetables, is another matter. He lets the dandelions there go to seed, then covers them up from the 30-pound bags of mulch and potting soil he brings home in the trunk of his fancy sedan.

This year he appears to be adding new wood to the enclosure, possibly increasing the depth of the growing area with long wooden rails. These also came out of the BMW, revealing seat backs which either recline or fold forward, since nothing that long would fit any other way. I watch his diligence from my bedroom window as I stand petting my cat where she wallows in my basket of scarves. I’ve lost the battle for ownership of the basket, so I just go along and scratch her ears while I watch Jim. He hasn’t made much progress in the garden this year. The new boards lie among the dandelions, getting dirty. At dusk Jim sits on his steps spraying them off with his backyard hose.

Last year he complained he was getting old, and after a year in quarantine he is obviously breaking down. When he’s not limping around the yard or hosing down the boards, he is picking at his feet, clearly sore and tired from hauling his bulk around. Jim is not a small man, but

neither is he tall, which means his vast belly is surely as unhealthy as his tender feet. I suspect gout, since he never wears proper shoes, but he is not the type to admit that anything ails him other than age. He was career military, after all.

When I first met Jim — or at least tried to — he told me quite harshly that he and his wife keep to themselves. I took that as a warning to leave them alone. I have made only one foray to their front door, in which I asked very politely if they might be able to turn off their side porch lights at night, since they shine directly into my bedroom window. I was severely rebuffed, though Charlene was at least polite about it. It surprised me when Jim brought me a small paper bag of tomatoes from his garden last summer, and I noted that he has gradually warmed up to me, recently bragging about his garden plans for this summer.

So I was not prepared for the Saturday afternoon encounter. Jim sets the sprinkler so it routinely hits the back of the mailbox, and the previous day I had gotten my feet wet while retrieving my mail. It was either stand in the puddle in front of the mailbox or step up onto the curb where the water was running down all four sides of the large metal container. I greeted him warmly as I started past his house, and the fact that he greeted me in return seemed like an opening. I asked him ever so politely if he could try not to water the mailbox, but my request for that small favor caused him to explode with rage.

In a loud voice he screamed at me, bluntly explaining he had engineered his sprinkler system to perfection as he waved around an old-fashioned two-holed metal head attached to a warped board. “I do everything I can,” he snarled, “but I can’t control Mother Nature. I have \$75 of grass seed in the lawn,” he raged on, “and I’m not going to let anything happen to it!”

I tried to interject when he stopped for a breath. “Perhaps if you moved the sprinkler head closer to the tree . . .” I began, but he cut me off.

“Shut up, woman!” he shouted. “I’ve got 500 points of IQ on you, so don’t try to tell me how to do anything!” Stunned, I took a step back, but Jim wasn’t finished yet.

“You have the same goddamned disease your brother had, and I hope you die from it too! I see your key. Go ahead and get your damned mail, or else stick that key somewhere else!”

During this tirade, Neighbor Bill, who lives directly across the street from Jim, came down his driveway, having heard everything from his backyard. (I know this because the following morning, Bill came to my door to make sure I had not “committed *seppuku*¹” in response to Jim’s tirade.) Four times he called across the street to Jim, telling him to calm down. Jim was having none of it and began to scream back at Bill. “I can’t hear your goddamned squeaky voice,” he railed. “Mind your own goddamned business!”

Now that I was no longer the target, I hurried to the mailbox, opened my box and saw that

¹Seppuku is a form of Japanese ritual suicide intended to restore honor.

it was empty. Without a single glance toward Jim, I jumped over the puddle and headed back to my own house as quickly as I could move, all the while listening to Jim shout at Bill about his hearing loss and how he was too fat to have the necessary surgery on his eustachian tubes. *That explains why that fat old man doesn't wear hearing aids*, I thought, *why I hear him yelling at his wife on a regular basis, why he and our other neighbor Dave, who is also deaf, always shout at each other under my bedroom window.*

I was shaking as I opened my front door and ducked inside, ready to burst into tears. I was feeling desperately wounded by the insults, not yet realizing how absurd they were. If Jim really believed his IQ was 500 points above mine, he clearly knew nothing about IQ, which can only be measured up to 200. But it was the slander against my brother, who had lived here before me, that hurt more. Tom really did die of his disease — Aspergers Syndrome — from the characteristic of being too smart for his own good. After abusing his body with tobacco and alcohol his whole life, he actually believed he could heal himself with his mind and refused to cooperate with his doctors. For an off-the-scale genius, he was really stupid. Just like Jim, upon whom I now visualized taking revenge.

First I thought about slashing his tires, but being old myself, I haven't the strength to wield the knife. Besides, my husband explained to me as I shared my ruminations, if I could actually puncture it, the tire would probably explode and injure me in the process.

Next I considered taking a chainsaw to his precious evergreens, but it wasn't the trees I want revenge on. It was Jim. I mulled over driving through his yard, which was surely soggy enough that the tires of my golf car to rip it to shreds — if it didn't get stuck.

I could take an icepick to his ancient hoses. Maybe if I made them into soakers, he'd water the lawn properly. But that too would take strength I just don't have.

Finally I hit upon the perfect scheme. If he was so miserly as to worry about \$75 worth of grass seed, what would he do when he discovered he needed to pick up the \$75 worth of coins I was going to throw all over his grass? After all, it wouldn't hurt any of the plants, and I wouldn't have to actually step into his yard. I could just cast them onto the grass while standing in the street. All those toe-touches might be just what he needs to trim down that huge belly. And if he is really as smart as he thinks he is, when he counts up his bounty once he gets it all picked up, he might realize the significance of \$75 dollars worth of extra effort to protect his precious \$75 worth of grass seed.

But I don't think he's that smart, and he will spend enough time puzzling over the meaning of the coins in his grass that I will have had my revenge — clearly a dish best served cold.

Author's note: Writing this essay was my true revenge. It was both safer and cheaper,

and it provided just the right amount of therapy to get the problem off my chest. After speaking with Bill about the incident, I reported it to our manager. She offered me the opportunity to make an official report so that a letter of warning could be sent to Jim.

I declined the sending of the letter because I don't think it would do any good — Jim is so headstrong, he believes he is always right. And I have to live next door and walk past his house every time I get the mail. I think it is safer to drop the issue for now. Besides, I have no intention of actually throwing coins (or anything else) into Jim's yard. Though it is fun to fantasize.