

The Grackle

“I don’t know anything sadder than a summer’s day.”

—E.B. White

I met Jean through her garden. It’s easy to walk by a garden, but not for my friend Lynn—who pauses and looks. She sees nuances in color and shape that my eyes seem unable to perceive. The distinction reminds me of a job I once held (a lifetime ago) unloading shirts from the back of an 18-wheeler and hanging them on racks in a discount store in the Blue Star mall. The men’s shirts were all exactly the same—forty of them. The women’s shirts were nearly all different—marked by the tiniest alterations of design: a single pale stripe in the collar, a change in the color of a button. The experience opened my eyes to the remarkably different lenses through which men and women see the world. I was fired from the job for—in the exact words of my supervisor— “lack of enthusiasm.” It still makes me laugh.

Jean’s garden, on Woodbridge Avenue, is almost entirely filled with varieties of blue flowers: meticulously pruned perennials that run down the long length of the driveway. Lynn always stopped to admire them. One day, in the Metuchen library, I recognized the gardener in her sun hat, and I introduced myself. “Excuse me. You don’t know me, but I wanted to let you know that my girlfriend absolutely loves your garden.”

And so a friendship was born.

Jean looks somewhat like Virginia Woolf: tall, lean, sharply drawn, almost regal. She told me that in younger days she had been a party-planner for the Lotos Club in New York City—“one of the oldest literary clubs in the United States”—and it’s easy to imagine her holding her own among that lofty crowd.

Her garden uses no fertilizers or weed killers. It thrives through her ceaseless vigilance. I rarely walk by and do not see her wearing that battered sun hat and an old tee-shirt: watering, trimming, adding worm casings to the soil, pushing an old manual lawn mower.

At the side of the garden a metal bird—a stylized crane—stands on one leg under the bird feeder. Each week, Jean’s husband buys 40 pounds of birdseed at Costco. Three times a day he goes out to refill the feeder. Her birds are demanding and unforgivingly punctual.

The other day when I walked by, Jean had found a baby grackle in her driveway. It had apparently fallen from its nest in a night-time storm.

“The parents have abandoned it,” she explained. “It’s too young to care for out of the nest. They left it to die.”

She had placed the bird, for safety, in the hollow of the metal crane where it fit like an egg in a cup. It peeped in its perch. Only one of its eyes was open. A tough little pirate, I thought.

“Maybe its parents will find it in the feeding area,” said Jean. “I tried to feed it some mashed-up seed. But it wouldn’t take it.”

I tried to steel myself against sentimentality, but at the same moment, looking at that baby bird, I felt my heart hurting. The bird swiveled its one good eye to look at me. And peeped.

I returned in the late afternoon. The bird was gone.

“I held him in my hands,” said Jean, “and I took him for a walk around the backyard. I wanted to show him what the world looked like. Then I put him back by the garage in the grass. He peeped for about an hour. Now he’s stopped.”

I walked home and the phrase “the great grief” came to my lips. All of us, I thought, held close to our chests our great griefs—the physical manifestation of some profound loss—largely beyond the expression of words, and certainly beyond the diminishment of time. For me the great grief was probably the loss of my sister Terry, seventeen years ago. I get dressed now for some occasion—I look in the mirror—and she still speaks to me: “You are *not* wearing that sports jacket. You look like an idiot.” For Jean, I think, her great grief might have been the loss of her brother. He had been a gifted student and scientist, still in his twenties, I think. One of his watercolor paintings hangs in Jean’s living room.

So I drive to the YMCA, and the car radio plays Paul McCartney’s “Here Today”, and a string quartet is pouring out grief for the death of John Lennon. And as I use the

NuStep machine in the Y (next to the dripping air conditioner), I see there are small paper signs affixed to the front desk: *I am a survivor*. There are maybe ten of them—all signed with a first name. As I look at them, I remember Jean's grackle, who, in the last hour of his life, was given a tiny tour of the backyard. I think: *We're all survivors*. Bruised in our own secret ways, our sneakers tied tightly, as we tour through the world with our one good eye.

Here's to us all.