

A Devious Mind

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

I'll be right with you, just putting the last touch to this flower arrangement. I'm a florist, you see. These gerberas really stand out with their striking salmon colour, an inspiration which should charm the buyer. Let's put this arrangement in the window. Ready now. Basically, I want to make a confession to you. I can see you smile with some relish. No, don't expect me to divulge some dark secret; that would be quite unlike me. It's a short confession about an ordinary, mundane feeling: I like my footpath. (I warned you not to expect any sort of intrigue.) This footpath, as banal a topic as it may appear to some, is of great importance to me. In fact, I call it "mine". I know, it's not really mine insofar as I can't build on it, but it's certainly seen as mine for maintenance. Each Sunday morning, after having done the lawn mowing and the edge trimming, I feel entitled to call it mine.

I see the footpath as the first step to my house, an appendage to it, an extension to my front garden. Preferring it to be welcoming rather than deterring, I've tried to embellish it instead of ignoring it. What better way to enhance it than with attractive plants: flower beds, small hedges, narrow bark paths, annuals and bulb flowers — a carpet so attractive that I almost wish I could lift it and lay it on the floor of my lounge room.

Pleasant to the eye, with its winding grass trail for pedestrians, it's an area that has a personality of its own. Going by my friends' praise, my landscaper's talents have some merit. My footpath certainly gets a tick of approval from my eyes and a tingling from my finger tips.

One day, feeling game, I had a small garden-pond built, surrounded with rocks. Half a dozen aquatic plants in it, an iron bench placed near, for anyone to sit and relax, a garden arch for shade embraced

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by fluffs of yellow banksia-roses. You should have seen the look of the water-lilies gazing up at the roses. A sight that left me contemplative.

I can just picture your reaction, and, before you start visualising my creative idea, I must stop your wandering into my fantasies. Immediately. No such pond ever got built. It was all untrue. Just a dream I had one night, an obsession with my garden having tampered with my mind and elevated it to unachievable ambitions. Yes, just dreaming ... Sorry to have you imagining such an odd, yet beautiful, wetland, so singularly placed. Obsessions are often conducive to dreams.

Think an instant, though, if I *could* build some structure on the footpath. Not only would it increase the value of my house but, most of all, delight me *and* the passers-by. Just a nice thought. I like your footpath, people tell me, catching me weeding. Welcome words that lead to gardening expertise from some and vague suggestions from others. Sometimes I wonder whether I should bring a table and chairs out with refreshments while we talk. I guess it's often silly if it's good fun. When people say, amused, that I'm crazy, I simply respond: happy to be.

Stop dreaming, Gina, get back to serious and realistic matters, I scold myself. The things that really happen in life. The unattractive side that would never make you dream of an enchanting garden. That's true. With the pleasant parts of life also come the unsavoury ones. And even my footpath suffers the ups and downs of it once or twice a year, an assault that I usually treat with acceptance.

To my dismay, it has indeed endured a real drawback the other morning. No, not a storm. No, not hail. Worse than that. To the eye anyway. Quite an unattractive incident occurred which was an insult, not just to me but to my flower beds on the footpath that

copped the unsightly intruder. I felt quite apologetic to my garden, particularly to the more delicate flowers.

That morning, quite early, I looked at my footpath and noticed an item that didn't belong to me. This is of course not the first time that dumpings have occurred. This time though it was the nature of the item that surprised me and which I took as a personal slight. If it had been inside my garden, it would have been seen as a criminal offence on top of a trespassing one. Some devious mind had wished to irritate me as well as repelling me. I'm pretty sure that you would empathise with me and share my outrage. Believe me, I have tried to read the mind of such an individual and have found it impossible. The item in question being of a more portable and disposable nature could have been pushed into the waste bin. No, the mind had decided otherwise: the object had to come to my footpath. Intentionally. A nocturnal deed. I found it among the flowers, sitting on the lilies as if on a nest, looking grotesque and absurd. Suddenly the perfume of my flowers turned musty and I felt hurt on their behalf.

To bring a bit of respite to my heartbeat, I walked around the house twice, mortified thoughts tagging along, feelings of having been soiled, shamed even. What would people who might have seen it walking up deduce. I shook my head. My understanding of human conduct, human intentions, is often rather limited. In this case it certainly leaves a blank in my mind.

After many sighs I realised I had to get rid of it somehow as quickly as possible before school started when parents and children would walk past my house. I needed some pluck but it had to be done. The unpleasant task was performed swiftly with tight lips and eyes looking elsewhere, not honouring the item with a last glance. Once done my hands were scarred.

I went inside, felt the clear water running on my fingers with a scented soap, and let them mix and play with the bubbles over my skin. I let it run on and on, listening to it as if I were beside a fountain. I closed my eyes to hear it better. Then I looked at my hands: clean gardener's hands. I massaged them with a fragrant cream, slowly, slowly to make the moment last. I then made some coffee, had breakfast, put the blinds of my mind down and, chewing slowly, stared at my posie of yellow carnations for deep and positive inspiration.

