

Garden Goddess for Hire

by Sandra Knauf

July 3

The first three hours working in the wealthy client's garden that hot morn are business as usual, focusing on the labors of weeding, watering, clipping, tying rose canes to arbors, all the while enjoying the sunshine and occasional refreshing mountain breeze.

Then boredom sets in, big time. Because my daughters are young and I've been reading bushels of storybooks about talking animals, it seems natural to amuse myself by inventing tales about plants and other animated citizens of the garden. For awhile, I concoct social dramas in my mind that feature lawn grass, dandelions and earthworms. The Kentucky bluegrass family are the stuffy, overly pampered aristocrats and the Dandelions are the humble "invaders." Even the earthworms know their place in this garden hierarchy.

It's no wonder my fantasies run down this path, in this garden. Everyone knows their place here, in our city's most monied neighborhood. A five-star, world famous hotel nearby even had a new fence put around it recently, to keep out the riff-raff. That would include me. The hired help. A gardener.

I soon grow bored with the play, yet I'm still mostly content, deep in a blissful sun/work trance.

The spell vanishes when loud arguing comes from the manse.

A male voice declares, "I only said I found her *moderately* attractive."

The female's reply is garbled.

Who are they talking about? I guess someone along the lines of a secretary, and am embarrassed to hear a domestic row. Then I imagine that perhaps the argument's about *me*. After all, there I crouch, easily visible not ten feet away from their huge Palladian-style windows, trimmed down and toned considerably from weeks of physical labor, brown and healthy as a berry, flushed with sweat and sunshine, feeling creative and sexy and interminably bored. Perhaps,

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/sandra-knauf/garden-goddess-for-hire>»

Copyright © 2010 Sandra Knauf. All rights reserved.

I muse, my cleavage is visible as I tend the grass. Maybe the Mr. has a wondering eye and the Mrs. is quite sick of it.

My mind drifts again. I remember the film *Gods and Monsters* and how the gay director of *Frankenstein* fame lusted after Clay, or “the yard man,” as he was called, played by Brendan Fraser. The old tomcat watched Clay from *his* window, greedily lapping him up secretly like so much yardman cream. Soon Clay is invited in for a glass of iced tea, then lunch, then receives an offer for a modeling job, posing nearly nude for a painting.

My lingering bit of zen fades. I begin to feel as trapped as the yard man did in Queen Leer's studio, but in another way. I miss my girls, who are home with Andy, my self-employed husband. I'm tired of working out in this heat every day, waiting for my skin to shrivel up like a dried peach. My own garden's now seriously neglected, and I have an idea for a novel that's been begging to get out on paper. I'm sick of working in spoiled rich people's gardens. Who am I kidding? I'm amusing myself by having the plants perform, by making up sexy gardener scenarios. I'm bored out of my freaking mind. I have been almost since I started this work.

For a few months I've been playing professional gardener. Hattie Goodacre, who found herself short-handed in April, asked me to come work for her part time, only fifteen to twenty hours a week, and I jumped at the chance. I knew all about the gardening part, back-breaking labor mixed with equal parts bliss, and figured the experience wouldn't be too far from that. Getting out of the house, a break from domesticity, was a plus, as was having a “real” (read “paying”) job. I welcomed the opportunity for camaraderie, outdoor work and extra cash with which to indulge my own garden.

April 18th

Hattie picks me up on the first day in her small truck. The back of it's covered with ecologically-minded bumper stickers and hippie words-of-wisdom, like “Who Owns You?” and “Subvert the Dominant

Paradigm," "Dare to Legalize Drugs," and "Trees are the Answer." Hattie's ten years older than I, in her 40's, and I'm one of her greatest admirers. She's an individual in a city that's seemingly run by fundamentalist Christians and developers; where marching to the tune of your own drummer is nearly as frowned upon as same-sex marriages. She's also an endangered species, one of the early Hippies. She looks the part, with nearly waist-length, beginning-to-grey hair braided in a ponytail and covered with a floppy straw hat, tie-dye tank shirt, Teva sandals and dangling jewelry of silver and wood.

We met a few years earlier at the Cooperative Extension's Master Gardener program. I was student, she was an instructor. I discovered Hattie possessed something rare and precious: a philosophy relating to gardening and her connection to nature. More importantly, she walked the walk. She spends much of her free time on environmental awareness, promoting permaculture, helping to save wild spaces, and non-environmental causes, such as helping the poor. Sensing a kindred soul, I gave her a copy of Michael Pollen's book *Second Nature* while I was taking the master gardening course. She, in turn, invited me to join her garden club. I learned she was also a writer; we became friends.

We head to the nursery to pick up some Feathermeal, a deer repellent. She banters with the help as I take it all in, happy to be part of a new adventure. I'm wearing faded jeans, a green T-shirt, sneakers. I hate hats and have left mine in the truck.

As we're pulling out of the driveway, Hattie spies the seashell shaped top of a birdbath, lying near a fence. It's chipped on one side. "Look at that."

"Garden art," I say.

"I'm going to go ask them what they're going to do with it."

I wait in the truck. It's a throwaway and Hattie claims it. Back in the cab she says, "Bitchin'."

Hattie's also a foster mom for plants. Her home garden's filled with orphans rescued from trash and compost piles.

At the first client's home I meet Hattie's new business partner, a twenty-two year old woman named Jill. Hattie filled me in on the way—Jill's a former class valedictorian, taking some time off from college, she's just bought her own home, a small ranch style house. Hattie discovered her last year, working for \$8 an hour for another gardener. When that gardener moved out of state, Hattie snagged Jill. "I could not believe how much she knew," Hattie told me earlier in the truck. "She's a genius." Although Jill knows a lot, she hasn't yet been accepted into the Master Gardener program.

Jill looks younger than I imagined; her short blond hair is pulled into a ponytail, kinda Gidget-y. She wears a big smile and no makeup.

"Man, the *nepeta*'s seeded everywhere," she says when we arrive, "also the asters. We'll need to work on that today. There's also tons of ash tree seedlings."

"Ah, the asters." Hattie winks at me. "I call 'em pain-in-the-asters."

I find that while Jill delights in letting plant-Latin roll effortlessly off her tongue she also speaks Slang-lish; she says "bitchin' " a lot, like Hattie, but her favorite expression is "killer," as in "those were some killer *pachysandra*."

It's clear Jill and Hattie are tight. They both wear Teva sandals, and carry matching Hori Hori knives Jill ordered through *Horticulture* magazine, in their matching ladies' size leather tool belts. I can't help but be a little envious of their relationship.

The client's home is palatial, with huge, water-sucking front and back lawns of green, lush Kentucky bluegrass, something I find disgusting in our time of drought. Flowers and shrubs border the lawn on all sides, and a tree-filled wild area sits at the back of the property. Hattie says she's found bear poop out there before and, last spring, a swarm of bees clinging to a tree branch. She also says it's a good place to squat and pee if you have an emergency, since we won't be using the facilities at the house.

I ponder that for a millisecond. I don't think so. While I'm not fearful of wildlife, I don't want to be spied pissing in someone's backyard.

We spend four hours weeding.

The end of the morning finds us on top of a stuccoed cement wall, pulling up ash tree seedlings.

"Damn, this bra is killing me," says Hattie, tugging at the bottom of hers. "Women shouldn't be trussed up like a turkey."

When I get home I feel good, but tired. Spending most of the day out in the fresh air is wonderful.

April 20

This morning I work for another gardener. Kate is Hattie's friend, a fellow garden club member, and a brilliant garden designer. She asked Hattie if she could spare someone and Hattie asked if I was interested. I know Kate and I like her; I said sure.

We labor hard at a beautiful hotel, beginning with planting five gallon shrubs all morning long.

The second task is climbing to the top of a fifteen-foot ladder leaning on a stone wall, with five-gallon buckets of soil that probably weigh about thirty pounds. We dump the soil at the top. Vertigo-neurotic that I am, I'm terrified at the prospect of doing this; luckily one of the younger workers, a British girl, doesn't mind standing on the ladder while we bring the buckets to her. The fair-haired Brit has a nasty sunburn by the time we leave.

At the end of the day Kate tells me that she'll pay me the fifteen dollars per hour, the wage Hattie gives me, but only for today. She says she'd love for me to work for her again but, in the future can only offer \$12. She tells me the other women working for her, including one who is over 40 and has to drive sixty miles round trip to work each day, receive only ten dollars an hour for this back-breaking/no benefits/no healthcare work. With no hard feelings, I realize that to her, I'm just a glorified hole digger and bucket hauler; she's looking at the bottom line and her own financial security. Later I hear she charges clients \$25 an hour, per worker. The saddest part

of it is \$12 is not a bad wage, in this city, for this type of work. But it's a survival-only wage. My first day with Kate will be my last.

April 22

Today I work with the whole crew, comprised of Hattie, Jill, and two younger women who also work part time, usually on the days I'm off. We crawl over a high, rounded garden bed near a driveway, fill in the few bare spots with new perennials. I've only been a professional gardener for a couple of weeks and I'm still self-conscious. I'm regularly asking Hattie how she does things, what's her technique.

The plants we put in today are bigger than usual, quart size, and we move the thick mulch and dig the holes. There's always a significant mound of soil next to the newly planted addition, in a little pile beside the mulch.

"What should I do with all the extra soil?" I ask. I realize it's a stupid question, but can't help myself, everything is so meticulously groomed.

Hattie laughs out loud. "I'm going to give you an Indian name, 'Extra Soil.' Just smooth it around." I'm grateful she doesn't comment on how uptight I am.

Later she tells me how happy she is I'm working for her. She compliments everyone on a daily basis. It's the first time I've experienced this behavior in a "boss," a word Hattie hates. She refers to all of us as gardening goddesses.

April 24

Hattie doesn't usually pick me up until 9:00, at the earliest, and we don't get to the first garden till after 9:30. I hate getting to the job so late. It feels like I'm not getting enough done at home in the morning, and then, by the time I get home again in the afternoon, I'm worn out. I'd prefer to go out early in the morning, when it's cooler, but Hattie says the clients don't like us to arrive until after 9 a.m. La dee da, I think, who cares if the gardeners have to work in more uncomfortable, hotter conditions?

Hattie and I dig a new bed together at a home I hadn't worked at before, a house they call the "Pink House" because the owner has a preference for pink flowers.

I ask her about rabbit hutches. My husband's building one for our daughters' new rabbit, Oscar, and I'm wondering about size. Hattie's kept rabbits for years. She rhapsodizes about bunny manure; it's the best, it's low in nitrogen so can be put right in the garden and won't burn plants.

"He should make it big," she says of the hutch, while popping out a dandelion.

"It is." I rip out a bindweed vine.

"*Real* big." She grins wickedly. "A big ass hutch."

I laugh and echo her, "Yeah, a big ass hutch." We snicker together under our straw hats, sounding like the female horticultural version of Beavis and Butthead.

I bought one of the leather tool belts, trying to fit in with Hattie and Jill I suspect, but I don't like it. Every time I crouch down, a tool pokes or juts out at me. And, as a person who won't leave home without at least some makeup on, it feels a little butch. I've gone back to carrying my tools in a bucket and leaving them, now and then, scattered like rose petals, on the job site.

May 10

Today I'm edging a huge flower bed, going along with a shovel, slicing out pieces of sod that are creeping in too close, shaking out the grass from the soil, making a pile of *Pennisetum* for the compost pile. The owner doesn't like the black plastic lawn edging so it's all done manually. Hattie reminds me to switch legs periodically, telling me she blew out one of her knees with the shovel work.

I'm enjoying the gardening, but I can honestly say I'm not too impressed with the neighborhood. While I admire much of the architecture and all of the beauty, it all seems too big, much too big, for so few people. I had a brief experience with poverty as a child. After my mom and dad divorced, my twenty-something mom, me, and three younger siblings lived on welfare for a few years. We

drank reconstituted powdered milk, ate “govm't” cheese and canned chicken. Once we received Christmas presents through a charity, including (this was the early 1970s), a used stuffed animal, a donkey. The donkey was adorable but I remember being repulsed. Spending a winter using an outhouse and sharing heated bathwater in a big metal tub by a fireplace is something that only sounds romantic. And you never forget. Seeing all this entitlement and grandiose living feels like a cockle-burr, snagged on the hem of my worn out jeans, prickling me now and again.

May 12

I'm planting annuals, salvia, petunias, lobelia, and dusty miller, in a long built-in planter at the top of a ten-foot-high brick wall on the side of a long driveway. It can only be reached by ladder. My vertigo's kicked in again and I'm a little shaky but going about my business. I see a bee fly into a small hole in a brick below me. She leaves, then returns, and this time I move down to get a closer look. The bee's carrying a perfectly round piece of leaf. I keep tabs on her and she comes out again, and flies away.

By the time she returns I'm very close, my face about a foot away from the hole's entrance. I'm not worried about being stung as I know she's working, and not concerned with me. As she positions herself for a landing, I get a micro-view. She's holding the leaf with her thin, long for a bee, legs. The leafy green rug's partially rolled up, so it'll fit in the hole. I watch her as she hovers for a few more moments, wings beating rapidly. She's about the same size as a honeybee, stout, hairy, and has a metallic blue cast. She completely ignores me, so intent is she on her work. It's like a TV nature show, a micro-view of one infinitesimal part of nature, but a million times better. It's the coolest thing I've witnessed in a garden yet.

Hattie tells me later I've seen a leafcutter bee. They cut precise circles and ovals out of leaves for their long, tunnel-like nests. The ovals line the bottom and sides. They lay one egg per cell, provision each with a mixture of nectar and pollen, and cap each cell with a circle of green.

"When you see rose leaves with these perfect holes in them, it's the leafcutter," Hattie says. "They cause some damage, but not enough to get worked up about. What's really cool about it all, is that the first egg they lay, the oldest one in the far back of the tunnel, is the last to come out."

I admire the leafcutter for her industriousness. Later I look it up on the internet and find out the leafcutter, of the *Megachile* species, are natives. I read that they are important pollinators, not aggressive, have a mild sting (milder than honeybees and wasps) that's used only when they are handled. Our Colorado entomological expert, Whitney Cranshaw, writes: "Leafcutter bees are solitary bees, meaning that they don't produce colonies . . . Instead, individual female leafcutter bees do all the work of rearing."

May 13

We're on the east side of town, in an upper middle-class neighborhood. The house next door to our client's is a tacky Southern cliché on "having arrived"; blindingly white fluted columns on a Georgian-style brick house sitting in front of an endless void of Kentucky green front lawn studded with white urns, fake flowers, and a Rococo, waterless fountain. All that's missing is Mary Kay's pink Cadillac.

Hattie refers to the client next door, where we'll be working, by her first name, Annie. Annie's a gynecologist. In the back garden is a patio and small lawn, the running ground for two amiable terriers, and a koi (Japanese carp) pond, covered with netting to protect the prize fishes from the occasional hungry blue heron. A huge rock garden surrounds it all. It's built into the surrounding hill, a terraced stone wall topped by an upper garden of boulders and flowers and backed by a parched meadow, a perfect habitat for rattlesnakes.

The day is warm for this time of year, in the upper 80's. We've been drinking a lot of water and I'm thankful Annie has welcomed us to use her bathroom facilities, so we won't have to go at the nearby 7-Eleven. This is a different neighborhood, though; in the super-wealthy one we always have to go to the convenience store. In spite

of Annie's hospitality, I'm thinking of calling this the Hades garden. On top of the rock wall it's hot and dry, and our weeding, started in different areas, has over the last two hours eventually brought us together. We squat at the top of the property, among the delphinium and yucca and lupine and soon-to-be scorching stones. I'm the first to finish and when I stand my head swims. "Whoa, I just got a head rush."

Hattie and Jill find this very amusing.

"She just got a twirly," says Jill.

"Congratulations," says Hattie. "Having a twirly is one of the milestones in becoming a gardener."

After some shrub pruning, we gather our tools to leave. Hattie points out a red-tailed hawk soaring above us in the cloudless sky, and I wonder if they like to eat koi too.

May 15

One of a hired gardener's perks is usually being able to keep anything they have to weed out. I always defer to Hattie and Jill, but have still scored some *coreopsis*, pain-in-the-aster, *Knautia macedonica* (red pincushion flower; Hattie calls them "naughty-uh" because of their fecundity), hollyhocks, and even a tiny tree, an *Arborvitae* Hattie potted up personally and presented to me like a gift.

It makes me feel Robin Hoody; taking from the rich. Hattie nurtures orphans in her own garden, gives them to garden club members and to the church where we hold our monthly garden club meetings. Most of the time, though, she relocates them to another of her clients' gardens as freebies. I'm astonished at her non-capitalistic commune with nature and don't think I'd be so generous. It's like the way she's taken Jill under her wing. I'm guessing it might not be in her best interests business-wise, but it's how she lives her life. She doesn't care about money. This makes me think more of her, not less.

May 18

We meet at the greenhouse with the garden club members. Hattie's multi-tasking, picking out annuals for both our club's plant sale and for her clients. I'm thrilled because I'm indulging in my all time favorite gardening task, shopping. I buy several flats at wholesale prices, an orgy of annuals.

Hattie and Jill buy a truckload for their clients. Jill raves over some parti-colored striped petunias, hot pink and white, white and dark purple. I think they look like they belong in a circus, but keep my hoity-toity opinion to myself.

Later that afternoon we go to one of Hattie's favorite clients, a sixty-something woman who lives in a Spanish-colonial style townhouse near the Garden of the Gods. She has a walled garden off the back patio, room-sized. It's mostly shady, secluded, lovely. The built-in stucco bed is graced with a climbing rose, a St. Francis statue. There are fifty clay pots we must fill. We plant the impatiens in the bed and bring in the souped-up soil; we divide up the pots, and start planting. Anything goes. Scads of petunias, lobelia, fancy begonias and geraniums, sweet potato vines, even a bromeliad. It's a party. Within an hour we finish. The client especially loves the circus-y petunias. She gives Hattie a sweater that she no longer wants, a silvery, sparkly sweater that is very un-Hattie. Hattie accepts it graciously and tells me in the truck that her mom will probably like it.

May 19

We spend a good part of the day at an out-of-town nursery that specializes in herbs. I'm in plant lust mode again, buying herbs and perennials at \$1 each for a 2 ½" pot. There are seven different types of basil--Thai, Siam Queen, African Blue, globe, purple leafed, lemon, Genovese; five types of scented geraniums, and oh, so much more!

Hattie wears short shorts and a tank top, her hair up in a ponytail. She's trying to even out, as she calls it, her "gardener's tan," a white-torsoed tan similar to the farmer's. Hattie's legs are gorgeous but her impressive breasts, I'd guess "DD," are slightly more on the

side of Venus of Willendorf than Venus de Milo. Hattie doesn't give a damn. I admire Hattie's uninhibited, I-am-beautiful attitude, one that I can only achieve when under the influence of a significant amount of alcohol. Hattie declares herself a primitive, and once told me she would love to live an aboriginal life.

This evening Hattie calls to get my hours—she also pays on time. We bitch about the sprawl in Colorado Springs and she comments about the developers who run our city. Hattie says, “Yep, that's their job. Sucking up beautiful places and spitting out shit.”

May 20

Hattie seems to genuinely adore most of her clients. This morning we weed and plant lemon gem marigolds at an elderly man's modest ranch-style house. The home seems to be suburban-boring until I see a contemporary bronze fountain in the back pond. Hattie calls him “sweetie.” One of many.

I notice a fledgling robin hopping around the yard, crying to its mother, who delivers food to him. “He'll be fine,” says Hattie, “unless a cat comes by.”

In the afternoon we're met by the whole crew, plus two more, an older man and woman Hattie hired specifically for the occasion, to plant a truckload of gallon-sized stop-sign colored geraniums in the front of a huge home in another part of town.

We tour the conifer garden, which is expansive and sculptural with few flowers. Hattie calls the owner by her first name, Madeline. Madeline is whip-thin, well dressed, and her pretty, somewhat waxy features remind me of a well-preserved orchid, a prom-queen from ages past. Hattie's sure she's had plastic surgery. Madeline's not a gardener, she's a *designer*, which means she does all the shopping and directing of where-to-put-what. Hattie tells me of some expensive cast-offs she's received from her, purchases Madeline decided she “didn't quite like” once she got home.

This is the first garden I've visited that bespoke major design savvy. Madeline's garden is Oriental-influence-done-right. Every tree, shrub and flower is carefully placed, meticulously groomed and

pampered. It's the antithesis of how Hattie and I roll; we tend toward the "wild and wooly" as Hattie calls it. I prefer to think of it as gardening with Nature and letting Nature keep the upper hand.

We meet another garden club member on the patio, Liz, who's also subcontracting. Hattie gives Liz a hand in hoisting the six foot long, two-and-a-half foot wide wall pockets she's planted up on massive hooks in the patio area. The striking arrangements include a dozen different types of coleus, from chartreuse, edged with lipstick red, to smoky black and crimson--molten lava in chlorophyll form.

We begin planting the geraniums and it isn't long before I notice Madeline holding an animated conversation with Hattie.

Madeline goes back into her home and Hattie walks over. She's holding a plastic jar of Osmocote, the time-release fertilizer that comes in tiny beige balls, and some measuring spoons. "Have you guys been putting Osmocote in the planting holes?" she asks.

Cindy and I shake our heads. "I didn't know we were supposed to," I say.

"Well, that's what Madeline wants. We're going to have to take them all out and put a rounded teaspoonful in each hole."

"Geez," I say, "what is she, the Osmocote heiress?"

"No," say Hattie. "She's an electronics heiress."

May 22

We go to Mike's today for the first time. Mike's a she, the sixty-something widow of a military officer, Jewish, kind of brusque, but I like her. I'm in love with her garden. It's on a hillside and has incredible diversity and is xeric. I see a lot of plants that I haven't seen in other gardens and covet a bronze Buddha nestled among poppies. Mike's middle-aged son lives with her, as do two small, barking terriers. Hattie leaves Cindy and me there and we weed for three hours.

My friend Susan calls me that evening and asks if I'd like to do a gardening job for a friend, an elderly lady who lives downtown. She has a Spanish colonial-style house, with a built-in planter running down the entire length that needs to be filled with annuals. Susan

usually does it for her but she's too busy this year. Would I call her?

I do; and make a date for my very first contract work!

May 23

This morning we're spreading mulch. I get to the job at 9:30 A.M. and have to wait for Hattie and crew for another twenty minutes. I'm irritated, thinking about how I could be home, working in my own garden instead of sitting here not getting paid. It's supposed to be a 90-degree day. When Cindy, another of Hattie's gardeners, pulls up, the owner, a rake thin, 40ish man comes out and greets us.

He leads us up the long driveway to the house. On the way, I spy a small weed tree sapling, a Siberian elm, notorious in these parts, among the border of shrubs and trees leading up the driveway. Reflexively, I reach down and pull it out.

The owner stops, turns to face me. He's angry. "Why did you do that?"

"It was a weed tree."

"I would appreciate it if you didn't remove anything without my permission." His manner is icy and he speaks slowly, as if instructing a child.

I seethe in silence, thinking, here I am, a master gardener with a B.A., getting chewed out by a homeowner for plucking a goddamn weed.

It doesn't get any better. The truck 'o mulch arrives as does Hattie, Jill, Cindy and another woman whom I've never met, just as it starts getting nice and toasty. We have three wheelbarrows. The assembly line begins. We take turns standing on the truckload of mulch, pitchforking the barrows full, and pushing them up the long, steep driveway, around to the back of the house, through the trees, to dump and spread among a stand of white pines.

Back and up, back and up, over and over. It takes us two hours at a fast clip and I don't know how many trips. It's fun in a way because we kind of get into this competitive thing, where we're hustling, passing each other like we're in a relay, grinning—"hey, look at me, top this."

I keep asking Cindy if she's okay; she's so red-faced she looks like she's going to pass out, but Hattie says mine is the same. "Are you Irish?" she asks Cindy. Cindy doesn't understand at first and thinks it may be a put-down, about liking to drink, but then Becky says it's a Celtic trait—to get so obviously flushed when exerted. She's of Celtic origin too. This may help to explain our shared pagan leanings.

Meanwhile, The Marquis de Sod, Supreme Protector of Weed Trees, is standing in the shade, watching four attractive, dressed-for-summer women haul wheelbarrow loads up and down his driveway, nearly collapsing from heat exhaustion. He's enjoying himself.

Hattie and Jill, after a P. R. session with the owners, plant several fifteen-gallon-size trees. It takes two of them to gently work them out of the pots and into the ground. Hattie told me that the landscapers refer to the gardeners as "ladies-in-sandals" and Hattie refers to them as "the guys in big boots." The girls are doing the boys' work today. I learn that this is probably a one-time-only visit for this client and feel both used and thrilled that I will never see him again.

May 24

The job for the lady downtown worked out perfectly. I spent Saturday morning buying plants and soil amendment, and I finished the job in one afternoon. It was fun and I made a nice profit. It is so much better being the boss, no matter how perfect your boss may be.

We work in another big money garden today. There's extensive construction going on with the house, adding a new wing to the thousands of square footage already in existence. More weeding, planting of annuals. The client's name has "Gold" in it, like Goldfinger, Goldfinch or Goldenrod, as is, I suppose, apropos.

As Hattie and I drive homeward, we debate the relative differences of garden tours in her artsy-fartsy, celebrating-diversity neighborhood, where the gardeners are the sole workers and designers, and those in this neighborhood. Our garden club's tour is

coming up and we're featuring gardens tended by the club's professional gardeners. Most of the gardens will be in this exclusive section of town.

"The difference," Hattie says, "is that here you get to see what shitloads of money can do for a garden."

"Maybe we should call it the 'Shitloads of Money' tour."

Hattie says that if we had a serious job we'd probably get into trouble together.

May 31

It's another hot day. We've had the hottest May in the city's recorded history, and it looks like June is going to be a scorcher too. Hattie says global warming is undeniable, those who work close to nature have been seeing changes for years. I get up early to water some plants in my own garden and to let the chickens out while everything's dewey and cool and inside the family's still sleeping. As I walk by a trellis, I see a bee's been slumbering in a poppy and is now crawling out, damp and dew covered. I've heard that if bees are gathering nectar and pollen and it gets too late to return to the hive they'll sleep in a flower. She's unable to fly away until she's dry. I feel blessed to witness this.

I work the morning alone in one of the gardens. Hattie's sent me over to remove a big patch of King Alfred daffodils. She wants to save the bulbs and I'm to put them in trash bags for her.

The King Alfreds are deeply embedded in eighteen inches of muck. I can't believe they are down so deep, that it is so frigging wet. Every time I put the shovel in to pry them out there is a tremendous sucking sound and the gigantic mound resists me, like they're stuck in glue. It takes me over an hour to do a 5 x 8 foot patch, I'm soon wearing platform-mud heels, and I'm cursing under my breath. The water these places use, in a drought, is incredible, it is a bog! When I tell Hattie about the experience, with the instruction "don't *ever* send me on a job like that again," she finds it hilarious.

The afternoon is spent at the Hades garden, where at one point, Hattie accidentally breaks off a daylily bud.

"Darn," she says. Then she eats it and says, "yum." I notice she's wearing her wooden, dangling, peace-sign earrings.

Before we leave, Hattie dusts everything, not with fairy-dust but with Feathermeal, the deer-keep away product. I have never smelled anything so god-awful in my life--it's worse than shit, it's worse than skunk, it's worse than fish emulsion; it's like the ground up, rotting entrails of the most vile sea/land/air creature imaginable. I can't see how she bears it.

Hattie says it's made out of "chicken parts."

On the way home she stops at a 7-Eleven to wash up and asks me if I need anything. When she comes back to the truck she's got a paper container holding a corn dog, dripping in nacho cheese sauce product. "Sorry," she says, "but I was starving."

June 4

Hattie sends me to Mike's alone today. As Mike shows me where to work, I comment on a *Salvia argentea*, a huge, hairy-leafed, silver plant now at its rosette stage. Mike says, "Oh, Monty bought that." She says it in a dismissive way that bothers me, the same tone she used when I commented on some interesting pavers that Monty bought. I think it's cool her son's into gardening, and feel sort of sorry for him, that his mom's so prickly.

I weed for a couple of hours in the 90-plus degree heat, then take a thirty-minute lunch break for an iced cappuccino. I'm filthy when I walk in the coffee shop, covered in dirt and sweat, but I feel good, fully endorphin-ized by the sun and work.

Mike offers some orange hawkweed I'm digging out of her beds, and some other weed, I think it's a malva. "The only name I know it by is "devil's paintbrush," she says of the hawkweed. "I brought it from back East, where it grows wild all over the place. They say it's a terrible weed, but it's easy to pull up, I don't think it's bad at all." The plant has a low, mounded, hairy-leafed base with thin ten-inch stems that shoot up and are topped by a burnt orange flower cluster. It's sculptural, interesting. Mike's like the flower's base, short,

stocky, with short hair. She's interesting too, but, like the weed, not easy to interpret.

She comes out to tell me when it's time to leave, and seems concerned when I don't pack up right away. I finish the area I'm working in, about ten more minutes, and I don't mark it on my card, figuring it would be a nice way to show my gratitude for the pass-alongs. It's been a lonely morning, in a stranger's garden, but I'm excited about the free weeds.

My daughters, Zora, age nine, and Lily, six, have been out of school for almost a week. They hardly miss me at all. They're having a grand time hanging out with Dad, and he with them. The house is about at the same stage of decay as it usually is, so I can't claim things are going to hell.

Years ago, when we were first married, Andy stayed home for a year working on our first home, a Victorian-era house so dilapidated my mom said she wept after her first visit. I know Andy'd like to have the freedom I've enjoyed for the last decade, working at home. I'm surprised at my own feelings of antsy-ness and how I miss them all, like they're having a party that I am not invited to.

June 8

The crew spends the morning at the electronics heiress' home. I hear her and Hattie argue twice. The first time is over some perennials Madeline bought mail order from an expensive East Coast nursery.

They're standing over the tiny plants (that Hattie and Jill planted personally two weeks ago) and Madeline says, "I just don't understand why they're not doing better."

"Madeline, they're fine," says Hattie. "They've only been in two weeks. They have to establish their root system in the new soil before they'll start having top growth."

This does not please the heiress, who's wearing black pants, a short-sleeved white silk shirt, velvet black mules and now, a serious frown. "They're just so small. I'm not happy with them."

"You could have bought bigger plants locally, for less money," says Hattie, and I cringe. It's Hattie's buy-local-think-global policy, she's not able to resist. "And they would have been acclimated too."

Madeline tosses her well-coiffed head. "I suppose."

Later, when it's almost time to leave, Hattie introduces me to Madeline, telling her I'm "a Master Gardener." This pleases Madeline and she smiles graciously, as do I. I return the Osmocote to the potting shed and run to the back to look for my bypass pruners. Two minutes later I'm back, and find the ladies still standing in the driveway.

"I buy them small, because when you buy a smaller plant, you're going to have a healthier plant," I hear Hattie explain. I notice the object of the conversation is the gallon-sized clematis she's holding in one hand, a lavender, foot-tall clematis that was planted earlier in the trellised area near the driveway.

"I would just like a bigger one," says Madeline.

"It won't take that long for it to grow once it becomes established," Hattie insists. "I guarantee you it will catch up." She smiles at Madeline and I see she's decided to turn on her considerable charm. "Now, what would you rather have, a healthier plant or instant gratification?"

The pause is not as long as a gnat's ass. "Instant gratification," Madeline says. She smiles back at Hattie when she says it, then looks over at me, and I feel a certain naughty admiration for her. Hattie looks dejected.

In the truck, Hattie tells me that Madeline is having all the perennials she special-ordered from some Fancy East Coast Flower Farm pulled out. Hattie is seething. I have a bad feeling about their business relationship.

Zora and Lily had a great time with their dad today, as if I haven't spent the last decade of my life being their personal entertainment center and doting, loving, 24/7 momma. I even read them all the Harry Potter books—aloud. What gratitude. Andy's dinner was very good, too.

June 10

Jill and I get into a disagreement over a plant identification at one of her gardens. She's been bounding around happily for the last two hours, fine tuning whilst I weed, like she's in a personal paradise she created with one hand tied behind her back. I am jealous; she's younger, in charge, doesn't have children to pine for while she toils. She says a plant is fernleaf yarrow, I say it's tansy. The plant isn't in bloom. I remark on the pungent foliage, and smartly share my knowledge that the word tansy comes from the French word for "nose-twister." I've got one in my yard.

"It's a fernleaf yarrow!" Jill's exasperated, and I feel oddly satisfied that I have irritated her. This is not like me.

I look the plant up that evening. Jill's right, it is fernleaf yarrow. My feelings for Jill are mixed. I like her and I don't. She seems to have all the answers, her compass confidently pointing to a direction of business ownership and independence at such a young age, when I'm rapidly approaching middle age and I can't really tell where the hell it is I'm headed, though I am beginning to worry it may be an entire life of scraping by and not knowing what it is, beside mothering, that I'm supposed to be doing.

Andy's teased me numerous times about how I can't seem to settle on anything. I've investigated becoming an interior designer, tried my hand at journalism, thought about opening a tea shop. Doctor, lawyer, Indian chief, what is it that I am meant for? I love writing and gardening and so many things hold me in rapt fascination. Motherhood has been my priority, and will be always, but now that the girls are growing older we both need more independence. I know I shouldn't cling too tightly, but at the same time I know these years will not last. I don't like being away from them.

Jill's lucky. She knows more about gardening than I do, and even had the good fortune to be raised by gardeners. Not only mom, but grandma too! I had to learn it all on my own. No one to guide me down the primrose path. I suspect Hattie likes Jill better too—how

could she not? My darker side sees Jill as a little know-it-all, still-wet-behind-the-ears, smartass. My truthful side says I'm the one being a jerk.

June 13

We're at a surgeon's home and it's one of the most beautiful gardens so far. There's a pool in the backyard and bursting, blooming, lovely English cottage style beds all around, designed and planted by the missus, a highly-educated, likeable, down-to-earth woman. She chats with us and I learn she enjoys shopping at Walmart and Home Depot for plants. That stops me. All this and . . . Walmart? She's the opposite of the franchise queen. Hattie and I refuse to shop at Walmart, knowing that low prices for some come at a steep price for others, namely American businesses and most Walmart employees.

This garden would be a glorious place to weed indeed except for one thing. There's dog shit everywhere, complements of an Orson Wells-sized retriever who stays in his kennel while we're there (his imprisonment's due to his excitable nature--if loose we'd all be soundly humped). There's definitely something amiss about this dog because his urine, which is also everywhere, reeks.

As I weed, gingerly avoiding turds, longing for a tussy-mussy to hold to my noses, I wonder at the mess. While I am far from fastidious, this is beyond even my level of tolerance. I think, surely if these people can afford three gardeners to come out, at twenty dollars an hour apiece, can't they afford to hire someone to pick up the dog shit?

At another garden one of the tasks include braiding daffodil foliage. The flowers are wilted and gone, the long green leaves of the daffodils are floppy and, I suppose, not pretty enough to display as is, and yet the bulb needs the energy garnered from those green leaves so they cannot be cut off. I feel ridiculous braiding daffodil foliage. For some reason it reminds me of extravagant pubic hair grooming, like when a friend told me she had her bush trimmed into a heart shape in celebration of Valentine's Day. Just (ugh) too much,

purity into pretension.

June 15

We're in Hades again, weeding together in a group, Hattie, Jill and I. June is turning out to be the hottest on record. Hattie asks me what's my astrological sign.

"Capricorn," I say.

"Oh, *Capricorn*," she says, lifting an eyebrow. "My mom's a Capricorn, I know all about you." Her tone is definitely on the smart-alecky side, with the tiniest hint of hostility, and I wonder what she's getting at. She's mentioned she and her mom have been at odds many times, over religion, politics, life in general.

"Well, what's yours?" I ask.

"Libra."

Well, I'll be damned, I think. My mom's a Libra and I can see some similarities between Hattie and Mom, the perhaps just slightly too fun-loving, living for the day attitude, the belief that their world view is the only world view.

"Ha," I say, "I know all about *you, too*."

June 17

A good day. I catch my first snakes *and* am stung by a wasp. I know it doesn't sound good, but for me, Mrs. Wild at Heart, it was exciting. Both occur at The Remmick's, a house with another big rock wall garden, two doors down from Hades. In the morning, I spot a yellow jacket and tell Jill. Hattie says it's probably nesting in the wall and the owner will spray because yellow jackets are aggressive. To verify this, within two minutes I'm stung, and endure a white-hot sensation on my wrist, but only for a few minutes. I feel rather proud of my ability to endure wasp-venom.

An hour later I notice the snake.

Jill's nearby and I call her attention to it.

"Get it," she says, and, not thinking, I snatch. My gloved hand comes back with two snakes. One about a foot long and the other a few inches smaller, both brilliant green with yellow stripes. My heart lurches but I don't yelp.

Luckily, Jill has the weed bucket ready and I'm able to drop them in immediately. They slither up the bucket's sides, frantically trying to escape. I squirm inwardly.

"Grab some weeds," orders Jill. I gather some up from the drying pile on the lawn and drop them over the snakes. They chill out.

"See, they just want some cover."

"Woo-wee!" says Hattie, who's joined us.

Jill leaves to get a shirt, to tie over the top of the bucket with a bungee cord.

"My God," I say. "I've never even held a snake before. It's a good thing I had gloves on, or I wouldn't have done it."

Hattie chuckles. "Your eyes were pretty big. Jill will take them home, put them in her garden. It's not a good idea to have them here. Annie next door, her boyfriend's killed snakes before."

"Ribbon snakes? Why?"

"Cause she's terrified."

"But they're *beneficial*."

"Tell that to someone standing on a lawn chair, screaming. Oh, by the way, sweetie, you've completed the second milestone that certifies you as a true gardener."

I feel a kinship towards Jill. I would have loved to take the snakes home but my chickens would probably have tried to eat them.

June 20

We're back in the Shitloads of Money area and I suspect Jill may have been smoking Mother Nature. She has that goofy, very-pleased-with-it-all look, and she's admiring the bush clematis a little too much.

Suddenly I hear bells playing "It's a 'Grand Ole' Flag.' "

"Where's that coming from?" I ask Hattie.

"Oh, it's the carillon in the church, up on the hill. It plays each noon."

"Does it always play that song?"

"Sure does," says Hattie. She rolls her eyes.

The extra-happy gardener walks by and says, "Wow, isn't that something?"

"You should of heard it earlier, Jill," I say. "They played 'Ain't Nothin But a Hound Dog.' "

"Really?" she asks.

As they'd say in slang-lish, she is *so* stoned. I'm practically bubbly too, with a feeling of superiority. I would never arrive at a client's house in such a condition, though I do remember smoking pot with my boss once, at Jill's age, at work. Oh yeah, I also got pretty intoxicated with that same boss during a luncheon on my 21st birthday. Perhaps I should lose the smugness.

June 21

I've been checking out starting my own gardening business during my days off and I found my second job today when I called a city office about getting a business license. The woman I spoke to said, "You're a gardener? I need one." We set an appointment. As with the other job, I don't tell Hattie or Jill.

June 24

I'm at Mike's again, by myself. It is yet another 90-degree-plus day. Maybe I should name this garden Hades II. After doing a lot of weeding her son drops by and says hi. He's a nice, kind of a doughy, middle-aged guy. I think he's in medicine. Mike has me cut down the poppies, telling me I can save the decorative seed heads if I like, then goes into the house. As I'm performing this task near their sliding glass doors I have this creepy feeling that I'm being watched.

The last thing I do is put up a trellis and try to attach the incredible mess that's laying all over the ground that is a honeysuckle vine. I do the best I can, wrestling with the son-of-a-seed, but it ends up looking far from perfect. I stay a few minutes longer, but Mike's a nice lady, I don't mind, I want to finish the work. I don't record it.

Hattie calls me that night and says Mike doesn't want me to come over any more; she'd like another gardener. She says I took too long to cut down the poppies. I'm stunned. I've never been fired in my life. I didn't dawdle with the poppies. I wonder what happened. Did it irritate her that I liked her son's contributions to the garden, or

maybe she thought I was charging her for the extra time I spent there, or maybe I just spent too much time admiring her flowers (though I didn't think so). The military are notorious for being the cheapest-of-the-cheapskates and she was hyper-aware of the time clock, that I know. I decide I probably just wasn't nose to the grindstone enough. Or, maybe, I didn't "know my place."

After some smarting and squirming, I realize I can't care about this. I am still happy about Mike's gift of free plants.

The client/service thing is really getting under my skin. I've gone nearly a decade free as most can ever hope to be, and am now like a tiger lily stolen from the wild and crammed into a pot. I do not like it. I fear I'm ruined for the work force, I'll never be any good in the rat race. Even though this may signal an inevitable decline down the road, for now the awareness of this is sweet.

June 29

I complete my second freelance gardening job this weekend.

The woman's name on the telephone was Iris, which I took as a good omen, and she lives alone in a newer neighborhood in a modest sized house. When we meet I see she's about fifty, pretty, quite feminine; her home is tastefully furnished. I admire her rose-patterned antique china in her antique oak hutch. She wants to start a garden, she's sick of the grass, but doesn't know a thing about the green world. She would like a couple of trellises with vines, and a planter on her front porch with perennials, ditto a small bed in back. I visit her grounds which include a patchy weed filled backyard and two small flower beds with feverfew seedlings and a few snapdragons. She covets her neighbor's garden, an enclosed paradise of honeysuckle vines and roses. We visit it together.

I am unloosed to design this woman's garden and during my ecstatic shopping excursion I buy in multiples: pasque flower, columbine, oriental poppy, salvia, ladies mantle, 'Johnson's Blue' geranium, siberian iris, 'Kent Beauty' oregano, pink baby's breath, 'Husker Red' penstemon, double hollyhocks, daylily, 'Hidcote' lavender and 'Rose Queen' salvia. Several roses: a dark rose and

white Meideland for her porch, a 'John Davis' climbing rose for the new bed below her deck, and a 'Fairy' polyantha for a large pot. A few vines: *clematis tangutica*, Hall's honeysuckle and trumpet creeper 'Madame Galen' will begin the softening of her fenced-in backyard. And of course, I add a few bags of soil amendment. I find a playdate for the girls on Saturday so Andy can help me by hauling over two fan trellises for the fence and two trellis panels to cover and beautify the space below her back deck. He hangs them for me.

I love it.

I can see how I could develop my own business easily. Problem is, as much as I love creating gardens, I love writing, and being home, more. The seed of a green-hearted novel's been germinating and now it's demanding to be cultivated on paper. And it's been almost a month since my girls got out of school. Even part time is too much time away.

July 3

On the day I begin creating childlike scenarios of intrigue with worms, dandelions, bluegrass and then tiptoe through sexual-in-nature garden fantasies, I take a 12:40 pee break at the Shitloads of Money neighborhood gas station/convenience store. I drive my seven-year-old Taurus, and as I stop at the intersection right next to the store, a man, about to cross the street, stops too. He waves my car on, his gestures grand. As I pull in the parking lot he walks by and says, "*THANK YOU!*"

The rudeness unsettles me. Was I supposed to insist he crossed before me? Oh, no sir, after *you*! As I dig for change in my purse a woman pulls up at the pumps. She's young, blonde, skinny with huge boobs, in the biggest SUV money can buy this side of a Hummer. I've come across one of the area's indigenous species, a trophy wife. She leaves the behemoth running while she darts into the store. Here it's safe to leave a new vehicle running, door unlocked. No car thief would be so incredibly stupid in this part of town, where police service is probably almost instantaneous. I'm angry at the prig at the

crossroad and sorely want to pass it on to the trophy bride, to yell, "*Hey, gas waster, turn off your damn engine!*"

The community toilet that we gardening ladies share with all the gentlemen workers in the area (pool men, lawn mowing men, tree men, construction workers, a man for every need, nothing too great or small) is half-clogged. I won't go into the disgusting, sickening details. I'm afraid to flush, but I'm near bursting, so I pee anyway, hovering. After I pull up my pants, I push down the handle and move away as fast as I can. The contents, thankfully, go down. My bile rises.

Our clients. Would it be too much to offer facilities at their homes, for their hired help who are busting their asses to make their lives more magically beautiful? Really, would an outhouse be too dear? I think how Hattie could make even an outhouse *tres chic*, covered with vines and roses. It would definitely be better than this communal shithole. Then I wonder why I'm wasting my time wondering.

That afternoon at the Rennick's I share my idea. I've temporarily gotten over my shitty mood because at this house I have some company. I'm not all by myself, going crazy.

"Great idea," Hattie says. "Only problem is, the workers would probably use it as a place to smoke pot."

I hadn't thought of that. So, who cares?

I bitch a little more and Hattie tells me that in all the years she's been a gardener, she's never gotten so much as a card on Christmas from the Shitloads of Money crowd.

July 8

By the second week in July, all the new installations have gone in, the flowerpots and hanging baskets and windowboxes have been filled. The weeds are under control. Now it's just mind-numbing maintenance. Deadheading, endless weeding. I don't want to be a hired gardener any more, and I'm a little doubtful I'll ever start my own gardening business. It's too hard physically, it's too hard on the ego, and I don't like being away from my daughters when they are

home all day during the summer. Life's too short. I tell Hattie that I'm going to leave, that I want to get back to writing and my family. She understands.

February 12, the next year

I had a physical legacy from the gardening experiment, my right elbow ached for months. Tennis elbow, from using a shovel, doing the manual lawn edging. It finally stopped this week. I can't wait to get back to gardening this year, in my own garden.

I talked to Hattie last night. She said she didn't last the summer with Madeline. The green grind also took its toll on Jill, and she decided in the fall to enroll in nursing school. She's able to make enough to live on by waitressing a few nights a week. Waitressing--even more of an expression of mindless servitude, but one that is surprisingly lucrative! I'm sorry that things weren't anywhere near as rosy for Jill as I had imagined.

Hattie says she'll start looking for some more crew members in a month or so. She says she thinks gardening must be a calling, as there are many who try it and don't stay with it. Only she's reached those other milestones of the true gardener, ones that may forever remain a mystery to me.

