

The grass is greener on the other side

The kitchen window looked out over the garden. I watched Ralph mowing the lawn with his Atco cylinder mower. The lawn was his pride and joy and the stripes were perfectly parallel. There was not a blade of grass out of place and certainly no daisies or mole hills. Ralph had an annual programme of lawn-care pinned up in the shed where he kept his 'weed-and-feed' and a row of other boxes and chemical fertilizers. We used to spend a lot of time together, but now I think he pays more attention to the grass than to me.



From my vantage point in the kitchen I can see over the fence. Next-door's lawn is still a mess. For the last three years it has been a playground for the children and there are bare patches where the football goal used to be. The for-sale sign is still up but the children have gone and the house has been sold. Ralph hates change and he is worried about what might happen next.

I haven't told him yet, but I saw the agent showing a young man around not so long ago. This chap was talking about renovating the garden – a raised deck, some fancy lighting, gravel pathways and a total re-turf. His name was Mark and he lived in London.

I went back to the washing up. If that was true, I'd have some building work to watch. Nothing ever happens around here and if it wasn't for Martha across the road, I'd have no one to talk to either.

That's where it all began.

As soon as he moved in Mark got down to business. He was away most of the week and since he couldn't do the work himself he hired Craig. 'Craig Cares: Landscape contractor, no job too small' or so it said on the side of the battered van.

Ralph was scathing, as usual. He knew a thing or two about grass. His own lawn had been cultivated from seed that he had selected himself. The top-quality mixture of rye and creeping red fescue that he had nurtured over the years never failed to produce a luscious green that was the envy of the neighbourhood.

It's true that Mark's turf could be laid quickly, and it would look good for a day or two, but without proper care it would dry out fast. And then what? Regular grass was unlikely to withstand a drought and in Ralph's opinion it was madness to lay a lawn at this time of year. There was no moisture in the sandy soil and by all accounts they were in for a record-breaking heatwave. Madness, he said, as he set up his own sprinkler system, 'madness, sheer madness'.

Unlike Ralph, I love the sun and the smell of the heat. When it is really hot I take a little table outside, sip iced lemonade and read my book. It was on just such a

day that I was watching Craig at work. He liked to take his time and it was true, there was no rush. Mark was away for a fortnight and Craig could do the job at a leisurely pace. He was obviously used to working outdoors, but this was a scorcher of a day. Perhaps I should offer him a cold drink?

Craig accepted and came around the side of the house. The rest of the turf could probably wait another day. He pulled up a garden chair beside me. 'That's the life' he said 'I'm jealous of you - sitting in the shade sipping lemonade'. I looked at him and smiled. 'It fills the day' I said.

I can't remember exactly what happened next, but soon we were chatting away as if we had known each other for years. Craig popped round the next day, and the day after that as well. I looked forward to Craig's arrival every morning, and to his easy company and cheerful good humour. As it said on the van, 'Craig Cares'.

I dreaded the end of the job but once all the turf was laid and when the deck was finished, Craig packed the tools in his van and that was it, he was off.

For the first time ever, the grass really was greener on the other side of the fence. Of course, Ralph was dismissive. He was always full of gloomy predictions. 'It won't last' he said. 'You mark my words, that grass is going to die. The turf will curl up at the edges and that will be that'.

The hot spell continued and, sure enough, Mark's grass suffered. His lawn soon looked like the back of a mangy hyena: unkempt tufts of yellowish green, and scabby patches of scrunchy brown.



When he finally returned home, Mark was horrified. How could it be? He got out the long yellow hose, but it was too late. Ralph looked over the fence, smug as ever. 'You'll have to do something about that lawn of yours' he said. And Mark had to admit that it was a disaster.

Mark called Craig, who came back quick as a flash. When I went over to say 'hello' they were talking about what to do next. Craig looked at me and winked. 'There are lots of possibilities. How about a wild meadow, no chemicals, no mowing and it would be excellent for insects and especially for bees? You wouldn't need to water – it would be the greenest solution and brilliant for biodiversity. You'd have many different grasses even in this small space. What do you think?'



It was then that I knew for sure. I'd had enough of Ralph and his obsessions. I could also be wild and free. There was no need to follow convention. I'd been with Ralph for twenty-three years, but why? I'd had doubts before, but somehow this plan for the garden next door brought it all into focus.

Who knows what the future might hold and who cares. The very idea of unpredictability gave me such a thrill. I felt like giving Craig a hug, there and then, but he and Mark were deep in conversation.

A week later I sent Craig a text. 'Don't forget, there's always iced lemonade in the fridge. Angela xx'. He never replied. To be honest I didn't mind. It wasn't really Craig that I'd fallen for. But it was Craig who had shown me that the grass really could be greener on the other side.