

Tom Kessler

Mr. Johnson Grows a Yard

THIS STORY BEGAN SIXTEEN YEARS AGO, WHEN I WAS 11.

Grandma was sitting on the front porch drinking a beer. The sun was bright that day. The air seemed so fresh and clean. I breathed it all in as deep as I could breathe it. I asked Grandma if this was maybe the best day she could ever remember.

"No, son, that day was a long time ago."

"How so, Grandma – what was that day like?"

Grandma took a long swig of her ice-cold beer and set it on the table next to her chair. She waved around at her beloved craftsman house and out to the yard, full of flowers and thick shrubs and tall, healthy trees. A cedar elm climbed to the sky, and there were craggy shin oaks and glossy live oaks. Thorny agarita popped out of the ground and shared the landscape with Carolina buckthorn and a big yaupon.

"Johnny, we moved in here twenty-three years ago. And what you're looking at almost didn't happen."

"Why is that Grandma?"

"Well, 'cause Mr. Johnson who lived next door just didn't want it. When we moved in, he'd already been living here for a few years. He seemed nice enough at first and told us about the neighborhood. He had a few good stories about the neighbors and knew how things in the town worked."

"Uh-huh."

"But Mr. Johnson was always working in his yard, mowing the grass, trimming the shrubs. And when he wasn't mowing or trimming, he was watering. Watering like hell, Johnny. He was growing a huge lawn of a kind of grass that doesn't grow here – doesn't grow here naturally. And it took a lot of water. Lot of water."

And then there were the chemicals. Grandma said Mr. Johnson was always spraying his grass to make it look greener than it wanted to be. "And God help us all if he ever found a dandelion..."

"Why's that Grandma?" I asked.

"Well, 'cause he said they were messy. And that they were weeds, which maybe they are in a way. That's what makes 'em controversial, I guess. But we didn't mind them 'cause they feed the bees and we need the bees."

I looked at Grandma and shrugged my shoulders.

"Anyway," she continued, "he'd see a dandelion in our yard and come flying over hot as hell. One time, he and your grandad got into a shouting match, and I thought somebody was going to get hurt. Grandad told old Mr. Johnson he'd better calm down and he let him know how the Indians used dandelions to control their blood pressure, and maybe he ought to try that."

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She said Mr. Johnson stormed off and they thought that was it. But then early the next morning while it was still dark, they were awakened by a rattling noise and saw a shadow moving outside. They caught Mr. Johnson in their yard squirting some kind of lawn poison on the dandelions. Mr. Johnson screamed at grandpa: "I don't know what y'all are doing over here, but I'm trying to grow a yard!"

That sounded crazy to me. "No way! He really did that?" I said.

"Oh yeah. And then he called us in to the neighborhood association. You know what neighborhood associations are, Johnny? They're communist, authoritarian sons of bitches – sorry for the language – and they make you do a lot of stuff you don't want or need to do and then they send you the bill."

I told Grandma that didn't sound right.

"It isn't right," she said. "And pretty soon we weren't just warring with Mr. Johnson, we were warring with the whole damn neighborhood, practically. You see, we had dug up a whole bunch of grass somebody planted years ago in the front yard and threw down a bunch of native wildflower seeds and then we watched those wildflowers grow. They were beautiful."

But Mr. Johnson hated how the wildflowers looked and complained to the neighborhood association again, she said with a frown. Meanwhile, he was out planting elephant-ear plants and Japanese honeysuckle and Chinese privet. "And all kinds of other invasives ... God-awful stuff."

My eyes got big, and I leaned in to hear more. Grandma stood up and she motioned for me to follow her. We walked over to the edge of Grandma's yard, and she stared at the house next door and shook her head. I looked out across the expansive front yard full of bright green grass that flowed downhill and seemed to go on forever.

"So crabby old Mr. Johnson ... well the worst of it was he had this pristine yard that he put in. Looked like a damn carpet in a showroom. Still does," she said.

I glanced over at Grandma, and she looked pretty in her pale-yellow top and jeans. She had always treated me with such kindness, and I appreciated how she had a calmness about her. But today I could see she was agitated.

"Johnny, do you see the life that's here?" she said. She walked toward a massive Red Oak and pointed up to a bird resting on a limb. "That's a canyon wren, one of our constant neighbors. And watch for it – I saw a painted bunting flying around here earlier. We've got foxes and deer and jack rabbits and lots of neighbors beyond our people neighbors."

Grandma looked over at me. "Say, would you mind running up and getting me another beer out of the cooler?"

"Sure, Grandma." I jogged up to the house and poked around the ice chest to see what was there. "You want a Shiner or a Lone Star?" I hollered.

"A Shiner will do me."

When I handed her the beer, I saw she had tears drying on her face.

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Neither of us said anything for a while. We just walked around, enjoying the breeze and the sounds of birds. It was a spring day, and the air wasn't too hot yet. Then Grandma stopped and turned to me.

"The thing I'm happiest to see is these butterflies, Johnny. They are abundant because we nurtured them along ... planted all these tiny milkweeds that they need to survive. I wish your grandpa was still here to appreciate all our work."

I watched several monarchs float and dance around. And I knew what she meant. I had seen those milkweeds with eggs all over them. And later I'd see caterpillars chomping their way through an entire plant in no time.

I stood there remembering how she once told me about a tussle between Grandpa and Mr. Johnson over something and how Mr. Johnson later came out of his house waving a gun and threatening them. He calmed down that day, but their feud kept simmering for years.

"Grandpa and Mr. Johnson didn't get along too well?" I said.

"No, son. That old codger tormented us something terrible. He was dead set on spreading his fertilizer and chemicals and he never thought for a second what that crap does to nature. We were... well, I guess we were just a couple of hippies or something in his eyes. He couldn't understand how we thought our wild yard was more beautiful than his manicured patch from hell."

I watched her eyes slowly trace the landscape. "But these plants aren't weeds, not like that. You know what's a real weed? Johnson grass!"

Grandma laughed at her joke, and I smiled too.

"So finally, we decided we'd had enough. As much as it hurt us, we said we would put the place up for sale and move on and find some land where we could live in peace. We had just put the house up when we woke up one morning and there were police cars all around and an ambulance flashing its lights. It turned out that someone had broken into Mr. Johnson's and shot him ... dead."

I felt my face blanch. "Oh, Grandma, I knew something bad had happened to that old man, but I never heard that before."

"Well, it did," she said. "He was an onery coot and the fact is a lot of people around here didn't much like him."

She said the police never caught who did it, but a few folks thought maybe it was a gang of teenagers that had come around to mess with him. "I don't know," she said. "It was a mystery then and it's a mystery now."

I nodded my head.

"That next morning after we heard Mr. Johnson got shot, your granddad went out and pulled that For Sale sign right out of the yard."

She took a deep breath and sighed loudly. I could see a little smile break on her face, and she looked as happy as I'd ever seen her in her long life.



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Six weeks ago, I was back at the old house. We had just lost Grandma a few weeks before and my parents asked if I would go through and help sort things out. I was overwhelmed by memories as I walked from room to room and looked over a collection of antique furniture, pottery that came mostly from New Mexico, a telescope we used to peer through to see Venus, Saturn and the stars. There was a lump in my throat from knowing the life that my grandparents had lived here...from the life I had lived here.

I went out to my grandpa's workshop in a barn shed at the back of the property. It smelled musty now and it was still littered with tools and cans of bolts and nuts and more stuff than my eyes could process. I picked up a wrench that was on the floor and placed it back in the toolbox. I looked up above the workbench and there was a wooden plaque that read:

"The environment is where we all meet; where we all have a mutual interest; it is the one thing all of us share." – Lady Bird Johnson

Over in a corner was an old file cabinet, sitting kind of crossways and off kilter. I pushed away some cobwebs and went to straighten it when I noticed something shoved up underneath the back of the cabinet. I lifted it gently and was profoundly surprised to see a pistol on the ground. I'd never seen that handgun before – in fact, I never knew my grandpa to have a gun at all. He hated them.

I sat on the dusty floor and looked at the pistol. It was beaten up, didn't look like it was much cared for. Then my mind went to that story of old Mr. Johnson and how he'd been shot to death and his murder was never solved. I felt butterflies in my stomach.

I don't recall what I was thinking, but at that moment I wrapped up the gun in a gunnysack and went out to my truck. I drove to a secluded spot on the Colorado River and parked. I took the pistol out of the sack and felt its hardness in my hand. Then I hurled it as far as I could into the dark river. It hit with a plunk and disappeared.

When I got back to the house, I parked my truck and as I hopped out I felt the warm air against my face. There was a Whitetail doe about fifteen feet away chewing on a Catclaw Acacia. She looked up at me with big, brown eyes and then went back to grazing. I thought again about my grandfather, and Mr. Johnson and that gun I'd found. I think I decided right there not to care too much about what had – or hadn't – ever happened with that gun.

That night, I had dinner with my parents in the weathered house with the wild yard. "What if I was to buy the old place and take it over?" I said. "See if I can keep it going."

My dad wiped his mouth and I saw his jaw relax. "I think that's a fine idea," he said.

I looked over at my mom. She smiled and nodded her head.