

LINDERTOWN

BY

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CHRISTY

Unlock the Secrets

George Undertown always took immaculate care of his tools, taking the most unreasonable measures to keep them clean. That morning, he polished the rear wheels of the lawnmower to inaugurate a new mowing season. On the surface, the wheels looked nice; however, on the underside, they had dry-rotted from the abuses of time. No one—not even George—noticed it, though. He, like the rest of his neighbors on Hidden Valley Drive, thought that if it looked clean, then it was clean.

The wheels gleamed in the morning sun, as George pushed the lawnmower from the garage—located behind his house. The crimson red deck of the mower hovered above the nervous blacktop, while the blades hung in eagerness on the underside. Past a patch of tiny tomato plants, empty pots, and freshly tilled soil, he guided the lawnmower down the driveway. Stopping short of the street, George positioned himself parallel to the traffic. He dipped the front two wheels into the lush grass and began to jerk on the rope.

The hot, summer sun beat down on the yards of Hidden Valley Drive, as George finished with the grass and pushed the machine up the driveway to the rear of the house. All of his neighbors were out, clipping their hedges, mowing their lawns, preparing for the biggest day on the west side of Cincinnati: “Delhi’s Best Lawn Contest” day. Like George, everyone wanted to win; however, unlike him, not everyone had the drive to do it: to win the “Delhi’s Best” ruby ring as esteemed champion. Not everyone’s yard hid the disgruntled resentment of coming in runner-up every year the way that his did.

As the sun went down later on that evening, George was tidying up and admiring his day’s work. He was fixing something on his lawn, when a bright light shined from his bedroom window, facing the street. Calling it a night, he walked up the driveway—past the beckoning light—to the other bedroom window on the side of the house. He looked in to whisper to his wife but suddenly became enthralled by something in the room. He stood against the house with his face momentarily snared by the view of the bedroom, as light pulsated in size to envelope the entire house. For a split-second in time—beyond the senses of his neighbors—George’s order in the universe was slightly out of order.

After shutting the gate at the top of the driveway, George retired to the back of the house. A ferocious breeze whipped down the pavement and twirled around in the front yard. A sign that read, “Delhi’s Best Lawn Candidate” violently shook, as lights from a passing car lit up the display. Just beyond the lawn, under the window in the front flower beds, poppy heads rose from the garden’s brick border like a den a poisonous cobras. Their acorn-shaped heads would prove to be far more fateful for George, though.

George was working slow and steady on his back yard when his cell phone rang. It took him a while to answer it, as he was so caught up in his yard work. When he did retrieve the ringing device on the deck's railing above the newly planted tomato plants, his voice was a mild, warm one. It was his daughter, who was away at college. Her first year away from home coincided with George's first year of retirement; and, in his mind, the first year of officially having the best yard in Delhi.

Over by the deck, the tomato plants dripped with dew and sparkled in the morning sun. Their roots grew deeper and strong from the special amendments that George added to them. They listened to every word of his conversation—absorbing as much from him, as from the soil.

“But this year, Sweetie, is *my* year. I think the poppies will make the difference,” pleaded George. “...your mom and I are fine,” he continued in a more insincere way.

His dialogue grew to be more uninteresting to the plants, as a crow perched itself on the railing above them and watched George in decisive curiosity. It was pondering his fate.

Eventually, George finished the call with his daughter and resumed his yard work. He started to mulch the back garden, where the tomato plants were. He did so with a smile on his face—a result of talking to Julie, his daughter, the anchor in his life. He pinched and spread handfuls of mulch, pushing it close to the tender plants. He slid and tossed it around the bed before coming up short in the center of the garden. He removed his gloves and sipped his coffee, sizing up the amount of mulch needed to completely cover the garden. The slight amount of freshly tilled soil was missing something on the surface and in the middle...like a person's soul, spread too thin over time.

At the hardware store up the street, George slowly stockpiled an arsenal of tools to help him win the contest. Although he just needed mulch, he walked around the store, mingling with the staff and taking a mental inventory of the devices that he needed. Made up of presumable retirees, the employees of the store were a happy bunch, who were reared during a time of small, quaint neighborhood hardware stores that smelled of grass seed and nitrogen fertilizer upon entry. One such associate, Mr. Whispers, as George humorously referred to him as, was always eager to help the customer. His small, broken-down frame, topped by the slicked-back Vitalis hairdo of men in their 80's, was overshadowed by the peculiar way that he forcefully whispered aloud when he spoke—probably a result of years of smoking or surgery. He was a shark when it came to customer service, a throwback to the times when he was younger. He patrolled the aisles, lurking around each endcap; hunched over enough to remain undetected, surprising each patron with a wicked, “Can I help *you*?”

George made his way against one of the side walls, where fifteen-foot-tall glass cabinets not only contained sharp objects and tools, but also mirrored the happenings of the friendly store in long,

slender proportions. He named each tool as he passed it: “machete...ax...garbage bags... .” He stopped at shovels—fortunately—as they hung next to boxes of ammunition that stretched the height of the cabinet. A distant ringing of a cash register broke the catchy, voiceless muzak that was piped in over the cabinet—as long faint reflections danced in front of George and the high-powered rifles on the other side of the bullets...just slightly out of his view.

Perhaps, with something on his mind, George rubbed the stubble on his face and mindlessly peered into the glass in front of the shovels, oblivious to one of the reflections that was getting bigger. The image grew like a bubble on the glass until it popped and startled both George and his reflection with a raspy, “Do you want to *kill* somebody?”

Caught off guard, George gathered his senses enough to look puzzledly into the sunken, gray eyes of Mr. Whispers.

“I say, Buddy...” he continued, “...do you want to *kill* something? Is a critter gettin’ at ya?”

“Oh,” George rebutted the old man, as he scrambled to regain his composure. “No,” he continued after a slight bewildering pause, “I’m looking at the shovels. Not the ammo.”

The old man boasted a raspy laugh and patted George on the shoulder the way that old-timers do, as he passed. He continued down the length of the store, as if on a high-speed conveyor belt, and disappeared into the ocean of aisles. Feeling a bit rattled, George shook off the experience and made his way over to the check-out counter.

He was familiar with the woman behind the counter, so he anticipated conversation with her.

“How’s it going, George? Are you getting everything ready for the big day?” she inquired.

His responses were short and insincere. She responded warmly when he revealed that poppies would be his featured flower.

“I love poppies,” she declared to George and the entire store. “They are so fragile, but beautiful. Maybe this will be your year, George,” she suggested, “...especially since Mark won’t be in it.” She continued, “I know his wife don’t want to hear this, but I think that he ran off with his secretary. So cliché.”

“That’s probably the case,” George quickly interjected. “No respect for family values anymore,” he added, while shifting weight from leg to leg and eying the receipt the way a dog does a pork chop.

“Well, I guess Miss Thing must be really something, because he wouldn’t give up his Delhi’s Best championship for nothing...all those years,” she proclaimed, while handing the receipt to George.

They both smiled at each other, as George made his way to the front door. He eyed the bag of mulch through the glass, while putting the receipt in his pocket. He pushed on the door and instantly received a chill up his spine, creating a wave of standing hairs on the back of his neck. The words, “devil’s weed,” echoed from the back of the store to the front and worked their way into George’s consciousness. Mr. Whisper’s opinion was just that: an opinion, not a prophecy. Some things just disappear over time—like customer service, family values, and trays of poppy and tomato seedlings next to the pallets of mulch right outside the door.

“And the Lord asked Cain, ‘where is your brother, Abel?’” recited the priest, as he peered out from the pulpit. His long, baggy cassock hung on his holy body; and, momentarily, froze like a statue, while he scanned the congregation for a reaction to his rhetoric.

“He answered, ‘I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?’” the priest continued to read from the Bible. His alluring presence captured the audience, while he calmly preached under a giant statue of Jesus on the cross—suspended from the ceiling. The cables creaked and the enormous statue swayed in the warm, humid air of the church. The face of Jesus gazed down upon the congregation, as the priest’s booming voice echoed throughout the rafters: *“Why have you done this terrible thing?”*

Sitting a little off-center, a couple of pews from the front, George sat—leaning to one side, listening...or, at least, appearing to be. With his hair slicked back, he was dressed in a very nice charcoal-colored suit, which complimented the thick, dark frames of his glasses. His eyes shifted from the priest to a vase of daisies, placed on the railing that separated the alter from the pews. George rocked his leg and longingly smiled at the flowers, while the priest continued on with the sermon.

“You are placed under a curse and can no longer farm the soil,” foretold the priest to the hot, lazy congregation. Hymnals used as fans waved throughout the rows of sweaty people.

Gargoyles peered down from the rafters, watching over the congregation, protecting the sanctity of the church from an undertow of evil. They snarled their marble fangs, like otherworldly lions, waiting to leap fifty feet onto a traitor. Directly below them, a statue of Joseph stood plush against a granite wall, quietly watching the crowd. The marble eyes of the statue shot daggers across the church, while the countenance of his likeness was warm in a peculiar way. He made the sign of the cross with one hand, while keeping the other one hidden under his robe.

As the procession was wrapping up, George decided that he was going to follow the priest with the majority of the congregation up the center aisle. While he was singing from the hymnal, he looked up to catch the priest—not singing—but staring at him; and, then, quickly looking away. George immediately glanced back down to his book of songs and flubbed a couple of words. Again, he looked up to catch the priest staring at him—only this time, he hesitated a second before peering straight ahead, wearing a lifeless slit for a smile. Suddenly, the priest exploded into song, projecting his booming voice across rows of worshippers, as he and his entourage marched up the center aisle towards the heavenly kingdom with a mass of people following them. George, on the other hand, quietly slipped out the side entrance in the front by the alter.

Once outside, he sat for a moment next to a Boxwood on the steps of the rectory, checking his phone. His daughter had called and left a message. He started to text her but was interrupted by the sudden chatter of three little girls to his back. He turned his head to see his neighbor from across the street and her three little girls leaving the church from the side entrance, as well. He stood up, turned to greet them, and slid his phone into his pocket. She was an attractive woman with long, kinky hair. Her full lips and deep brown eyes hinted at a former life of modeling; but, now, settled for the roles of suburban mom and trophy wife. The three girls—all about the same age—shared the same features as their mother: the lips, the eyes, and the kinky curls of hair...although the girls’ hair was a fiery shade of red. George leisurely walked with them to the

parking lot, talking about the sermon and family life, fighting off the subtle urge to hold his neighbor's hand. She faced him closely, as they said their goodbyes; but, he didn't kiss her. The warmth of her body was noticeable to George, given the muggy temperature of the lazy, Sunday afternoon. He knew that he made the right decision, but he thought about her the whole way home. He wondered about her and her husband's ancestry, since neither of them had red hair.

With the giant white doors of his stand-alone garage slightly open, George worked feverishly on something from behind the hinged, wooden walls. He banged away on metal, like a knight forging a sword—interrupting without rhythm, the classic rock music that was blasting through the tattered white boards of his concealed workspace. A one-inch view from the crack of the door revealed very little, but a hazy, dark garage and something big, like a kettle or a wok. There was silence, momentarily, before a set of lips appeared, formed an “O” and blew smoke from the space between the slightly open door and the rest of the garage. The music started back up, and George continued clanking away on something.

Meanwhile, the fruity-flowery smoke that emanated from the garage, whirled around in circles in the backyard. It sifted through a patch of tigerlillies, bringing them to life in lively shades of orange and red. They danced under a colorful, paisley backdrop with George’s music as a distant soundtrack. Rays of sun glistened brilliantly on the blades of grass, while butterflies descended from above, like angels. The kaleidoscope-of-a-backyard was beautiful and peaceful; but, like everything else, it wore away over time.

Later in the afternoon, all was quiet at the Undertown estate. The music was over, the tigerlillies were wilting, the late-afternoon shadows were creeping up the driveway onto the garage. Through the crack in the door, George’s glazy eye peered lifelessly into the shadows, fearing them. He knew that someday, they would be coming for him. Distant wind chimes from a neighbor’s house breezily sang an odd tune, casually hitting notes out of order in a peculiar way. They rang through George’s dilated pupils, deep into his brain, giving him the confidence to continue his work.

Later on that night, George and his wife attended the wedding of a relative. The crowded hall consisted of the wedding party’s table against a mirrored wall on the dance floor and a semi-circle of tables surrounding it. There was a sense of anticipation and happiness amongst the silhouetted bobbing heads of curious onlookers in the smoky, dimly lit room. George’s reflection in the mirrored wall behind the wedding party showed him yawning and fighting to stay awake, but smiling upon the newlyweds in approval. Several people—including the priest of the ceremony—approached him, whispered in his ear, and shook his hand. Everyone, including George, looked on in eagerness for the couple to take their first dance.

Upon the dj’s announcement, the bride walked onto the dance floor and took the hand of her new husband. Her tiara sparkled, like snapshots from the crowd, as her flowing, white dress lit up the room, like a movie theater. The upbeat music blasted and light beams shot from the mirror ball above the couple, spinning the room around, getting everyone drunk on the eternal hope and love of two young hearts becoming one. She held on to her new husband, grasping him like a kitten on an outstretched limb; but, with a little more assurance now. She gazed at him longingly, feeling safe and secure in his arms, giving him total control of her tender body. He held her tiny

frame and kissed her, as the dance ended. The crowd cheered and whistled at the newlyweds...and at the universe for allowing it to happen.

After the reception, George waited for his wife out in his truck. He thought about his own wedding day, the feelings of infallibility and optimism that drive young hearts and minds. His eyes welled slightly, as he remembered how beautiful his wife was in her dress. He held her the same way that the groom did earlier; and, she gazed at him the same way, too.

Just then, the cab of his truck lit up. George looked in the rearview mirror to see an open door with a dark figure in the middle of a brilliant array of light. It was his wife.

He lit up a cigarette and tossed the match on the ground outside his window. He took a deep drag and exhaled the smoke into the summer night. He watched the smoke drift upwards, trying hard to maintain its shape the farther it went. It finally drifted apart into nothingness. He enjoyed the cigarette while it lasted, but was sad when it was over.

“The big day’s almost here,” George excitedly proclaimed to his daughter, while pacing around the living room with a cell phone to his ear.

“This is *my* year to get the ruby ring,” he declared. There was silence for a moment, as his daughter rebutted him.

“That’s not going to happen,” he snapped in frustration. “...I have poppies this year,” he continued. “...and, they are beautiful...and they are going to win me the championship this year!”

“No more runner-up bullshit, Julie,” he stated in conclusion. There was more silence, as George listened to his daughter. “Of course, they’re legal,” he continued with irritation in his voice. “Don’t you worry about that.”

He continued to walk around in circles under the spinning ceiling fan in his living room. An occasional breeze lifted the sheers that hung over the open front window, casually waving the translucent fabric in the lazy summer wind. A nearby clock ticked in unison with the ceiling fan blades, while an occasional passing cloud sent light and reason out of the room, temporarily.

“Your mother’s doing fine,” George’s voice faded back into relevancy.

While George turned to look at the clock, something suddenly struck the corner of his eye. In one motion, his face turned white, and time almost came to a stop, as he found himself peering *through* the sheers into the mirrored sunglasses of a cop—watching him from the street. His daughter’s voice became background chatter, while he cautiously moved closer to the window in disbelief. Parked under a giant spruce tree in a private drive—perpendicular to George’s house—the cop car sat, facing his living room. Behind the windshield, George spied a round face and helmet, piercing his house and scanning his brain for information. George’s breathing was slow and shallow, and his limbs were heavy, like stone. He was dizzy and could barely make it to the window. He struggled, but eventually made it to the front and grabbed a fistful of sheers; but, not before falling and ripping the fabric from the wall. He immediately hoisted his broken body to the window, only to be looking through it in wonderment. There was no cop there.

“Dad...are you there?” his daughter’s voice broke the clicking of the fan and clock in unison. The sun came back out and projected bright rays across the disheveled living room. With a sheer wrapped around his bloody hand, George picked up his phone and held it to his dizzy head.

“I’m alright, Sweetie,” he quietly relayed to her. “I just had an accident.” George looked down at his hand and shook it to help alleviate some of the pain. He looked out the clear window at the empty drive, noticing the bags under his eyes were getting more noticeable in his reflection.

Later on that night, George excitedly prepared for his annual summer solstice bbq. He filled the grill with charcoal—enough for himself, really—and doused the small pile with lighter fluid. The

grill instantly combusted when he lit it with a long match, sending a huge puff of smoke into the air. He bent down close to the flames and stoked them, secretly enjoying the intense heat on the muscles of his face. Retreating to the garage, his orbital muscles subtly contracted, like an orgasm, sending an electrical charge throughout his body. To George, the summer solstice wasn't just the longest day of the year, but rather, the longest celebration of the year for all things organic.

As the night rolled on, red-hot coals glowed under the bars of dripping grease—while flames danced around in circles, feeding off the sinful flesh above. Residual slivers of unrepentant meat perished in the unforgiving embers, giving off a steady black stream of smoke throughout the night. It wasn't so much of a coincidence that the carnage was leftover, but rather a sacrifice to the universe for allowing all things to happen...including the unforeseen transformation of George Undertown. The flames swayed and shook in the wind on that long night, but eventually, they retreated back to where they came from: the glowing coals in the center of the grill.

Moments before the clock struck midnight, George meandered into the backyard from somewhere. As if in a daze, he stumbled around the asphalt, rearranging chairs and grilling utensils in a programmed attempt to be orderly. The air was dark, still and thick; but, an occasional heavy raindrop broke through the murky, fruity-flowery haze and foretold of things to come. The grill smoldered anew with raindrops hitting the dying coals, bringing out the rosy, green hue of his maturing tomatoes next to the smoking bowl.

With a little left in the tank, George wandered out to the front yard to check on his beloved poppies. The rain was crashing to the earth, like meteorites, as dark, black smoke rose from behind the house. Strangely, moonlight poked through the clouds and lit up the front lawn, like a stage. George took his queue and knelt down before the emerging flowers in reverence. He bent down, so that his leathery face was between a patch of hairy poppy buds and a lawn lantern, that emitted a soft orange glow. He smiled deeply and opened his bloodshot eyes to display the madness that ate away at him. "It won't be long, Girlies," he whispered under his fruity-flowery breath to their delicate heads. Then, the rain came down on George and his good-natured soul—despite his strongest efforts to stop it.



“The Baseball Game”

Down the Street from George’s house, Delhi Park hosted little league games on Saturdays. Different tones of cheering, mixed with the crack of an aluminum bat to form the true sounds of summer on the west side of Cincinnati. Delhi Park was the sunniest place on the planet; or, at least, to a kid it was. Beautifully striking petunias dotted the entrance to the park next to a McDonalds, which saw many sad little leaguers lift their spirits after the game with an ice-cream cone.

On one particular day, a game was underway. A smaller-framed boy launched a bullet over the pitcher’s head into right centerfield. He rounded first and then took second base, standing up. When the right fielder started to bobble the ball, the boy bolted to third. The boy arrived at the bag in a cloud of dust to the words, “you’re out!” He jumped to his feet, threw down his helmet, and immediately shoved his small body against the umpire. They jawed at each other for a moment before the coach intervened, sending the angry boy back to the dugout.

On the long way back to the bench, the boy’s competitive nature ate away at him. He gritted his teeth in anger at the thought of having been beaten by someone. He didn’t think the call was fair, so he clenched his fists and kicked rocks across the dirt. The pain of coming in runner-up to the third baseman wore in his young eyes, as he lowered them—keeping them hidden from his teammates.

Eventually, he found a spot at the end of the bench and lowered his tense body onto it. He spit in anger and defiance for the call and lowered his cap beneath his eyebrows. He stewed for a moment, all the while looking down at the loose dirt. It wasn’t long before the idle chatter and carefree laughter from the rest of the bench infected the scorned boy. A teammate turned to him and asked about his favorite cartoon. His degrees of anger and feelings of injustice disappeared slowly over a conversation of ice cream after the game. The boy’s eyes lit up, as he talked about putting sprinkles and chocolate sauce on his cone. They argued about which flavor was better before the coach came along and shooed them off the bench to their respective positions on the field. The boy joyfully picked up his cracked batting helmet and carried it off, singing and dancing because he was going to get an ice cream later and talk about his favorite cartoons.

After the game, the boy sat in the back seat, as his mom waited to turn onto the busy street from McDonalds. He joyfully lapped at his cone, forgetting about baseball and the play at third. He took breaks from the licking to gleefully gaze out the window at the traffic. His mom was quiet and patient, while she waited for her turn. He continued with the cone and steadily worked his way to the bottom, as his mom finally turned onto Delhi Pike. Ignoring the stickiness on his hands, the boy finished off the cone—paying no attention to his mother’s eyes in the rearview mirror, nor her unforgiving words: “you know, you *were* safe at third.”

George worked the mulch, like a baker kneading dough, pinching and forming mounds around the mature poppy plants. Their heads were swollen with milk and lifted upwards towards the sun and George's face. They bobbed in the sunny breeze, top-heavy from the buds that were ready to explode into paper-thin brilliance. He looked down at them in earnest, confident that they would hand him the title. He babied them, manicuring their leaves and spraying their plump, furry heads with a misterful of nutrients.

As George was enjoying himself on the bright-green lawn, something caught the corner of his eye down the street. A figure walking toward him made a slight tingle shoot up his erect spine. He mulched nervously with left hand, trying to stay focused. With his right hand, however, he gripped the trowel with enough force to conquer Caesar. He turned and looked at the figure over his sunglasses, and then turned back around to square up his shoulders. He held his breath, as the footsteps became louder.

In the crazy summer heat, under the sun, George sat—holding his breath, a clump of mulch and a hand trowel. The steps came closer...and then, closer...until finally they stopped right behind him. He did not move, nor make a sound, as he waited to release his spring-loaded body, while clutching a dagger-like shovel. There was nothing, only silence in that moment of time for George. The summer breeze blew through his sweaty body, and the sun warmed the erect hairs on the back of his neck.

Finally, the steps started up again; but this time, they were going away from him. George opened his eyes and slowly turned around to find a man crossing the street after waiting for a car to pass. He looked down at his sweaty shirt and trowel—and then, back at the figure, who was now traveling away from him. Sighing in relief, he stood for a while in his front yard; but, not as a broken man, but rather, a man breaking himself.

He was adjusting the “Delhi’s Best Candidate” sign in his front yard, when he heard the click behind his back in the near distance. The dull gray glow emanating from the bedroom window on the other side of the poppies meant that his wife was watching TV. He froze while polishing the sign, not listening to anything...not even the narrator’s voice in the bedroom:

“Eradication of the plant in this country is hard because the narcotic cultivars are so easily indistinguishable, even in the front yards of suburbia.”

George snapped out of his daze and continued adjusting the sign, so that it was evenly parallel to the manicured lawn. The big day was just days away, and George knew that his life would never be the same.

The voice from the glowing bedroom window continued:

“...but make no mistake, we are watching you, and we are coming for you.”

With that, George broke part of the sign and fell to the ground. It wasn't that he was listening, it was only a coincidence. He quickly re-gained his composure and fixed the broken piece. He walked up the driveway, admiring his beautiful poppies, knowing that they'd be exploding with color just in time to win the contest.

Full clouds started to cover the crazy sun, as the glow from the TV reflected the sheen on the foreboding sign. Rolling thunder crackled in the distance, while the citizens of Hidden Valley Drive prepared for an unusual summer storm. The rain started to come down in buckets, washing away the evils of the neighborhood...or maybe just nourishing it.

The pre-dawn hours after a wicked summer storm are always more quiet and still. Watered-down milk from the firmly erect poppy heads dripped from the tips of their bulbous heads. They rested for a moment after a hard, physical night of being pounded by the storm. The moon was full and bright, highlighting the glistening drops on each individual blade of grass. There was no movement, only calmness and tranquility, as the earth absorbed the nourishment and moisture.

Suddenly, as if the electricity in the air formed a person, a glowing-white figure appeared from behind the house across the street from George. It wasn't Puck, but it was George's neighbor—the kinky-haired trophy wife, who he talked to at church. She quietly floated across her driveway, like an angel, pussyfooting past all the vehicles that support a suburban family. She disappeared into the shadows of her neighbor's house, but re-appeared at his side window. She cautiously looked around before tapping on the glass with her forefinger; and, after a moment, the window opened up and pulled her uneasy body inside.

The façade of her neighbor's house was innocent-looking, just like the others on Hidden Valley Drive; but, on that night—at that particular moment—on the other side of the walls in one particular room, a suburban mom didn't care about her kids, nor her husband; but, only reseeded her own garden...and falling in love with the gardener in the process, just like when she was younger. The house stood quiet and innocent, just like all the others, not giving a hint to the selfish, unjust carnality inside.

On the other side of the house, in the early morning shadows, a small open section of a bedroom window leaked the house's secret to any voyeur close enough to it. The white buttocks of a man pounded George's neighbor, as she struggled to keep her legs spread and out of his business. The uneasy way she held her mouth open allowed the shockwaves from her neighbor's forceful thrusts to leave her submissive body with only a heave and then a sigh. He didn't reciprocate the love in her eyes, but only closed his...taking advantage of his family's absence. Giving in to the quickening pace of the prickly red stubble on his swollen balls tickling her pink butthole—puckering and then kissing them at every thrust—she dug her nails into his broad shoulders and came a gallon. Responding to her erect nipples and quivering, wet pussy, the man braced himself for orgasm, too. He excitedly grabbed a pair of his daughter's panties and laid them across the ravaged midsection of George's neighbor. He pulled his big dick from the woman and mindlessly stroked himself over the white, cotton panties. He shot streams of cum across them, seemingly from three testicles, as he thought about finding them waded up in the bathroom earlier in the week. The cotton hungrily absorbed the semen, of course; but, since there was so much, some spilt onto his daughter's sheets. He wiped it up and threw the sticky panties under her bed, hoping that his daughter would find them...not his wife.

Just as quickly as she got there, the trophy wife scurried back to her own home from the neighbor's house. It was the moments just before dawn—the darkest—that she slipped back into bed, undetected, before her family woke up. Across the street from her, George stood in the shadows of his front beds, not too far from the poppies. Puffing on his fruity-flowery pipe, he watched the shenanigans across the street, like Ahab, peering out into the ocean. With the contest just days away, he didn't have that excited look; but rather, his mind was relaxed, but someplace else. He stood, draped in a wet hoodie with his hands in his pockets—fidgeting with something.

His face was beaded with rain and marked by a squiggly, wet curl across his forehead. The drawstrings were drawn tight across his head, as he clenched his pipe and shifted his squinty eyes from his neighbor's house to the poppies.

Suddenly, like a tiger pouncing on his prey, George came to life and lunged at the poppies. He pulled a razor from his pocket and hacked at them. Their heads split open and fell to the ground—oozing the precious juice from their wounds. He was frantic, moving in jerky movements, as a ringing in his ears matched the tumult of his actions. The moonlight opened up the garden, exposing not George Undertown; but rather, a devilish distorted figure of him. He continued to ruthlessly cut away at them, unphased by the carnage, and seemingly concerned about doing so before the sun came up. He bent down to pick up the slaughtered heads and whispered to them, as he put them in a pouch around his shoulder: “See...what did I tell you?” He was in a hurry, looking around, gathering up every last one. Then, just as the sun was starting to break, George disappeared into the shadows, like a vampire, without a trace.

The mid afternoon shadows stretched across the floor of George's rustic living room, creating long figures on the rug. A lazy, Sunday breeze blew the faint scent of lilac past the sheers into the cool, ominous house—sedating it from the boredom and heinousness of suburban life. The ceiling fan blades clicked overhead, casually drifting in and out of synchronicity with the clock in front of the window. The family's cat stretched on the couch, ironically, enjoying the dog days of summer—while a copper sculpture on the end table next to the couch spun in the wind, like a top, alternating sun and moon sides.

Down the hallway, peculiar noises emanated from behind a closed door. Unrhythmic mumbling and ranting complimented the occasional sound of something breaking, like a beaker. Across the hall, another closed door concealed the subtle chatter of a television. Erupting gunfire from a western battled with the sporadic outbursts of laughter from across the hall to form a cacophony of unusual clamor to tease the senses of the cat in the other room.

The shadows moved slightly across the floor, as the living room darkened from a cloud passing in front of the sun. Light disappeared from a giant painting, hanging on one of the walls. It was an odd depiction of a man, dressed entirely in Elizabethan attire, wearing a big, golden ring. He had a confused look on his face, as he was embarking on a path that eventually led into a dark patch of woods. Occasional beads of light poked through the trees with the biggest one at the end of the path. The melancholic nature of the painting aroused the attention of the cat, perched across the room on the couch. It gazed upon the artistic display with warm, sleepy eyes, getting half-glances of the lost man in between nods. The laziness of the day made it impossible for the man to find his way, especially in a state of confusion.

Eventually, the room darkened completely and the pandemonium from both of the closed doors quieted. Everything was silent in the house except for the fan and clock in the living room. The house was now in order, ready for the big day. This was the year of George Undertown, and the universe was going to give it to him. His hard work was about to come to an end, and he was going to get what he deserved.

An early morning haze hung over the manicured lawns of Hidden Valley Drive on the morning of the contest. The sky was an electric blue with puffy white clouds, like ships, sailing above the earth. There was a sense of excitement, ringing through the backyard patios, where couples and families anxiously ate croissants with their coffee. The scattered “candidate” signs sprinkled the street—all witnessing the injustice that was about to come.

With, perhaps, the most well-kept yard on the street, George Undertown was on top of his game that morning—a year-long process, coming to its annual fruition. The poppies were erect with brilliant, delicate flowers that gently flapped in the lazy, summer breeze. They stood confidently in the front bed, like a newly crowned royal family, awaiting an important dignitary.

Whispering the front door open with a carefree shove, George stepped onto his porch, handsomely dressed in a tuxedo, holding a shiny bucket with a bottle protruding from it. He placed it on a small breakfast table, along with a couple of Champaign glasses with balloons tied around them. There definitely was a small amount of eccentric flare with George that morning. He was dying for their arrival.

Suddenly, as George turned to go back into his house, an entourage of sleek, black town cars slithered down the street and up his driveway. This was it! George turned back around, grabbed the bottle with his left hand, and the glasses with his right. He made his way down the stairs, glancing at the candidate sign in his lawn, wearing the biggest smile from the excitement. The walk to the limo was in slow motion, as he savored the moment—like a celebrity, walking the red carpet on awards night. He thought about his speech, and the full-length fur that he was going to wear to the ceremony. He worried about the long-term effect that his newly found celebrity would have on his marriage, but that wouldn’t matter because he’d be a big celebrity...

“Pomp and Circumstance” was ringing in his ears, blindly paralyzing him to the wave of federal agents that seeped from the cars, surrounding him. They pushed him to the ground and placed handcuffs around his wrists. Facedown—with his head nearly in the poppies—he gasped for air, as one of the men firmly kept his knee in George’s back. Several of the men broke off and walked down the driveway to the rear of one of their cars. Witnessing this, a car with a “Delhi’s Best Selection Committee” sign on the door slowed down to observe the scene in disgust. The woman in the passenger seat let out a shrill cry, causing the agents to turn and look at them. The car sped up and pulled into his adulterous neighbor’s driveway across the street.

The agents eyed his poppy plants, as they fumbled for something in the trunk. They pulled out shovels and made their way up the driveway. By this time, George was already in the back of the first car. They gripped their shovels and planned on unearthing the evil that brought George down. He thought that it would be different this year. He thought that he couldn’t lose; but, irrational planning only led to his arrest. The agents continued on.

Strangely enough, however, they didn’t stop at the poppy beds; but rather, they kept on walking to the rear of the house...to George’s tomato garden. They started chopping into the dirt, hacking at the plants and slaughtering the fruit. Crimson red tomato pieces stuck to their shovels, as they dug deeper into the loose soil. They kept digging and digging until finally they stopped. They peered down into the hole with quiet astonishment, wondering where the gentle soul of George

Undertown went wrong. Was it all those years coming in second place? Or, was it there all along, just quietly suppressed?

A crow's-eye view of the Undertown estate witnessed the entire tragic story: a ruby-red ring on a decomposing hand in the backyard and George being led away in handcuffs. The words, "Delhi's Best" sparkled from the ring, amongst a bloodbath of wasted tomatoes. As the last of the feds left George's house, the committee members were pulling out of his neighbor's house, as well. They stopped and let the valiant officials out, still shaking their heads in disbelief. One of them even commented on how beautiful the poppies were.



Later on that day, everything was quiet and still at George's house. The red footprints on the blacktop summarized the horrific events of earlier. Yellow police tape swayed violently in the lazy, summer breeze, giving George exception and notoriety on that day; but, for different, unexpected reasons.

Also bobbing in the wind, George's poppies stood innocently before his house. They were not directly involved in his fall. Under their canopy of beautifully delicate petals, a small junkyard of spent poppy heads and two cracked wine glasses littered the underside of the bed next to the walkway. Among the debris, George's cell phone started to ring from the patch of lovely flowers. "Julie Cell" was on the phone's display. It broke the monotonic background noise of lazy wind chimes and the occasional dog barking.

In the middle of the driveway, the bottle of Champaign laid on its side with a stream running from it. The bottle's contents flowed onto Hidden Valley Drive, pooling at the bottom of George's driveway. A small locust swirled around in the Champaign whirlpool, grasping to stay afloat; but, eventually succumbing to the strong current underneath. It spun around in circles, taking its last breath and looking up at the faint traces of the moon and stars. The soft, comforting sounds of the TV emanated from George's bedroom window, just beyond the poppies. It resonated from the bedroom to swallow the whole house, and then the entire neighborhood. George could hear it, even in his jail cell. Pounding and pulsating...louder and faster, he hears it everyday, now.

