

Queen of the Box

A short story by Karen Lawrence

Copyright belongs to Karen Lawrence. All rights reserved.



They call me the Topiary Queen. My garden is famous throughout the county. My verdant pride and shapely delight. I open to the public for one day each year, on the first Sunday of June. For charity, of course. Visitors admire my sleek lawns,

flawless roses and azure agapanthus. But they are reduced to awed silence by my box. Smooth emerald curves and perfectly clipped balls, smelling of royalty. A circular low hedge, four spirals, eight tall cones, all pay homage to the glorious centrepiece, a statue of my own head, sculpted out of glossy *buxus sempervirens*.

The head was a special commission, a birthday gift for my fiftieth from darling Bobby. He banned me from the garden the day before, all curtains closed while I tried in vain to guess what special treat he had in store. Then, in the morning, he led me out blindfold. I gasped with pleasure as he unveiled my eyes to reveal the magnificent tower of green. Six feet tall, I beheld my own serene face, hair piled high and crowned with a tiara, giant viridescent eyes surveying my kingdom.

“Dearest Bobby. You understand me perfectly.”

I planted a precise kiss on his lips. It had taken some time.

Bobby used to pester me for children, holidays, frivolous trips to the cinema or the seaside. A garden requires attention, care and full-time commitment if it is to achieve perfection. Babies would have been a fatal distraction, allowing weeds and fungus to creep in. Bobby is a grown man. He has the golf course, and his Jaguar to polish. Eventually, he learned to leave me to my devotion. My life's work in contours of peerless green.

May is my busiest month. The garden must be at its spectacular best for my public. I am outside from dawn until nightfall, spraying, clipping and feeding. A salad sandwich suffices for my hurried lunch. I like to keep a trim figure. The queen should appear as resplendent as her realm. Self-discipline is the path to perfection.

This morning I begin at six, inspecting the rose beds and checking that no impertinent daisies have penetrated the lawn. A little flock of starlings is pecking at one of the hedges. I wave my arms at them in irritation and they fly away. As I approach

my topiary head, the low sun is in my eyes. Squinting at the noble shape, my attention is jolted. Something is not quite right. The left cheek has a new dent, a scar of missing leaves, two or three inches across. Catching my breath, I hurry over for a closer look. A ragged patch has opened in the healthy surface, eaten away like a cancer. It is small, but definitely damaged. An ugly wound in my immaculate complexion.

The fresh top layer of leaves is gone, and the darker green below looks dry and broken. Twigs and ravaged foliage stick together in clumps, glued by thick webs. Peering inside, I come face to face with the culprit: a lime caterpillar with a thin black stripe. It is no longer than my little fingernail. I part the sorry remains of leaves and quickly find more. Fat thugs swollen from gorging on my beloved handiwork. Clutches of tiny eggs hide deeper within, wrapped in cradles of silk, waiting their turn to hatch and feed on my face.

Urgent action is required. I hurry indoors to grab my phone and

google “box caterpillar”. Within moments I am armed with the menacing truth. My enemy is an invader from East Asia: *Cydalima perspectalis*, or the Box tree caterpillar. Pale brownish moths deposit their nasty eggs which hatch into ferociously greedy caterpillars. The result is “severe defoliation”, “dieback” and “extensive damage”. The online pundits propose various methods of “control” but suggest that “alternatives to box” may be the way forward. Clearly these so-called experts have not met the Topiary Queen. I am not about to give up my precious box to some vile maggots. My empire has been assaulted. This is war.

A quick search through the bottles in my shed and I am armed with my strongest pesticide. The namby-pamby instructions warn of extreme danger to birds, bees and other wildlife. Maximum dosage is one capful of concentrate per litre of water. I shrug my shoulders and stir in two capfuls, and then add another half capful for good measure. Within minutes I am dousing my hedges liberally with the evil-smelling spray. This

should kill the disgusting pests before they eat any more of my lovely face. I am smiling cheerfully as I shower them with death. Afterwards, a good hand wash and a nice cup of tea before getting on with the weeding. Everything must be perfect for Sunday.

Next morning I am up even earlier. So much to be done. I step outside to be stabbed by new damage like a ruptured gut. The scar has spread, all the way down my cheek, across to the left ear, and into the corner of my mouth. My stately smile looks twisted, like a bitter sneer. My perfect beauty sullied by a running sore. The fiends live. And eat.

The infection has spread to more plants. Two of the elegant cones are showing naked stems, and the round hedge has a big bite out of one side. I part the shredded remains and instantly find ravenous caterpillars. Overnight the green monsters have devoured chasms. My heart thumps and my fingers tremble with jealous fury. This is sacrilege.

I nibble a rich tea biscuit to calm myself while I re-consult the internet. A bacterial treatment is available, but it will take a week to arrive. After last night's speedy defoliation, that may be too late. The remaining option is removal by hand. There must be thousands of the larvae. I sigh and drain my bone china mug. No time to waste.

At first I am a little squeamish. I wear gloves, delicately plucking caterpillars one by one from the masticated branches. My reading glasses help me identify the devilishly camouflaged brutes, which I pick off and chuck into a bucket. But before long they are crawling up the bucket sides, looking for a route back to their dinner, so I grind each one between my finger and thumb before disposal. After a brief break to drink water I forget to replace my gloves. I discover that my bare hands can find caterpillars more easily by touch. The skeletons of leaves are warm in the sun, but my nemesis feels cool and meaty. I thrust inside, grab flesh, crush, kill. Sometimes I collect a heap

of my prey in my left palm. When I have a handful, I squeeze as tightly as I can, teeth clenched with the effort. Apple-green juice oozes out between my fingers. I sigh with satisfaction.

I wash my hands with soap, but the stickiness remains.

Caterpillar sap coats my arms to above the elbow. I lick my fingers tentatively. They taste like the gum on an envelope flap. I rub and wring them again, this time with washing up liquid, but the protein deposits cling like calumny. No time to rest. No time for lunch or dinner. Back to dealing death.

The sun sinks low and my back is aching. I am sitting on the ground now, eyes closed, hunting by pure touch and smell. A caterpillar is a gut with a mouth. These eating machines are transforming my foliage to flesh. I exist to destroy them. When I squish them, everything is soft except the hard little biting parts, like tiny pinpricks in my skin. Feel and crush. It is my rhythm and my obsession. The monsters seem endless, buried in every inch of my garden. Feel and crush.

Bobby's petulant voice drifts from far away. Something about it being late, and am I coming to bed? I have more important work to do. I ignore him, and he fades. Night brings welcome coolness as the green sinks to grey. Light is unnecessary. I know my garden by touch. Ten thousand worms await my destruction and I will not fail them.

I come to enjoy the sour tang on my skin. Licking the thick glue from my arms and hands sates my thirst. The blood of my enemies is smeared across my cheeks and runs into my eyes. My clothes are drenched in emerald death. A full moon rises and its light is dazzling. I crawl and grab, pulp and mash. The invasion seems endless and my quest eternal. But finally I reach into the last inch of hedge, and find nothing. Nothing but emptiness among the leaves. Nothing left to kill. No more to be done.

Everything aches, and I stink of glaucous fluids. I am too tired

to drag myself indoors, and besides, I need to keep vigil. I must stay on guard, in case of fresh attack. I will rest here for now, on my velvet lawn. Curling up like a foetus, I close my empty eyes.

It is the warmth that wakes me. Enlivening sun, combined with the scent of heaven. The juiciest, most enticing aroma. It is apples and avocados, basil and berries, as fresh as a newborn . If the gods made a salad, it could not smell half so good. My belly aches with an all-consuming hunger. Never have I known such an urge to eat. I must ingest or die. I must find that succulent feast and have it. I must make it part of me. I must consume and be consumed into bliss.

I crawl on my long fat belly. I haul my body on tiny legs. My eyesight is dimmed and everything is a green blur. But the perfume leads me. My virid flesh knows its way to my feast. I crawl inside and bury deep into my delicious face. Ambrosial box leaves enclose me. My saliva drips like honey. I stretch

my strong jaws wide and close them around my breakfast,
lunch and dinner. I will eat and devour. I will be satisfied. I am
Queen of the Box, *Cydalima perspectalis*.