

ALL QUIET ON THE OUTDOOR FRONT

By Irene Virag

IT IS ONE OF THOSE DAYS when the sunshine pours down like silent rain, drenching earth, plants and gardeners with midsummer heat. I keep a water bottle alongside me in the flowerbeds and vow to take a break at noon, or at least take shelter in the shade.

I can hear birds going about their business outside the fence - chirping, calling, commenting about the day. Or perhaps chattering about the silly humans laboring in the dirt. But in the garden, everything is quiet as if sound itself is muted by the heat.

Bees forage among the cone flowers - maybe they're onto the virtues of echinacea. Butterflies explore the blue salvia. I spot a black swallowtail and a pearly crescent, but no monarchs. The air is heavy and the movement of the bees and the butterflies has a dreamlike quality. For the most part, the garden is still. The garden is waiting. The tomatoes need staking, the weeds are beyond the pale, the spent blooms of the lilies are ready to be removed.

I love such days.

In the heat and stillness, the world beyond the green picket fence and the arbors and the gates melts away. For the moment, family frustrations and office tensions fade. The troubles in Bridgeport and Bosnia are at bay. Perhaps that is the zen of gardening - you become one with the plants, lost in the rhythm of the tasks at hand. Snip, tie, dig, pull. Actions become synchronized. The minutes tick away. Tranquility beckons.

My husband and I are together in the garden. He ties the tomato vines to the bamboo stakes and cuts off fruitless sideshoots. The vines are turning into tangles - he is trying to set things straight. Throughout the garden, sun and earth and water are performing their magic. Suddenly, seeds are plants, buds are flowers. But nature runs wild. In what seems like an instant, the neatlyplanted garden of spring verges on becoming a jungle. Gardeners keep order - or at least a semblance of it.

And so my husband maintains a modicum of discipline among the tomatoes and weeds the vegetable beds and enjoys the fruits of his labors. He harvests the string beans and Swiss chard for tonight's supper and delights at the discovery of green peppers and a ripe eggplant.

He points out the brilliant violet shade of the eggplant so perfectly named Neon. I show him the burgeoning buds of a perennial hibiscus that produced dinner-plate-size blooms last summer. I pluck off the dead and mushy blossoms of the pink and red hollyhocks that rise high above the fence, and cut back the prickly foliage of thistle in the hope of encouraging a second wave of spiky magenta flowers.

The browning heads of dianthus and marigolds fall to my faithful Felco pruners and I prop up the lilies that have grown as high as my shoulders. I pull purslane and quackgrass and errant tomato seedlings out of the paths. I adjust the arms of vinyl-coated metal Y-stakes and sink the stakes into the ground to prop up the cleome and purple cone flowers. It is time to shear off the spent spikes of lavender that are no longer the color purple but have turned a dusty pale shade of silvery blue. Waves of perfume reward me as I bend to them.

I cut a bouquet of white lilies and purple cone flowers and yellow snapdragons and pink cosmos for a galvanized French bucket I bought this spring at the Philadelphia flower show. It is almost 1 o'clock before we

remember to take our break. The scent of lavender is still with me. On the way into the house, I spot a dead leaf on a taro plant in the small fish pond and go into automatic deadheading mode. But I reach too far forward and in a splash, I'm knee-deep in the pond. Actually, it's refreshing and the fish are careful to avoid me. After lunch, we work in the shade of the backyard and then we return to the fenced-in world of the flower-vegetable garden in the middle of the front lawn.

We are alone with the stillness. In the garden, tranquility is my reality. I love the look of weeded beds and the sense of virtue they engender in me. They are like freshly dusted and straightened rooms and newlycleaned garages. But work begets work. One of my favorite quotes - the source is anonymous - goes "A garden is a thing of beauty and a job forever." We make mental lists of things to do - put new pinebark mulch on the paths, get weather-proof plant tags, prune the climbing roses.

The heat fades with the dying afternoon. I am still at peace but more aware of the life in my garden. I once walked through a garden with Sir David Attenborough and he told me about the secret life of plants - the stealing and cheating and sexual goings-on. I know such things are happening in my garden, and there is more action involving the creatures who frequent it. I reach beneath a weathered cedar bench to yank out a weed and find a sun-bleached rabbit skull. I think of the predator cat that roams the neighborhood and the screams and screeches of the little murders that punctuate the night.

Minutes later, my husband hollers as he tries to dig out the lovage that is threatening the passion flower vine that runs up the obelisk in the center of the garden. He has uncovered a nest filled with baby rabbits. Confused, they stumble out of the nest. They are the size of chipmunks with big dark eyes and ears still stuck to the sides of their heads. They're adorable. One of them tries to get back into the nest. My husband - who is known for screaming obscenities at the adult bunnies that invade his lettuce rows - bends down and for a moment, I'm frightened. He smiles and very gently nudges the baby rabbit back into the nest with a trowel.

Soon, dusk falls and the moon flowers appear like white saucers against the dark green fence. Their fragrance blends with the scent of the lilies. We gather up our tools and water bottles and close the garden gate.