

Dottie's Revenge

The annoying “click-clack” easily penetrated the old windows of my music room. “Click-clack.” I'd been happy, immersed in the piano piece I was learning, but those aggressive footsteps were unnerving – and unlikely. My 89 year-old neighbor, Gemma, was a full-blooded Italian, but she was a practical woman not given to living dangerously. Even if she'd just arrived home from the big family wedding in Arizona, I couldn't imagine her prancing around her yard in stiletto heels.

Gemma, the elder homeowner on our block, was sharp in many ways. Walking to the local market several times a week, she'd bring home a little beef or chicken, plenty of vegetables and a sweet too. Slow but steady, she'd make her way to the gate of my postage-stamp front yard to deliver her feedback on my gardening. Gemma may have been sympathetic to my hopes of brightening my yard, but she wasn't encouraging.

“Hi Gemma, nice day for a walk.”

“Hi, Tracy, too many trees. “

“What's that, Gemma?”

“I said you've got too many trees. They make a yard seem overcrowded, to say nothing of the mess of leaves they drop on my lawn.”

I turned to look at the water-starved patch fronting her house. Sure enough, my Japanese plum had shed deep purple leaves across her former lawn.

“I'll be happy to rake those up, Gemma, but don't set your heart on us giving up the cool shade of that old tree.” She laughed, we hugged, and I got out the rake. By that time she'd made it to her front door.

“You, know, I could use a new pot for my orchids,” she said to the ancient plant.

“And I know just where I can find one,” I laughed. “How about we meet back here at noon?”

Gemma lived without pretense, and she graced my life in many ways. When she cooked, the rich, mouth-watering aromas of fresh basil and garlic drifted from her kitchen to mine. And when she spoke her mind openly, she reminded our neighborhood of values and sensibilities brought forward from a slower, more tolerant time. In the sunny, summer months, the loose screen door off her tiny, second-story porch would bark open.

“Creakity-creakity-creak.” Gemma’s towels, nightgowns and undies would squeak their way out to dangle over her steadfast geraniums, the single lemon bush and the cracked pavement of her backyard. Neighbors in at least two directions were offended. But I loved Gemma’s Old World common sense, and I admired her sun-drenched clothesline.