

# The Garden Club

## A Short Story

by Kit Reed



She knew she did it well, had done this well almost all her married life; she would spend days at it if she had to, just to make it right. Still, every time the members of the Garden Club came to Alicia's house, her mouth dried and her belly trembled.

Employed as she was now, for the first time in her life a working woman, Alicia understood she was suspect among the lovely friends of a lifetime, who carried their age lightly and chattered like girls. This made success here more important. She had to be good at life precisely because she was now good at work. It was as if each small gain in other areas increased her vulnerability, in some geometrically enlarged arena of risk. She did not so much court as create these moments of insupportable tension, which were only sometimes followed by a measurable triumph. It was necessary to win. Petty triumph, Alfred would have said. Well, he was wrong.

They would be here soon. Spilling into the house, the girls would make a pretty spectacle: Janice and Maud, exotic Clarita, who had Spanish blood, and Elise. Alicia could hardly wait to see them, all those well-dressed friends of her marriage nodding and rustling in the slanting dust-flecked sunlight, with their nails bright and their hair enhanced by

touches of bronze or gold. Murmuring, they would hug her, the living complement to her carefully designed rooms; then they would take off their coats and judge. Although they would have been astounded at the suggestion, competition was the air they breathed. Smiling, they measured each other off. Alicia looked forward with love and fear to the moment when they finished their sherry and clustered in her dining room, judging the arrangement.

For the arrangement was everything.

How could she make the football hang in air above the miniature goalposts on her polished table, forever indicating victory: the means, or was it the emblem, eternally poised? How could she keep it in the air until they came? Could they tell from the way she used her blues that Yale was supposed to be the favorite? Would they know the roses symbolizing Harvard were overblown by design, to signify Harvard's defeat? Even fulfilling the Garden Club guidelines—centerpiece, Football Brunch—she wasn't sure she had it right.

"It's perfect," Alfred said when he came down at dawn today and discovered her in tears over the tottering goalposts, the unstable ball.

"It's not," she said, afraid God would hear and take everything away. "... Is it?"

"Everything you do looks wonderful to me," Alfred said

---

*Kit Reed's most recent novel is Catholic Girls. She lives in Middletown, Connecticut.*

indifferently, so promiscuous in his praise that she wasn't sure he saw.

"Something is wrong with it," she groaned.

"You shouldn't let these things bother you." He seemed pleased to find her worrying over flowers for once, instead of the job. "What are you doing?"

Her job! She was holding the phone book at arm's length, trying to make the numbers hold still. "Tad will know what to do."

"For Pete's sake it's Saturday morning! He's probably asleep."

"He's a runner," she told him with a proprietary thrill. "He'll be up."

Alfred's voice spiked in irritation. "Why didn't you ask me?"

"Because I knew what you'd say."

Of course Tad came, her young employer in his Saturday sweats soberly bending over the arrangement, never once suggesting even by inflection that this was a waste of his time. She leaned close, absorbed, as he did magic with a piece of wire. "You do good work," he said.

Alicia knew what he was too polite to say, that there were better places to do it, yet she did not so much suffer as encourage the Garden Club, traveling to Hartford for the special glass marbles, setting bachelor's buttons in washable blue ink to enhance the color, getting up at five to arrange the fresh flowers, using her own breath to fog and polish the fruitwood table. If at her new job in the library she had to spend hours searching a title for some medieval scholar, if she could never catch up on the paperwork Tad and the other kids in their 20's seemed to toss off in minutes, she was still good at this. In the moment before they came, she could be perfect.

Alicia loved the way her house looked in the morning light, the golden promises of autumn in this near-perfect moment right before they came. It was her favorite time of the year, and the saddest; everything was so pretty, its time so short . . . She had dressed in rust today, to match the leaves; the committee would come in fall colors—Janice and Maud, Clarita and Elise, whose race memory, or sense of the appropriate, would direct their color choices as it had every October since they first went off to college, five tremulous, gawky girls. When they were standing around it, admiring, her arrangement would be complete.

Alfred was out raking leaves in old boots and a Shetland sweater; in a few hours she would hear cheering from the Yale Bowl as the crowd rose for the kickoff. Thirty years ago she and Alfred used to walk out to the Bowl with hundreds of others, lugging blankets and thermoses. She remembered her doctor in another autumn, waving at the open hospital window: hear them cheering? By the time the game is over, you will have your baby. Yes, it was a cliché. She loved clichés. Hence the arrangement.

She had begun to understand that there were in life challenges it was appropriate to meet and others it was better to avoid.

Within the circle of the Garden Club she still had the capability, as the computer people said, of fulfillment. At least she needed to tell herself this when, in fact, she understood—if she understood anything—that life had

been created to demonstrate Goedel's Theorem of Incompleteness, unless Goedel's theorem was an analog for life—the hand forever reaching for the eternally receding cup.

**Y**ou are too smart to sit home, her young boss had said after their first conversation, in the year she went back to school. She was not sure what he saw when he looked at her. Whether he had spoken out of admiration or pity she still did not know.

She would have put it another way. Her children were grown. Her watercolors had dried up in their tubes, which was all right because in her new, apparently insatiable drive for excellence she understood that her paintings had never been anything more than ladylike. Abandoned when she gave up photography, her darkroom filled up with wintering plants. She could no longer be certain she was at the beginning and not the end of something.

Then one night she woke up screaming and felt Alfred gently trying to disengage her fingers even as he patted her back and murmured, from long practice, *There there, Lissy, there there.*

So she went back to school. At the university she had to run hard to stay in one place among swift, indifferent kids who did well precisely because they didn't need it. She used to go home exhausted while the kids, her classmates, ran around like jackrabbits, falling into bed with just anybody anywhere, any time, dancing if they wanted to, partying late into the night. Well, let them. She was better organized. She took some assurance from her surroundings, or was it the setting she had created: the glinting prisms in her chandeliers, the polished surfaces of her ancestral furniture, feeding on her reflected image in the beveled mirror her great-grandparents had taken from New York to Baltimore in the back of a wagon. Standing in the dust-shot sunlight she thought she saw her own reflected face receding; I need to be useful, she told the image, *useful*.

When she blundered into the Manuscripts Library, stymied by a graduate school assignment, Tad Elson was more than kind. Did she remind him of his mother or was there more? Although she preferred not to admit it, he had invented her, directing her thesis, creating a job for her. Well, it was easy for him to make large gestures. *Everything is easy for Tad*, she thought resentfully.

Unlike Tad, she had to work long hours to accomplish anything. Unlike handsome, careless Tad, who had a small car and a girlfriend, she hated to go home. Still, she could spend only so long at the library. When she got back to the house, no matter how late it was or how many lights she had left on, it would be empty and too dark. At least she no longer imagined she heard the voices of her grown children somewhere in the house. Howard was working for an oil company in Saudi Arabia and Martha was married and living in Florida. Even in summer the house seemed cold and no matter how exhausted she was, she would have to start dinner for Alfred, who had begun to affect a neglected air.

When it was all she did outside the home, Alfred loved her work with flowers. He used to come up behind her and put his arms around her waist, chin on her shoulder, admiring the arrangement.

When the kids were young Alfred had spent thousands helping her to complete her prizewinners—especially the one she'd wrought with her bare hands in the garage, using exotic jungle flowers and a vase from Sotheby's; she had replicated it in Bermuda to win the Grand Prize. She had made successes here; she had been photographed, and written up. He had bought her a ring.

At the dinner table in those days Alfred would sometimes reach for her hand, in front of guests who smiled indulgently: "Lissy. Isn't she wonderful? The flowers!" He would pull her close when the company left, his face crushing her hair.

They were never closer than at those moments. Everything she did in those days was a credit to him.

At first he treated her graduate career like another extension, or enhancement of himself, jetting to Europe to make a holiday of her scholarly errands, meeting her in the shade of some abbey in England or in Bonn for yet another honeymoon; couldn't he see she was serious? Recreating herself, she began to argue at dinner parties like a bright teenager discovering her powers. Newly assertive, she found she interrupted Alfred to tell the girls' admiring husbands about pigment on vellum, or cleaning incunables, and in thanks for support, she had dedicated her thesis to him.

She had surpassed the dear girls who were coming to her house today, her partners at innumerable bridge luncheons, loving givers of gifts at baby and wedding showers, by going back to school and taking a paying job. By having male colleagues, whom she could have lunch with, Alicia had changed her standing among them; yet this created a puzzle: why should they judge her more harshly, precisely because she had accomplished more than they?

("If you work too hard you'll lose your looks," Elise had said, quite gratuitously.

"Don't get so busy you lose track of your man," dark-haired Clarita said to Alicia before she had intimations that her own husband had strayed.)

But the girls had gotten together to give her a black-tie dinner party when she got her master's; when Tad gave her the job, they took her to lunch. They were almost as pleased as Alfred. They had been college classmates, frantic mothers at a collective play group, who some years later discussed the loves and losses of their grown children with the same passion they'd had for their own; they were her friends.

Then why should her face ache and her shoulders twitch because they were coming up the drive? No matter how she tried to stabilize the miniature football it dropped to a vertical position, dangling foolishly over the clever teak-wood goalposts she'd paid McBride to build. No matter how carefully she walked, the wretched thing quivered and tipped. Why should she think they wanted her to fail?

She'd read or dreamed she read about a transplant doctor in one of those bizarre weekly tabloids—a medical genius whose work on organ transplants was without peer. It was rumored that his taste for the delicate meat was such that he did the most exquisite of excisions—no scrap of inflamed tissue left anywhere because he was not so much ravenous as intoxicated by quality. Did he cook it right there, over a Bunsen burner in a corner of the operating theater, or did he like to take it home and eat it raw? Did he do this secretly,

or did he offer bits to his resident, to the anaesthesiologist? Did the nurses jump for leftovers, snapping like hunting dogs eager for a reward? Sometimes it seemed one way to her, at other times, another. Was he a figment of her imagination? She did not know.

She did know that anyone who aspired to success had to rise above detractors. If the doctor really ate the meat, then he probably deserved it. He had replaced failing hearts and kidneys with good ones, he was conferring life. He had a high function, an unassailable place in society. If she won the first round of judging in this category, let the women, walking away from the house, draw this picture if it pleased them: Alicia crouched in a corner, devouring baby's breath.

"Use a coathanger," Tad had said—a serious scholar who cared enough to give her the time. "You can prop it with a coathanger." Well, this had almost worked. In some respect it had worked, because she would be able to say to the girls, "If the football wobbles it's my boss's fault. He came all the way over just to advise."

She wished the girls would hurry; it was only a matter of time before the goalposts listed in spite of the supporting marbles, and the whole thing began to slide.

Was Tad stifling laughter this morning, dutifully praising her work? Although he made a great show of being egalitarian he might despise her for having money, even as she would always secretly resent him, for being young. She would never admit he had invented her, any more than she would forgive him for finding her weeping in the stacks that first day. Had he really seen promise in her, or was she his welfare work?

*Useful.* She couldn't remember whether he'd heard her say it aloud. Tad had pushed through her master's thesis to high honors in spite of the committee's complaints that Alfred's money bought trips other graduate students couldn't afford to make to all those museums and monasteries abroad. A good administrator, Tad needed to protect his predictions; he sent her to professional meetings, sometimes in his stead.

"Use initials when you publish," he said. "Your first name sounds a little—I don't know."

At parties Alfred boasted that his wife had been invited to give a paper in Kansas City or Quebec; she came home late to find him standing in the kitchen, angrily stabbing his fork into an open can of beans. She had redeemed that one by producing the *paté en croute* she'd made and frozen against such eventualities; still the angel on the hearth, OK?

For a while she got up in the night to keep the kitchen immaculate, bought a cocktail dress in American Beauty Rose because it made her look frivolous. She had to keep proving herself. In spite of his frequent presents and surprises, she still did not know; did her accomplishments make Alfred proud or angry, or did he need to keep her occupied, for reasons she could not divine?

She and Tad found it important to believe that he was not sorry for her and she did not envy him; that she wasn't really rich. Now that she'd almost finished creating herself, she found it necessary to dispute him in staff meetings, to argue over fine points of dating certain Books of Hours, even though he had hired her knowing that she would never really need a paycheck, not for food or lodging, not even for



cigarettes or for the curator's wardrobe, in tones of prune and raisin, that she had bought to convince. She put on her new position like a costume, affecting a scholar's stoop. She would do anything to erase the housewife and dabbler, the woman she had been.

Leaving the Manuscripts Library promptly at five, Tad often looked at her with the assurance of a born careerist: "That doesn't need doing now." He might guess at the empty house, but he could not imagine the anxiety that kept her at her desk.

"You don't understand," she would tell him, "you've always worked. It's going to take me the rest of my life to catch up." If she fell short they would seize her liver; if she failed at this she deserved to have it eaten, down to the last delicious shred. It was Tad's fault that she had expanded her area of vulnerability. There were so many more things in her life now than there used to be, that she might do wrong. Going back to school she had imagined, rather, that she was covering the exits—the number of places where she put herself on the line.

This was best: this moment before the women came; the light falling on the polished table in her silent house. When she felt ready she would bring the parts of her life together; she was going to dazzle her colleagues and the Garden Club with medieval illumination, wrought in flowers: an illustrated capital, she thought, but at the moment she could not decide which letter she would choose. Once again, she would win the international competition, and Alfred—what would Alfred do?

Her most beautiful arrangement would always be The Moon Walk, conceived when her children were still young and opening faces like flowers at the dinner table, in the uncomplicated days when she was primarily a homemaker, well before she enlarged the area of risk. This was before she became a competitor outside her local club, and she would always like it best because it didn't matter at all and therefore she had accomplished it with the careless grace of a Zen archer: a perfect iris curving from the perfect silver tube.

Accepting the trophy, she had never imagined that she would want anything more.

But they were here: the committee—Clarita and Janice, Maud and Elise, the friends—all right, the friends of her youth. She had drunk and giggled with these dear girls on the way to and from sorority meetings and college mixers and, in adulthood, in the car on the way to dozens of flower shows. They had cooked and dressed up for each other from the early days around tiny kitchen tables in first apartments cluttered by small children's toys, through the years they had spent decorating gracious houses appropriate to their station, making festivities in spite of everything that happened to them, or perhaps because of it.

They had soldiered through cocktail parties at the Yacht Club and dinner parties without number, giggling on the sidelines at their children's weddings. They'd even managed to make a party of the luncheon after Clarita, the Castilian beauty, won her divorce.

It made Alicia proud to see them filing into her carefully kept house today: pretty and gratifyingly ageless in their autumn costumes, serene in the context of orderly households, successful grown children, exercise classes and clubs

## Denial, Dream

by Gloria Glickstein Brame

Climbing out of vivid scenes,  
coughing an incoherent word  
in the pillow, I woke, thinking I heard  
you move. It was a dream.

This bed is wide empty earth,  
a landscape devoid of intimacy.  
Are you leaving me?  
I've been waiting for that.

Are you leaving? I know  
it from signs in the way  
people charge through the street, deranged  
by heat, the narrowness of the road,

and the search for consolation.  
Your sleep is transparent  
and deep, without feeling.  
Outside, faces belie a preoccupation

with death. Hurried, magnetized,  
they drag the pavement into their lives.  
Your sleeping hand avoids mine.  
You're already planning lies.

---

such as this one. It gave her a sense of well-being, of the order and fitness of life. She was rich beyond money: she had her place in the university library and yet she still belonged here. She loved the cashmeres and tweeds her oldest friends wore to her house, the muted lipsticks and nail gloss with which they honored her, the touches of antique gold.

"Lissy, darling."

"... so glad to see you."

"So happy you came."

"Everything is just lovely."

It was; Ardena had cleaned yesterday, while she was at work, and as they did so often now, she and Alfred had eaten out. So few things happened in the house on Friday nights