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Shyla Ann Shehan

ALL THE LIFE THAT WANTS TO LIVE

My neighbor, Dick, has touched over a thousand people's hearts. Literally. In his prime, he was a cardiothoracic surgeon who performed thousands of procedures. It's got to be a bit surreal to think back over your life and know that you have saved hundreds of people's lives, extended the lives of so many others, and had a profound impact on countless family members. I can't imagine the amount of gratitude that he's received or the weight that surely comes with delivering the worst possible news to the partner, child, or sibling of a patient. Being a witness to grief taking over as they clutch whatever is in their arms a little tighter, would be incredibly difficult.

Dick is retired now and though he has a bit of trouble getting around, he still comes out every day to check the mailbox at the end of his driveway and on Tuesdays to wheel his trash cart to our shared curb. His hearing and eyesight are not good so when he sees me he always walks closer to the small green space that separates our driveways.

I've only lived here for a year, but his greeting has become familiar, "Shyla, is that you? I can't see so good anymore." He hobbles with his cane a little closer. His smile is soft and genuine.

"Yes," I reply, walking a little quicker toward him so he doesn't have to come too far and also so I don't have to raise my voice in an unnatural way. "How's it going?"

"Oh, you know," he says with a smile. I'm not sure I know but I think I might.

Recently I was working to tease the weeds out of the lilac bushes that live in our shared strip of green space. I was

on his property and down on my hands and knees pulling out little saplings and Creeping Jenny that have planted themselves there. You have to go after the root otherwise they will stubbornly grow back. *All the life that wants to live*, I often think to myself when I am weeding.

It wasn't Tuesday. The mail hadn't been delivered yet. Yet here was Dick outside and making his way from his garage across his driveway to speak to me.

He smiles and says hi and asks me what I'm doing. I stand so we can be eye to eye and I tell him I'm pulling weeds. We survey the bushes in silence for a second. They have been neglected for far too long and are in rough shape but still working all their lilac magic to produce those wonderfully smelling blooms.

Sometimes, plants that are stressed or near the end of their life put all their energy into producing whatever it is that will beget offspring. Like a pine tree that produces twice the typical number of pine cones as its branches become brittle and brown. Or a flower that blooms a second time in a season when growing conditions have been poor, somehow with a premonition of things to come.

Dick breaks the silence and says the bushes look great. I don't think we're looking at the same bushes. They smell amazing though, and maybe that's what he's basing his assessment on.

I ask him how it's going. He surprises me and says, "You know a person shouldn't live much past 90." He's 92.

I'm not sure how to respond to that so I just smile and we stand there for another moment of silence. He reaches over his cane and grabs the tendril of a Creeping Jenny and yanks it away from the bush. It snaps, leaving the bottom half and the weed intact.

"I think I've got my work cut out for me," I say.

"You're doing good work." He says. And then "I'll leave you to it."

As he turns to walk back to his open garage I can't help

but think that no matter how much good I do in my life, it will never amount to much. All the life that wants to live will indeed go on living and there may be no more of a point to it than that.

I get back down on my knees and reach for another weed.