

Home Front

Yardwork does nothing for me. I'm expressing total honesty when I say that. I'm aware that some guys look at their lawn as an extension of their manhood; they seem to think it's a stage where they can act out the ancient struggle of man against nature. I see this play out on my street by my neighbors, like Harold Ronson, the crusty old fellow who got the neighborhood started on all the nonsense with yellow ribbons. I'll get to that part later.

Unlike Harold, I don't put any thought into keeping my lawn looking nice. Ellie knew that when we got married and bought the house, and she should have guessed that the rake and the Desert Storm ribbon she tied around the porch railing would eventually lead to a disagreement.

It took a while for that to happen; in fact, the pot simmered for several months. Ellie kept after me last autumn when the leaves from the neighbors' trees were landing on our lawn in thick layers and blowing wildly through the damp air. One weekend she brought two bags of groceries into the kitchen and announced that she had picked up a rake at the hardware store.

R U B B E R N E C K E R S

"Would you get it out of the car for me?" she asked. That's Ellie for you. She knew the word *subtle* quite well, but I'm not sure the definition ever really sunk in. That bluntness is one of the many reasons I fell in love with her.

I slid the rake out of Ellie's back seat and took a long look at the thing before leaning it against my workbench in the garage, where it remained for a few weeks. Ellie sharply reminded me about the leaves several times as she came home from work and I would bring it up just before we went to sleep so she'd know I wasn't blowing her off. While on the subject, I sometimes complained about being forced to rake leaves when we didn't even have a tree in the front yard. We played this passive-aggressive back-and-forth game until the first snowfall in November, when it became clear that the moment had passed. Knowing the brutality of winter weather in Nebraska, I stowed the rake in the corner of the garage and promised to get the job done early in the spring. Ellie told me that I was making us look like poor white trash, and I just shook my head at that.

During those months, while our unkempt lawn was obscured under six inches of snow, that military build-up known as Operation Desert Shield became Operation Desert Storm. The price of gasoline went through the roof and the nightly news focused on that one subject from a hundred angles. After a few weeks I stopped paying attention, even though Ellie had a cousin stationed over there in Saudi Arabia. I had never met the kid—Lonnie was his name—so hearing about his exploits via my wife didn't bring Desert Storm any closer to home.

Then one day in March, after the short-lived ground war and subsequent cease-fire over in Saudi, that majestic rake made an

B R E N D A N H O W A R D

unexpected reappearance in our kitchen. I came out for coffee that morning to find the rake propped against the counter so that the silverware drawer was blocked. As I set the thing aside, I looked at Ellie.

"Can you do it today? I know the game starts at two o'clock. Does that give you enough time?"

I closed my eyes and said yes.

A breeze whistled down the street. Tree limbs, still naked and smooth, tapped together in a lazy rhythm on my next-door neighbor's property. I had taken a seat on the porch steps, and I could hear the branches creaking in the morning wind, rattling as the bright sun illuminated the suburban landscape. Both of my hands were clasped around one of the iced tea glasses given to me and Ellie as a wedding present two years back. I asked her to make some tea while I changed into grubby clothes, and she dug through the cupboards to find the proper glasses and the matching pitcher designed especially for iced tea. The pitcher was at my side. I stirred the ice in the glass with an absent-minded finger, feeling the slippery cubes wobble against each other. Then, with an ominous roar, Harold Ronson's vintage Dodge Dart rumbled past our house. I lifted my arm to wave at him, but he failed to return the gesture. No surprise there. He probably didn't even see me. Why on Earth would Harold expect me to be working in the front yard?

I thought ahead to the end of the job, when I could drag Ellie out of the kitchen to help me stuff the yard waste bags. She