

Corridors

You remember – *Dobmeier vs. Town Council*.

He let that swath of weeds grow up in the back of his yard. Just didn't want to deal with a drainage problem, so he called it "naturalization." The wimps on the council backed down after two losses in court.

Then he let his whole lot, a prime double lot, go native.

Okay, a few wildflowers, no problem. They plant those out by the interstate, look like hell by September, but okay. And the Garden Club ladies with their butterfly patches and bird sanctuaries. Fine.

This – *this* – is out of control.

First Dobmeier. Then what's-his-name on my left, Guzetti on the right, the rest of the street going down like dominoes. That Chinese doctor resisted the longest – she had some sense of propriety – but when she let go it was all the way, baby. Planted the whole lot in trees and shrubs. Lights gleam in there and disappear, children get lost in the woods.

I've given up on the string trimmer, the power clippers. Rank weeds and young trees need a machete. They didn't have one at the hardware store so I went to the Army/Navy Depot. Feel sometimes like I'm in a jungle, right here in the Northeast Corridor.

My sweat drops on the leaves. Hope it's toxic.

The weeds are aggressive. They lean over the boundary, put down roots and tendrils, drop seeds. I slash the overgrowth back, back. I go a little onto Dobmeier's – so let him sue me. My house is the only one in the neighborhood with visible foundation plantings. Ranch houses wallow in brush, split levels and mock Tudors float on a weedy sea.

There is a shadow under the cotoneaster I don't care for.

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Five lots adjoin mine, because of the cul-de-sac. Dobmeier comes against me at the back corner, where the ground is soggy. A French drain would have solved his problem, like it did mine. Run the drainage right into the creek. He let weeds grow instead. If this subdivision was set up square, I'd only have three people to worry about. All the lots are oddly shaped. I very nearly didn't buy because of that.

I've told him, over and over, that this won't do. Bugs and weeds. Animals.

"Isn't this Badger Hollow?" he needles.

“Oh, for pity’s sake, who ever saw a fox at Foxcroft Estates? A hornbeam – whatever that is – in Hornbeam Hills? A deer at Dappled Fawn Farms?”

He grins at that. A deer went through someone’s picture window there in October.

“You know what I mean. This is the suburbs, not a game preserve.”

“So you think.”

Dobmeier used to be in insurance, like me. When the lawsuit came up, he got help from the Sierra Club and that sort of people. Started reading *Mother Earth News*. I’d like to see what magazines are dropped into his mailbox now. *Eco-Warrior Alert*, or something. He’s grown a scruffy beard to match his scruffy lot.

I lean on my electric edger and confront him. “What kind of game are you playing? Trying to kill the property values? What’s this about?”

“Reclamation, Muncey.”

“What?”

He smiles mysteriously. Then he drifts back into his weed patch.

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I double the treatment for white grubs and wireworms. Creeping infestation. Butterflies and dragonflies and who knows what THOSE are, dropping eggs as they zip back and forth. What makes grubs? Maybe grubs are just grubs forever. Probably a damn Save-the-Grubs movement.

I walked out to get the paper the other morning and stepped right in it, a big green splotch of stuff on the walk. Canada geese live in the creek and waddle up to graze. Like sheep. They like my lawn – the ONLY lawn – the best.

We put in an Invisible Fence, back when all our lawns met, seamlessly green, maybe a few shrubs to tastefully mark the line, but no fences. It wasn’t that kind of neighborhood. The buried wire kept Sunniepryde on our lot, until Angela left and took the mean little hairball with her.

But Invisible Fence doesn’t mean a thing to geese.

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Dobmeier says, “There are forty-five million lawns in the United States. Most of them in the suburbs, just like these. Miles of them, all connected. Thirty million acres! Can you imagine?”

This is a one-third-acre lot. No, I can’t imagine.

“I found this out when I got into the lawsuit. All these lawns. And at the same time, the wild areas getting smaller and smaller, cut off from each other by the cities and suburbs....” He leans on the last word. His brown eyes are soft, imploring. Probably sold a lot of whole-life policies with those eyes. “... just like Badger Hollow. So if we connect the lawns up, let them go wild, then we create corridors. Ecological corridors.”

“Great. Miles of weeds. Strip development for vermin.”

“Think of them as natural highways, Muncey. The animals can travel, mix the gene pools, all that.”

I think of a lovesick moose trotting down Arbutus Avenue.

“I don’t want to be on an ecological corridor, thank you very much. I want a nice lawn.”

Dobmeier’s skinny cheeks (probably from eating health food) redden under the graying whiskers. “Why are you so attached to a labor-intensive monoculture habitat?”

“It’s a lawn, not a habitat. A LAWN!”

I’m shaking. He’s so damned smug. Lawns have a proud history. Ones in England that have been mowed the same way for five hundred years. The White House lawn, egg-rolling. Lawn parties. Angela sunbathing.

“I worked hard for this,” I say, when my breathing levels out. “I earned it. I grew up in an apartment over a beauty shop on 163rd. Smelled perm solution every morning with my corn flakes. After college, a starter home at Dawnrise. Then a second house. Then the big jump – never mind the ARM and the points – Badger Hollow.”

A good family neighborhood, Angela said. Angela who took the dog. Thank God we never started with kids.

Dobmeier tries to pat me on the shoulder. I brush his moist hand away. My fingers are stained green. Have to get gloves.

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I use a gasoline-powered hedge trimmer to square off the shrubs. Weeds overtaken by woody things. It makes for a magnificent boundary fence. I am the center of the maze. I have carved out a haven. A place of order and sanity, of civilization.

I find myself whistling the tune to *Gilligan’s Island*. It’s somewhat embarrassing when Dobmeier emerges from his brush woods. He favors modern classical, the Kronos Quartet and *Nixon in China*. Hard to whistle.

With some satisfaction, I notice that the briars have put a hole in the knee of his L.L. Beans.

“They sighted a bear at Pheasant Ridge.”

“A bear?” Claws and teeth. Campers gutted at Yellowstone.

“A black bear. Yeah. There were tracks where this guy’s pool filter had leaked. And scat.”

I don’t ask. “Probably somebody’s Great Dane. Wishful thinking.”

I buzz the trimmer at a 90-degree angle down the brush line. A little close to Dobmeier’s knee. He grimaces.

“I’m sure the bear will find your place a lot more attractive than mine.” I step back. The newly cut stems are level and clean, thin grass underneath as pale as a recruit’s scalp. I touch up here and there, ignoring Dobmeier.

Rabbits and tame squirrels used to come out on the lawns, back in the old days. They were sort of ornamental. Then the raccoons – brazen, right up to the back door. Then deer. Wild turkeys, frightening big loud birds, all wings and necks, red raw skin. Odd huffing moans came from the Guzettis’ side last night. Something big and warm-blooded. I double-checked the locks on the windows.

“It doesn’t matter how well you trim.” Dobmeier’s voice fades into the thicket. “The animals will cross your lawn just like a clearing in the woods.”

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I tore out the cotoneaster, the arborvitae, the spreading juniper. Now it’s all grass. The best guaranteed weed-free hybrid bluegrass, level as a putting green. No concealment.

I gave up the back of the lot near the creek, after being chased out by something long-nosed and toothy. Anyway, it squared things up.

The visible fence mounts higher each week. Square and perfect. I patrol the lines daily with hedge trimmer and chain saw. A right little, tight little island.

Or maybe a peninsula. The highways are still open, black asphalt smooth as a tabletop, concrete curbing, painted crosswalks, storm drains, sodium vapor lights on brushed aluminum arms. They connect me with others of my species.

I drive forty-eight miles to Brentwood to couple with a woman named Donna.