

Curb Appeal

by Ann Wahlman

The guttural drone of the leaf blower blotted out the sound of everything else. That was how he liked it. From his vantage point, Bill could see through the sparse wood that separated their backyard from the others across the way. When Kathy had insisted on buying this house eleven years ago, she'd said the thinning tree line would fill out along with their growing family, but neither had come true in the end. The trees still looked spindly, like tall, waifish models posing on long legs for a magazine cover, and while the families living around them had collected new members year after year—boys and girls and dogs and cats—theirs hadn't.

The backyard directly across from theirs was full of the kind of neglect that young children introduce into families. The lawn could have used a good mow a week ago, at least. Ragged edges grew along the pathway around the house—it hadn't been trimmed properly in quite some time. A pink kiddie pool lay overturned by the side of the house like a beached, cartoonish whale next to a garden hose that had been left uncoiled. Plants sat sickly and drooping after a long Indian summer in the unkempt beds lining the sides of the house. Faded plastic toys lay scattered around the back deck, some beneath it, their weary, bleached reds and dingy yellows left to lay in the dirt underneath the house.

Bill and Kathy's yard stood out among the others. Theirs was green, tidy and neat. He'd made sure of that. Each week, he raked up the leaves and twigs and nuts that had fallen from the nearby trees. He cut back bushes and trimmed hedges and pulled weeds out by their roots. He kept the lawn mowed at the perfect height. He'd put the lawn in himself a few years back; he'd dug up the old one entirely to do it right. He'd put in a variety of Creeping Bentgrass frequently used by golf courses. It grew a lush green in summers but needed regular care. Bill didn't mind. He mowed it twice a week to one inch. Some weeks he mowed it a third time for good measure. It was his baby.

Bill swung the leaf blower in a lazy arc, blowing the few leaves that had fallen this early in the season back into the receding tree line of the woods. The leaves were still supple, partially dried around the edges, spotted with brown and yellowed. The weather wouldn't turn quick enough this year to cause those bright, vivid colors that Kathy so loved. In years past, they had gone to Wachusett Mountain to ride the ski lifts and look at the foliage as they glided up the mountain with only the hum of the cables between them. The trails cut into the mountainside left gaping holes in the tree cover like great gashes that ran from top to bottom, a line of scars where things wouldn't grow.

The motor of the leaf blower sent vibrations through his hand that he knew would cause his skin to go numb if he stayed out there too long. It was a sacrifice he'd make. He didn't want to go back inside the house. This was what he was reduced to; it was his only way to find two hours of peace every day, maybe four or six on weekends. The summer and spring indulged him. It was the winters he hated the most, the sun setting sooner and sooner, as if it couldn't wait to be done for the day. By the end of the month, he'd barely have an hour of daylight to get in some yard work after coming home from his nine to five in Boston. By the end of October, forget it. He'd just be getting home as the last rays of sun touched the edge of his yard. By November, it'd set while he was still sitting behind his desk, staring at some financial reports under the blue glow of his monitor. And then he'd start thinking about March, because March was the month he'd see the sun again. Just a little at first, as he pulled his car into the driveway in the evening, but then thanks to some political bullshit that actually favored him for once, the day would leap forward on the second Sunday of the month. He'd have a whole hour tending to his lawn then—outdoors, outside, away from it all. The ground might still be frozen, but he'd find something to do.

It used to be that Kathy spent the five months of New England winter darkness baking. She'd started her obsession with cookies years ago when they'd first married, and had moved on to other things—experimenting with breads and pizza crusts and focaccias,

but eventually she had settled on cakes. Angel and Devil's Food, lemon and orange Bundt cakes with rum drizzles and crackly confectioner's sugar frosting that dripped down into the trenches shaped from the molds. There were cupcakes, too—so many different combinations of cakes and frostings he couldn't keep count, but the muffin tins and the crinkly paper liners eventually went by the wayside when Kathy called it a fad. In the summer there were pies, too—lemon meringue and cherry and blueberry, maybe even a key lime if she were feeling exotic.

He'd asked her to stop once, a few years ago. Middle age was beginning to set in and Bill had gained some weight around his mid-section. It hung there like an over-risen bowl of dough, yeasty and elastic, meant to be punched down but sadly forgotten. He poked and prodded at the bulge with his fingers, watched with fascination how it protruded from the sides of his waistband and hung over the top. Love handles—that was all his wife's boredom had gotten him.

“You have to stop baking so much,” he'd said. He pinched off a piece of German chocolate cake she was working on and popped it into his mouth. “I'm getting fat.” He licked the sweet caramel coconut frosting from his fingertips in succession.

“You don't have to eat it,” Kathy had said. She swatted his hand away as he went back for seconds.

“What will you do with it if I don't?”

“I don't know. Take it into the office or bring it to church.”

He'd laughed at that, but he'd felt bad about it later. “Since when do you go to church?”

“Well, maybe I should go more often,” she'd murmured, using the red-handled spreader to pile more of the chunky frosting into the crevice he had dug out with his fingers.

His wife hadn't gone to church regularly since the last miscarriage five years ago. After that, they'd stopped trying. It wasn't just the sex, though they'd pretty much given up on that, too. The attitude seeped into all aspects of their lives. They'd not only given up on having children, but on finding God, and on their marriage, too. Kathy threw herself into her baking and Bill worked

on the yard—because at the end of the day, that's all that was left for him to do. He didn't know how to fix what had become of their lives.

Kathy hadn't gone back to church, though. She still only went on Christmas and Easter, and the things she baked either went uneaten, or were consumed mostly by her. Her thighs expanded along with her waistline, the shape of her once firm, taut ass became slack and dimply from too much sitting and overconsumption of sweet, baked goods. The cupboards filled with cookbooks she'd bought in lieu of daily baking, so she could sit on the couch and sip tea, nibbling at a scone while thumbing through the photographs, looking for inspiration. She didn't often cook according to recipe, so the cookbooks themselves went largely unused, and that bothered Bill. It annoyed him that she bought all these things only to look at them—these things that took up space in their lives in cupboards and cabinets and along shelves in the living room, their glossy covers and colorful photos mocking them.

Bill turned and looked back at the house. He half expected to see Kathy there, watching him from behind the sliding glass door. Her face would be pale and bluish behind the double or triple or quadruple paned glass. He wasn't sure what it was, but they had made a big deal out of it when they were selling them the house. Instead of her figure, however, there was nothing. Just the empty blackness of the living room beyond that led into the open kitchen where Kathy did her baking.

He contemplated turning off the leaf blower and going inside. The sun was setting and he still had to put the machine away. He could feel the silence that would descend upon him as surely as the setting sun would set on the other side of that thin wood. His hand was tingling with numbness so badly that he almost couldn't feel the grip of the blower in his hand, couldn't feel his fingers as individual entities anymore. It was time to go in, but he wanted to stay outside just a little while longer. He moved a few feet to the side and blew some twigs and acorn caps back into the woods, concentrated on lifting them up and sending them tumbling end over end into a thick

carpet of mulch made from rotted leaves leftover from the previous fall.

It was last fall that Kathy had gotten into exercise. He was happy that she was out of the house that winter when he couldn't be out in the yard. At first, she'd tried to get him to go with her, to work off those extra pounds that her baking had put on him, but he hadn't wanted to. He'd never been one to work out, to lift weights, go jogging, or sit on some machine like a hamster stuck on some perverted, never-ending staircase. He liked his push mower and his rake and his manual clippers. It was Kathy who had bought him the leaf blower a few birthdays ago. He still preferred to rake the leaves by hand, the old-fashioned way, but it had been a gift.

Kathy had turned her attention to healthier baked goods when she'd started losing the weight. She baked with canola oil instead of butter, sucralose or stevia instead of sugar, applesauce in place of oil. She experimented with pumpkin instead of eggs, whole wheat flour and wheat germ, too. And it was nice having his freedom, having the house alone to himself while Kathy was off at the gym for another class or a session with her trainer or just doing a workout. It was easier to get by that way, to not have to see her as much, to not be reminded of this life that had fallen apart on them.

Of course, the weight fell off Kathy faster than it did him—he wasn't really trying. By spring, he barely recognized the woman to whom he was married. Sure, she looked more like the woman he *had* married, but it wasn't the woman he'd come to know. She cut her hair short and dyed her naturally light brown hair to a white, platinum blonde. She'd started wearing makeup. There were new clothes too, of course. And she looked great in them, her soft, flabbiness gone and replaced by a chiseled musculature he wasn't at all used to. When he'd crept up behind her in bed, pressing an unexpected erection against her tailbone, he'd put his hand on her hip and—expecting suppleness to the flesh beneath his palm, was at once surprised and terrified of the bony protrusion he encountered instead. Kathy had pushed him away, saying she had an early workout in the morning and she was tired. He couldn't blame her;

she suddenly looked ten years younger. Bill himself still had the paunch around his middle and looked every one of his approaching forty-seven years.

Bill switched off the leaf blower. His ears hummed with the newfound silence, picking up the warble and delicate song of a bird out in the trees behind the houses. Kathy was always on him to wear ear protection whenever he was using that thing, but he hadn't wanted to. It was the noise that he liked the best—not what it could do or even the oily gasoline-laced smell of it, that dank, chemical smell that reminded him of summer and moss and spiders. The buzz and throttle of the engine that powered the blower filled up his ears and told him—*don't think*. All that noise reverberating around in his head, bouncing off the walls of his skull and leaving his whole brain numb to everything.

He carried the leaf blower over to the shed and wrenched open the metal door. It squeaked on its hinges and he made a mental note to oil them later. He found a rag and wiped down the housing. He set it on the shelf where he always kept it, draped the tan tarp over it to protect it from moisture in case it rained. He didn't trust that the shed wouldn't leak. He knew he'd put the kit together right, but it was the workmanship at the factory he didn't trust. You never knew when two pieces might suddenly come apart for whatever reason and let water and God knows what else in.

The darkness of the shed and the closeness of the space comforted him. That big old house had been far too large for the two of them—but now? He didn't know what he was supposed to do with it now. Sell it, he supposed. Some couple would want it—ones that were expecting to stay for a while, looking to raise a family. There were good schools in the area and plenty of other families with kids around. And with the amount of work he'd put into the yard, he had to imagine the curb appeal would be irresistible. Thanks to the high-end kitchen with built-in double ovens, the forty-two inch French door refrigerator with the freezer on the bottom, the stainless appointments and granite counters, not to mention the automatic lift he'd put in for Kathy's Kitchen-Aid mixer—that house was a woman's

dream. It was a man's dream, too—with its tool shed and impeccable lawn and careful landscaping. It just wasn't Bill's dream anymore. He'd always thought that someday they'd have a family. Maybe they'd adopt if it turned out they couldn't have kids. Maybe they'd hire a surrogate and grow their own flesh and blood inside someone who could. He wasn't sure how it would happen exactly, or how they'd get to that point. He only thought that it might happen—someday.

Once Kathy had left—once she'd packed up her things into boxes and moved out her share of the furniture, he'd finally realized that the someday he'd imagined wasn't tangible. It sat there, just out of reach, like some greedy sponge, soaking up all his hopes and dreams. Bill was beginning to think that most people's somedays never came true. But Kathy had gotten hers. She'd moved in with her trainer and his six-year-old daughter. Sure, it wasn't her kid, but it was as close as she'd probably get. She deserved that happiness. He just wished her happiness and his had overlapped in some way, but there was no sense in wallowing in that any more. He'd been wallowing out here all summer.

He wanted to erase her from his memory, from his life, from their house. Hell, it was *his* house now. She had taken the photos and the albums and the artwork. They were all things that reminded him of her. Even that damned leaf blower reminded him of her—perfect and modern and sleek—nothing at all like him. He pulled the tarp off of it and stared at the orange plastic housing that made up the body. It wasn't sturdy at all, just polycarbonate crap. It was nothing like his trusty steel hedge clippers he'd bought when they'd first married. All they needed were some oiling and sharpening once in a while, maybe some steel wool to clean off the rust spots from the salt in the air, but really they were low-maintenance as these things go. This monstrosity wasn't anything of the sort. Kathy hadn't known him at all if she'd thought he'd actually wanted that damn thing.

Bill hefted it off the shelf with a numb hand and with the other, took the sledgehammer that hung on the pegboard on the wall, its head suspended by two nails. Behind it, an outline in blue marker

traced the empty image of the hammer on the wall. It was made of forged carbon steel, double-headed, with a yellow fiberglass handle. He couldn't remember why he'd bought it now. Maybe it was from when they had taken down the wall in the tiny fourth bedroom to make Kathy's office larger.

He dropped the leaf blower on the lawn, let it fall with a satisfying thump onto the lush grass. He took a step backward and reared the sledgehammer over his head, but then he dropped his arm and let the hammer dangle from his right hand. He stepped into the shed and found himself a pair of protective glasses. No sense in losing an eye over a woman, he'd lost nearly thirteen years already. The yellow lenses made it seem brighter in the falling darkness than it actually was. He picked up the sledgehammer again in both hands and raised it high above his head, the head of the hammer sinking well below his shoulder blades on the backswing—and he brought it forward, throwing all of his weight behind it, feeling the burn and tug of his muscles as his arms brought the thing down. The head landed squarely on the plastic housing with a *crack* that split the body down the middle, putting a tangle of mechanics on display. On the second swing, the handle on the unit snapped off, flew up into the air and hit the wood railing of the deck with a flat sound. He smashed at it again and again, feeling the heft of the hammer in his hands and letting the reverberations of each blow travel down the length of the handle and burn into his hands, the numbness spreading down his arms all the way to his elbows—making them feel loose at the joint, disconnected.

He felt disconnected from everything now that Kathy was gone. He spent his days staring at a mindless stream of numbers running down his computer screen and his nights tossing fretfully in the guest bed. She'd taken theirs—taken the bed they'd shared when she'd left and found her own someday with another man. There would be divorce papers, he supposed, but neither of them had bothered to file yet—they'd been too busy. And now that the sunlight was fading away along with the month of September, he had nothing left to hold onto.

When there was no more rage or anger or disappointment left in him, Bill let the handle of the sledgehammer slide through his fingers until the head rested on the ground. He leaned his weight against the handle, cupping the end of it in his hand—feeling the hardness of it bite into his palm like the bony protrusion of Kathy's hip. He took off his glasses and surveyed the wreckage. Nuts and bolts lay strewn in a pile of plastic chaos, slick with oil and thick with the turpentine smell of gasoline. The dusk suddenly looked less friendly without the yellow film of the protective lenses over his eyes. His gaze flicked towards the house where—had Kathy been home, a light or two would be on, burning brightly, welcoming him in. But there was nothing there now. Nothing at all that spoke of the someday they'd lost. All that was left now were faded spots on walls, dust bunnies along the baseboards and empty hangers in closets—a series of blank spaces where things had once been, like the bare shelf in the shed that stood on their perfectly manicured backyard.

