

The Fallen Oak

by Nathaniel Tower

Jonas Griffin stared out the bay window as he drank his morning cup, his eyes gleaming with something between wistfulness and disdain at Reynold who sat patiently in the adjacent yard, leaning against the majestic oak tree that towered in its hundred years of perfect straightness over the whole neighborhood. There Reynold sat. Just sitting. He wasn't reading or drinking coffee or working on a crossword or talking on the phone. He was just sitting like some silently bragging arrogant fool.

"That son of a bitch," Jonas yelled into the steaming cup of muddy brown liquid.

"What is it now, sweetheart?" his wife mused with an air of annoyance.

"That bastard Reynold is doing it again," he growled without looking up at her.

"And what is he doing this time," she replied with a roll of her eyes as she emptied her unfinished drink into the stainless steel sink.

"You know what he's doing. He's sitting there like he's on his damn throne, worshipping that tree and looking at everyone else's yard in scorn because no one else's yard can be as perfect as Reynold's. And what the hell kind of name is Reynold anyway? Why does he have to think that he is better than everyone else?"

"Honey, I think he is just sitting there thinking," the wife said coolly after a quick glance out the window.

"Yeah, just thinking about how much better he is than everyone else." Jonas stood up violently and poured the rest of his coffee down the drain, pretending that he was dumping the steaming liquid on his neighbor's complacent face.

"You're overreacting again, dear," the wife said as she walked out of the kitchen. "He's a good neighbor."

"Good neighbor my ass," Jonas shouted as he slammed the ceramic mug onto the granite counter and chased her up the stairs.

"He's so arrogant. He makes the rest of the neighborhood feel like crap."

He could feel her roll her eyes even with her back to him.

"And have you seen the way he looks at you? What a creep. I'll not have an arrogant and covetous neighbor living next door to me."

The wife perked up, her cheeks slightly flushed at the prospect of being coveted by a man of such sturdy stature. In her eyes, Reynold was tall and firm as the oak tree he sat upon every morning. Although she would never act upon her fantasies, many a nights had she fallen asleep wondering what it would be like to lean on such a man. "So what are you going to do about it dear? Kick him out of his house? He's just a fine innocent man." She tried to speak indifferently to hide her longing.

"Sure, take his side. Always take his side. Just because his grass is a little greener. His bed's probably a little softer if you want to go check it out." Jonas muttered the last line under his breath, hoping his wife wouldn't actually hear him or get any ideas.

"Well, as soon as you go to work, maybe I will," she said with a wink as she removed her robe to reveal the perfectly tanned skin of her naked back.

Rather than turning him on, the sight of her back only made Jonas hate his neighbor more.

"I'm not going to work today."

"What? You can't just stay home from work." Her quick and nagging response suddenly filled him with jealousy.

"I knew it. I knew that bastard had his eye on you."

"Relax, darling. I'm going shopping all day." She turned and faced him, her bare breasts smiling at him as she unclasped the beige bra she had removed from the dresser.

He chuckled awkwardly. "I was just joking of course. But I really am staying home today. I want to work on some things around the house."

"Like what?"

"For starters, I'm going to install those shelves in the basement. You know, the ones you've been hounding me about for weeks?" A

phony smile swept across his lips as he spoke. Although he was staring at his wife's cascading mountainous breasts, breasts that would cause any man to leap with desire, all he could think about was how much he hated the man leaning on that stupid tree.

"That's so sweet," she said as she covered the peaks with the beige padless cups. With quick ease, she pulled a blue tank top over her head, walked over to Jonas and planted a firm kiss on his cheek. "Perhaps I will thank you for your work when I get home," she added with a flirtatious wink as she strutted away from her husband and out the bedroom door.

"Looking forward to it," he replied, his brown eyes filled with thoughts of revenge.

When Jonas was certain that the garage door had shut and his wife's car had exited the driveway, he immediately rushed back to the bay window and watched as Reynold rose from the comfortableness of the plush shaded seat under the tree and strutted confidently to his shiny black Audi. Jonas continued to stare as the neighbor entered the car, adjusted the rearview mirror, placed his sunglasses upon his ears, fastened his seatbelt, started the vehicle and selected his favorite radio station. With each action, Jonas' disgust grew, a desire to vomit rising up from his stomach. He hated Reynold in every fathomable way, so much that it made him sick on a daily basis and had stolen away all of his sex drive. Although Jonas had the most beautiful wife in a ten-block radius, he had been unable to make successful love to her for over a month, ever since the first time he had spotted Reynold cradled against that awful tree.

"I hate him with every fiber of my being," he clichéd out the bay window, falling to his knees as he spoke. Somehow, Reynold drained his body of everything. It was as if Reynold was some sort of soul-sucking Satan, called forth from the depths of hell to steal away the great life that had been bestowed upon Jonas. Jonas had always felt he had everything, that is until Reynold moved next door and begin

to slowly and mysteriously take it all away. Something had to be done.

As Jonas continued to stare out the window, a brilliant idea popped into his head. With what little strength he had left, he rose from the ground and dashed to the phone book, removing his cell phone from his jean pocket and flipping it open all in one fluid movement. Frantically, he flipped through the thin yellow pages, several of them tearing beneath the force of his clumsy fingers. When he reached his desired page, he pointed haphazardly to the service of his choice, carefully dialing the number the ad in the book touted in front of him.

"Ray's Tree Service," the predictably gruff voice on the other end announced. "Removing unwanted trees for seventy-five years. How may I help you?"

"Yes, yes," Jonas shouted into the receiver much too loudly. "I need a tree removed." Ray, if that was who was speaking to him, must have thought him to be insane. Deep down, Jonas knew he was, but he also knew that he would soon regain his sanity.

"Well, you've called the right place," Ray chortled in a lame attempt at humor. Jonas laughed uncomfortably to build credibility with the man.

"I have this big ass oak tree in my front yard. It's like a hundred years old, and I want it removed so I can install a swing set," Jonas rambled quickly, spit spewing out of his mouth as he spoke.

"A hundred years old?" Ray said with surprise. "Is it still alive?"

"It's got green leaves and a perfectly straight trunk, so I'd say it's as alive as I am."

Ray let out a low whistle, the kind that showed both that he was impressed and that Jonas was looking at a mighty big cost. "Well, we can certainly help you out. When do you want us to come by for an estimate?"

"No," Jonas shouted. "No estimate necessary. Just come out and remove it. Today if you can. In fact, I'll pay double if you can remove it today."

"About how tall would you say it is?" Jonas couldn't tell, but Ray was grinning ear-to-ear with dollar signs in his eyes. This was the type of job that could allow an old man like Ray to retire and pass the company along to his son, just as his own father had done almost thirty years prior.

"I've never measured," Jonas began as he stared up out the window into the light blue sky. His eyes began to water, but he continued to strain his neck as he tried to ascertain an approximate height. "Seventy feet maybe. Does that sound right?"

"Sounds perfect to me," Ray replied joyously. "That might take more than one day though."

"Send as many men as you can. I want it down today."

"What's the rush?"

"My son's birthday is this weekend and I want to get working on this swing set," Jonas replied thoughtlessly.

"Well, I'll see what I can do, but it's going to cost you," Ray warned.

"Money is no object to me," Jonas replied, trying to ignore the fact that they had overdrawn their checking account two of the last three months.

"Then I'll get those men over right away. In fact, I'm going to come myself so I can see this mighty oak in action."

"Sounds great."

"Address?"

"2648 Hereford Street. The name's Reynold. I'll meet you out front. I'll be sitting by the tree."

"Looking forward to it," Ray said, his smile obvious even through the phone.

"Me too," Jonas replied with an even bigger smile.

The sound of the chainsaw was much louder than Jonas had expected. As the men hacked away at the many tentacles of thick limbs, Jonas eyed his watch nervously. "Can't you go any faster?" he bleated at Ray.

"Not if we want to do it safely. What's the rush? We'll have it done today."

Jonas looked at his watch again. The minutes seemed to tick by much faster than they should. The hour that Reynold would return was approaching ever nearer, and even though the tree kept getting smaller, it just didn't seem possible that the men and their chainsaws could remove the beast in time. The other matter that worried Jonas was his wife and the basement shelves. He had no idea when she would return, but he knew she would be livid if she found him outside cutting down his neighbor's tree rather than installing the laundry shelves he had promised. Tonight was to be his big return to manhood, and he couldn't afford any bumps in the road.

"Hey Ray," he shouted over the buzzing.

"What's up?"

"I'm going to go over to my neighbor's house to help him install some shelves. I might not be done by the time you finish. How much do I owe you?" he asked as he removed the checkbook.

Ray glanced up at his four men dangling like lemurs from the almost barren tree. He looked back at the mess of branches in his truck. "Let's make it an even eight thousand," Ray said with a repressed grin.

Jonas hurriedly wrote the amount on the check and folded it before handing it to the man, hoping he wouldn't look at the name or address typed in the upper left-hand corner. "I gave you a little extra," Jonas said with a wink and a nudge before opening into a near sprint to his front door.

Ray pocketed the check without unfolding it, first watching the strange man run away, then turning an admiring glance up to the mighty tree. It had been a perfect specimen, and Ray felt a little sorry both for the oak and for the man he had just taken advantage of. In all honesty, Ray had seen much bigger oak trees, and the fact that it was so straight and alive made the job all the easier. It had only been a three thousand dollar job, but Ray knew a sucker when he saw one.

Jonas heard his wife enter through the garage door just as he was pounding the last shelf hurriedly into the wall. He expected her to

walk into the basement with her top off, baring those beautiful mountain peaks for his immediate satisfaction. When he heard the basement door open, he promptly removed his shirt and sat on the washing machine, his sweaty muscles rippling from the manual labor he had just incurred.

“Look baby,” he said proudly, dancing his pecs a little as she approached. Jonas was immediately disappointed when he saw his wife still clad in the blue tank top. He was even more disappointed when he saw the armful of bags of clothing they couldn't afford. But he could get over both of those things. There was always more money to be made, and it was even more fun sometimes to remove the shirt on his own.

But he could not overcome the disappointment of her first words to him. “Did you see what's going on outside? I can't believe that Reynold would get rid of that beautiful oak tree. I loved that tree. It was so nice how it offered that shade onto our yard, giving us just the right lighting for the flowerbed.”

“What? The tree's gone?” he feigned a hopeful surprise.

“Well, almost. All that's left is the trunk, but that will be gone soon I'm sure.”

Jonas tried to think of something wittily sexual to retort, but her attachment to the oak tree that had belonged to Reynold left him dry and limp. His muscles instantly sagged and he became embarrassed by his soft appearance. It didn't matter that the tree really had been beautiful or that it had belonged to someone besides Reynold for ninety-nine of its hundred years.

The dejected Jonas slid off the washer and slipped his shirt onto his shriveled biceps.

“Oh, I see you put the shelves in,” she commented indifferently as he began his ascent up the gray wooden stairs.

Once upstairs, Jonas immediately reached into the refrigerator for a cold beer. The beer felt good in his hand, but once he popped the tab and started to guzzle the thick liquid down, he was immediately dissatisfied with both the temperature and the taste. Beer still in hand but with no intention of drinking it further, Jonas walked to the

bay window just in time to see the truck drive away, nothing left in the yard except for a large island of dirt in the sea of lush green grass. "Dammit," he swore aloud into his beer. "I should've had them remove the roots too. That would have really gotten the bastard." He glanced at his watch as he heard his wife's heels click up the wooden steps. It was a little after four. If Reynold held to his daily schedule of braggartness, the man would surely arrive home within the hour. But who really knew what that awful man did all day, Jonas thought to himself.

For the next thirty minutes, Jonas sat in the bay window, no knowledge of the fact that his wife was upstairs trying on lingerie, staring out the clear panes into nothingness. Deep down, he felt a bit of regret that he and his wife could no longer enjoy the shade of the majestic tree, but he knew that this regret would soon dissipate when he witnessed the soul-sucking dejection that Reynold would certainly suffer at the disappearance of his prized possession.

The gentle sound of the Audi rolling through the neighborhood snapped Jonas out of his haze. He eyed the car with great anticipation as it seemed to slow a little prematurely, its driver staring dubiously out the window into his barren yard. Reynold jerked the wheel into the driveway and slammed on his brakes much sooner than usual, blocking the sidewalk with his parked luxury vehicle. His jaw dropped as he opened the car door, his briefcase spilling out its important contents as his wide eyes scanned the yard in disbelief.

Jonas rushed to the front door, opting to offer a comforting hand to his defeated neighbor. Now Jonas would show all that he was indeed the better man. Not only had he secretly bested the arrogant fool, but now he was lending a helping neighborly hand. Besides, Jonas was sure that the two could be friends now that the man no longer had his tree.

"What the..." was all Jonas heard the man say as he continued to stare, his jaw still hanging low.

"Your tree's gone," Jonas pointed out obviously.

Reynold, not seeming to hear Jonas' careless comment, headed straight for the dirt island where his beautiful tree had once towered. He sat on the ground, his black suit pants absorbing the fresh dirt, and appeared to be deep in thought that bordered between bliss and anguish.

"My tree's gone," Reynold mouthed, echoing the obvious.

Jonas took a seat next to the suited man. He glanced over and saw a strange smile emerge on Reynold's face, the smile one is accustomed to making at times of awkward despair.

"What are you going to do now that your tree is gone?" Jonas asked.

Reynold hesitated, glancing around at his lush green yard. "I guess now I can finally plant that Bradford Pear."

"What? You're going to plant another tree?"

"Yeah. My wife had been wanting me to get rid of that damn oak tree for awhile. She's allergic to oak pollen. We just couldn't afford it. I never thought she would have the gumption to remove it herself."

"You mean you're glad it's gone? But you were so proud of it. You sat with it every morning." Jonas felt duped. Somehow Reynold had tricked him into removing the expensive tree. Jonas wanted to bury the man's face in the dirt, to plant him as a tree.

"Proud? No, I sat there every morning trying to figure out what the hell to do with the monstrosity so that my wife could live in peace."

Jonas stood up and walked away without another word to his neighbor. "Arrogant son of a bitch," he muttered repeatedly to himself as he plodded, the hot sun beaming brightly on his sensitive pale neck. When he returned home, his wife was nude on their bed, but all Jonas could picture was his neighbor leaning proudly against the thin trunk of a Bradford Pear.

