

## HOW SHARPER THAN THE LION'S TOOTH...

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On Tuesday, there were twenty-three dandelions in Brian Corwin's yard. He had counted them when he arrived home from work at seven, crawling on his hands and knees. The dew had already fallen, so there went another suit, but now at least he knew.

Well, that was to say, *Tuesday* he knew.

By Friday evening, he was out another suit – and, worse yet, there were twenty-*seven* goddamned dandelions.

While sitting at his desk at work, every day – every day since the weather had become warm enough for things to start turning green, anyway – Brian had planned his attack on the little yellow bastards. Merely digging them up was a solution, of course. It had the appeal of kinetics – getting his hands dirty, physically ripping the little green invaders up out of the ground – but was inefficient (too much energy and time) and ineffective (often, the root would sprout another one within a few days).

He had tried the hand method the previous year, because Winnie wouldn't let him put chemicals on the grass; the dog and the children might get sick. She wouldn't come out and help, though, because she liked dandelions.

With Winnie 'officially dead,' now – not really dead, just dead as far as Brian was concerned – and no contact with the kids, Brian thought he could try a chemical against the little, evil bastards.

His lazy-ass neighbors apparently all called lawn companies; they put chemicals down, and there were no dandelions. Brian's yard was the only one on the street with such a profusion of them. He'd seen his neighbor across the street come out with a small bottle of something, stick the nozzle directly on a dandelion, and squirt. Within days, a brown hole appeared; within a week, the grass covered it up.

Caroline, his fourteen-year-old ex-stepdaughter, had been the one who'd whined the most about the chemicals; she was a McVegetarian, as Brian had called it. She called herself vegan, but all she ever ate was crap. Caroline always had hated him. Probably because he'd made fun of her calling herself a vegetarian then eating pizza, french fries and other things that true, political and health vegetarians didn't eat.

Brian thought he was right, though – her choice had been a faddish one. She'd only done it because her current boyfriend called himself one. The little zit-face also ate french fries and candy, but turned his nose up at meat.

Brian was starting to hate Caroline, too. Leave alone that he'd adopted somebody else's mistake by taking the kids on, against his better judgment – and had thought himself generous for agreeing to it – Caroline was the main reason Winnie was officially dead.

Winnie had told him at the time if he'd stopped trying to control Caroline and just let things run their course, she'd break up with the zit-faced kid whose name Brian couldn't remember and go back to eating meat within days. River? Rain? Some fucking hippie name, maybe not even the one (probably perfectly good) that his folks gave him.

The more fun Brian made of Caroline, and the zit, the more tenaciously she clung to the kid, though. So he'd punched the kid out one night when the kid had been ragging him about something Brian didn't even remember, and had gotten pretty pissed and kind of threatening.

That hadn't been the biggest problem. The biggest problem had been Caroline's accusing him of molesting her, immediately after the incident with the kid – who'd refused to report Brian to the cops, to Brian's surprise, probably because the kid had some cop problems of his own – even though he hadn't done it.

He'd scrupulously avoided her, in fact, even in the house – had made goddamned sure he never saw her undressed, never accidentally walked into the bathroom while she was in the shower or getting dressed. Hell, since she was in junior high, Brian hadn't even seen the kid without her eyeliner on.

But the bleeding heart courts always believed fourteen year old girls – and so had Winnie, apparently – so they were out in an apartment Brian was legally required to subsidize; a total waste of money because not only did none of them live with him, he wasn't even allowed to be seen on the same block they lived on because of the restraining orders.

Winnie let the kids both run riot. Brian wouldn't have raised them the way she had, after her first husband had bailed out on them. He'd have demanded more respect, insisted on more discipline. Mark, the boy, who was twelve, had a bleached white crew cut and an eyebrow ring. What kind of mother let her kids do that shit? One who knew nothing about discipline, which Brian had told Winnie at least once a day.

Mark had constantly been in trouble for little stuff – shoplifting beer from the convenience store between school and the bus stop for home, smoking on school grounds. None of it had been anything the kid could go to juvie for. The kid was smart enough – he never committed the same petty larceny twice, and the individual incidents hadn't been all that serious, only the sheer volume.

The last one, Mark had been hauled in for sending threatening e-mails to other people on AOL who had disagreed with him in a chat room. What the hell was going on in a kid's head who did shit like that?

Well, Brian admitted to himself he had been a bit of a reprobate too, as an adolescent; but military school had cured him of that. He'd offered to send Mark to the same school he'd attended, but Winnie thought it sounded cruel.

Brian made a quarter of a million dollars a year because, between his father and the military institute, he'd learned discipline, control and how to moderate the urges to rebellion he'd felt. He'd turned those urges toward commerce, learning to watch stocks and predict those that would do well; spent long hours researching companies and economic trends that would result in the best return for himself and his clients. Nothing much got past Brian. At forty, he was considered one of the best stock analysts in the business.

That was why the goddamned dandelions in his yard were so hard to live with. Just pulling into the driveway every night, Brian's stomach would clench; at least two nights a week, now, he got down on his knees and counted the cancerous bastards. So far, though, he hadn't done anything about it. It was important to gather information, find the most efficient and effective way of dealing with the problem, and then just deal with it.

The idea of having some stranger come and take care of the problem for him also made him feel a little sick. This was something he should have been able to do for himself.

The previous summer, he'd spent the better part of six or seven hours every week out in the yard with a tool designed for yanking the bastards up by the roots, jerking the little cancers up out of the ground.

Thing was, this year he was having trouble with the tool. Right after Winnie had packed up the plantation and gotten a lawyer, his doctor – assuming Brian was just like everybody else, and couldn't handle his own problems with willpower and determination – had suggested he see a shrink. Brian had refused – not only did he not have time for that, he wasn't crazy; he just wasn't sleeping well because his wife had turned his life into a living hell, what was so unusual about that? Why was that crazy?

The doctor, who had pulled some whiny old-lady act on him, had prescribed antidepressants of some kind or other. Worst thing was, Brian knew the HMO would expect him to take his doctor's advice, so he'd filled the prescription and shoved it into the now-nearly-empty medicine cabinet in his bathroom.

He hadn't taken the pills for a few weeks, but then his performance had started to fall off at work; because of the sleep deprivation, his attention span hadn't been able to keep up with all the things he needed to know to make predictions about the market, he'd made a couple of bad calls, and lost money for both clients and himself, so – as much as he hated it – he'd started taking the damned pills.

The pills had helped clear his head; he'd started sleeping three or four hours a night again, and the old organization of his thoughts had come back, but with it had come a nasty tremor in his wrists that seemed to make garden tools like the dandelion puller impossible to use. He'd place it on top of the weed and try to push it down, but somehow the strength would just go out of his arms and he'd stand there, trembling, pathetic.

He'd found several new herbicides by searching the Internet and talking to a couple of the chemical companies on his 'hot list,' one of which was experimenting with a chemical cocktail that killed many weeds almost immediately, but which was too volatile to be safe for use other than in places where nobody cared if the fumes killed a few rabbits or squirrels, and where it wouldn't endanger the neighbors.

One of the chemists had agreed to send Brian a trial application, with the understanding that he would be very cautious with its use. Brian had told the chemist he knew what he was doing, and agreed to sign a release that said he wouldn't hold them responsible if anything went wrong. He had lied and told the chemist he lived at least half a mile from his neighbors.

Brian had always hated squirrels and rabbits, too, but a hemorrhagic rodenticide his dad had always used took care of most such vermin. It had been banned years before, because irresponsible assholes let their cats and dogs run loose and the stuff smelled like food, so quite often more pets were killed than rabbits and squirrels.

Brian's father had heard about the impending ban and had bought a supply before it left the market. Brian had done him one better; Brian had found out how to make the stuff himself, and had set up a lab in the basement. That was where the market research had paid off on the personal level – Brian had many contacts with chemical companies, so he could keep an eye on the latest experiments in killing inconvenient things cheaply and quickly, and knew how to get chemicals to use for such things that were generally illegal to possess without the proper permits.

Neighbors had suffered a few pet deaths, early on after Brian had bought the house, but now nobody let their animals run loose on his street and only mice, rabbits and chipmunks showed up on his porch bleeding from the mouths and noses now.

Winnie's kids' first dog, a yappy, annoying little terrier of some kind, had got hold of some of the stuff right after they'd moved in with Brian. She never seemed to forgive Brian for it, but he'd told her when she first moved in that she should crate the dog at night, when nobody could look after it; if she had, the dog wouldn't have died. It was inconvenient and downright stupid to let animals run all over your house, and dirty besides.

Given a choice, Brian wouldn't have had any pets; didn't have any now that Winnie and the brats had moved out and taken the menagerie of fish, lizards and gerbils, and the second dog, with them.

Caroline, the little bint, had even wanted to keep a cat in his house. Brian had drawn the line right there – of all the animals he hated, he most hated cats. Caroline could throw all the fits she wanted – there were not going to be any cats in Brian's house. They felt like it was their right to walk everywhere, even on places where people put food. They were chaotic and anarchic, and if you didn't let them roam the neighborhood – which Brian thought should be grounds for a fine – you had to keep a box in the house for them to shit and piss in. The very idea disgusted him.

Saturday's UPS delivery brought him the box from the chemist he'd waited for. He opened it up and read all the hazmat warning sheets, but the information didn't really stick with him too much. He knew to wear coveralls and a mask, that was the most he'd ever really had to do to use anything any of his contacts had ever sent him. He wore them to mix up the rodenticide, so it didn't seem all that strange.

He got all tricked out and carried the aluminum sprayer that had come with the clear fluid out into the yard. It was a still, sunny day – not too breezy, so even if the stuff was poisonous, he wouldn't have any liability to his neighbors in case it blew into their yards.

The sun was barely up when Brian got out in the yard in his mask and gloves, got down on his knees and started spraying. Brian didn't want his neighbors – most of whom weren't really out and moving at five-thirty on a Saturday; he presumed most of them got drunk on Friday and slept in until noon – to become suspicious of him. The last thing you wanted to do was draw the attention of your neighbors or be thought weird. By avoiding them entirely, Brian had few worries about that.

The nozzle on the sprayer didn't concentrate the chemicals as much as Brian would have liked. He knew spraying them too widely would probably kill all the grass. Holding the nozzle with one hand while he sprayed with the other seemed to work better, so he tried that. After a while, though, the stuff ate through the fingers of the left glove; he shoved it in his pocket, grabbed the faulty nozzle with his bare fingers and told himself he'd wash his hands immediately. It couldn't be that bad, he reasoned.

It smelled so foreign, when Brian caught a whiff of the stuff it made the hairs stand up on the back of his neck. Like something from another planet, almost. He had crawled all the way from the street back to the house. When he stood up to walk around the hedge to the back, his knees gave out and he fell flat on his face in the wet grass. Should have eaten something, he told himself, and he crawled on around the hedge and kept going.

His left thumb and forefinger, with which he was holding the sprayer's nozzle, were starting to go numb. Persistence, he reminded himself. He was almost finished.

Halfway down the lawn he had to stop and rest – he felt a little weak. Brian took off the mask and caught a lung full of the odor. It smelled like a chemical plant. He hoped the dew would keep it from drifting; felt a bit light-headed, but stronger, after a few minutes. The mask went back on – only ten of the little bastards left, now.

Once he finished, the bottle was empty but for a teaspoon of the clear compound. Brian had to hold the bottle under his arm to twist the nozzle shut – his left hand and forearm were now numb and tingly. He supposed he hadn't slept much the night before – suddenly, he felt weak and tired. He forced himself to stand up and walk back to the house; carefully bagged the sprayer bottle, down in the basement, and put it in the cabinet where he kept the rest of the cocktail he used on the squirrels. It was about all he could do to drag himself to the shower and wash all the stuff off himself. He pitched the clothes he'd worn into the shower, too, and ran hot water over them until he no longer smelled the herbicide, then shut off the shower and dragged himself to the downstairs sofa that faced the patio doors.

When he awakened several hours later, the numbness had left his arm – but the skin on his fingers was blistered and he had a raging headache. He felt more energetic after the nap, though – in fact, he could barely sit still. Brian went upstairs for some antibiotic ointment, smeared it all over his hand and arm, and went up to his office to do some work. Now, he'd taken things into his own hands; he'd taken care of the dandelions once and for all.

It was three in the morning before he dragged himself away from the computer. The odor of the chemicals still wafted, faintly, in from the yard; but he knew that would settle down eventually, and he'd finally have a clean, green yard again.

At sunrise on Sunday Brian awakened. His headache was gone, but when he lifted his left hand to his face, the blistering was moving up his arm, the nail had fallen off his left thumb and he could no longer move his left index finger. It had troubled him somewhat, the previous night on the computer, but he'd thought it would feel better in the morning. Things usually did.

When he smeared the antibiotic cream on his hands, the thumbnail fell off his left thumb, too, and the pain was excruciating. Maybe he should see the doctor. Only problem was, he'd have to admit to the doctor what he'd done, and Brian was pretty sure it was illegal. All right, but he couldn't go to work with his hand looking like this, could he? What would people say? It looked like he'd thrust it into a pot of molten lead.

Halfway through his second cup of coffee, Brian projectile vomited it all over the side of the refrigerator and started to feel just the slightest trickle of dread. What if he'd poisoned himself with the chemicals? What the hell was he going to do now?

He'd have to go to the emergency room. He'd have to take the bottle and go to the emergency room, because he was probably going to lose his left thumb and forefinger already, and maybe he'd poisoned himself. Those bastards at the chemical company – why hadn't they told him not to use latex gloves? Where were the warnings?

They were staring him in the face from the table, of course; 'vinyl gloves only,' the back of the hazmat sheet leered up at him from the table. 'Chemicals interact with natural rubber and latex.'

Crap.

He gathered the hazmat sheets, headed downstairs for the bagged-up bottle and started back upstairs. Cold fingers of the very same intuition that always told him which stocks were going to run and which to founder tugged at his shoulder; turned him around; set him before the patio doors.

The dandelions were brown and shriveled.

So was the grass in a twelve-inch radius around each dandelion. And it didn't look too good on the perimeters, either. Without even reading the hazmat sheets, Brian knew the stuff had hang-time. It was supposed to keep the weeds out of any sprayed area for the entire year.

He started away from the window, but motion at the end of the yard drew his eye back.

In the shrubbery that marked the division between Brian's lot and the one directly behind it, he could see two pale smudges and motion. He slid the patio door open slowly; it was still darker inside than out, he didn't think anybody who was back there would hear it move.

Though at the distance, he couldn't hear what was being said, he could hear the voices. The zit-faced kid and Caroline. A pale hand extended out of the shrubbery. Caroline's. She was holding something; waving it around in the air. The faint breeze carried small, white blobs of fluff up, depositing them here and there all the way up the yard. Two or three of them made it as far as the patio, to halt against the screen.

Dandelion fluff.