

## The Hedge

By Nick Fieldhouse

Dan unwound his long extension lead and plugged the hedge trimmer into the reel. It was time yet again to cut the hedge. God knew it seemed to grow so fast. It was the end of May and hot, sunny weather. He was sure he had cut it at least twice already this year. It took about two and a half hours to cut and sweep up the privet which wound around his Victorian semi. It showed him up if he left it, and the neighbours would cluck. Since his wife had died in the accident it had been a battle to keep up appearances. It was not just that he was a man down when it came to doing the chores, it was the lack of any drive to do them. Somehow he just didn't care anymore, but now he had taken early retirement there were no excuses.

Dan dragged the folding steps to the next section, just as Sandy crossed the road to talk to him. Sandy was twenty years older than Dan and followed his life from his study window across the street.

"I have to get a man to do that now, don'tcha know! I'm not as young as I used to be," he started.

Dan forced a smile and put down the trimmer.

"Well, I'm not sure I'll do it myself much longer," Dan replied, in sympathy.

"Oh no! You're still a young man." Sandy said. "You've got many years left in you."

The banter turned to gardening and broadband speeds, and to random local issues before Dan felt he had been neighbourly enough, and picked up the machine again. He smiled and climbed up the steps as a form of polite dismissal.

"Have you heard about the Himalayan Balsam?" Dan turned again and found Chrissie from next door peering up at him. He was a sitting duck out here on the road. No, he hadn't heard.

"Apparently they shoot 600 seeds from each pod and they're taking over the county," she said. More botanical bulletins followed as Dan learned about invaders and casualties in the garden department. He had just wanted to get the job done and have a beer out back on the decking. Instead he was becoming a free shrink for lonely neighbours, it seemed. After ten minutes Chrissie declared she was far too busy to talk anymore and went back indoors.

It was hot and nearly noon when Dan cut through the cable. For some reason the system didn't trip and standing on the metal steps didn't help either. He didn't feel the shock or the fall. Typically his neighbours did not choose that moment to peep round the curtains, and the parked cars hid him from the traffic. With the wife gone there was no-one coming out with that life-saving cup of tea.

The seconds ticked by, his heart had stopped with his head thrown back on the pavement, blood trickling down behind his left ear. A fly buzzed. The world had stopped. His world had stopped. Fragments of privet leaf covered his shirt. An Easyjet flight passed overhead bound for Rhodes. His retirement watch ticked loudly on in the peaceful afternoon. The oxygen level in Dan's brain ebbed away. He was all of fifty-five years of age.

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Dan thought he was dreaming. He was floating on air. A beautiful angel looked into his eyes and smiled. She had short blond hair and blue eyes with a pale freckled complexion. Her lips were a luscious wet pink colour with pearl like teeth between. Her breath was soft and warm and smelled of mint. Her cheeks were flushed as if rouged.

“I think you’ll live, soldier,” she said happily. She seemed out of breath for some reason. He realised that she had her arms around his head and that her face stayed close to his. She kissed him on the nose. He was happy with that, and only wanted to gaze into her eyes. Annoyingly there was a siren getting louder and louder then the noise of a van stopping, with doors slamming. Two young men in uniform put him on a stretcher and shoved a mask on his face. It was alright though, she was still beside him, holding his hand. She climbed into the ambulance and sat beside him on the way to the hospital.

Dan felt very tired. He drifted in and out of consciousness, but she was always there. She sat beside his bed and mopped his brow. She fed him water and kissed his ear. Should he know her? He couldn’t think of a name. Thinking of anything seemed too much. He could only see those eyes.

The next day a duty doctor declared him fit and discharged him. After all he would block the bed and he clearly had someone to look after him at home. Did he? Yes, she was still there next to him. She smiled and led him to a waiting taxi. Not a word, she held his hand and looked into his eyes. If he was a lamb to the slaughter, bring it on.

Jen was an A&E nurse and an expert at resuscitation. She happened along his street at just the right time it seemed, and then, she never left.