

This's A Good Time

2700 words

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Decker's got a fucker next door still complaining about the trees.

The whole neighborhood it seems like's been doing home improvement work for a decade. Nearly all of it ridiculous in Decker's book.

He and his wife--maybe along with the one old couple up the street where the guy needs that battery cart to get the mail--they're the last holdouts with common sense.

Or were. Decker's wife left him a few weeks ago, went to Olympia, Washington. She moved in with a girlfriend from high school.

Who backed her own self into a corner, she and *her* husband convinced that New York politics were ruining their lives, and chucking it all and moving to Vegas. Took a couple months to get acclimated, then the husband connected with a 3rd-shift pai gow dealer.

Before Decker's wife dumped him, they would watch the TV couples looking at the three houses and buying

the one, and if the location was interesting they'd go on *Realtor.com* and look around.

Every year they've been dealing worse with the wildfires, the drought, the assorted peripheral bullshit--but they never found anywhere that convinced them to move. You trade one problem for another.

The mope next door, the previous owner had just face-lifted the place to sell it to him, and he decides to rip most of it out and do it his way. Plus halfway through, after 6 months of trucks and dumpsters and high-pitched power tools and work crews, he decides, actually why not put on an extension?

At least that's what Decker assumes, so one day he asks the guy over the fence is that really necessary--they have one kid, already in high school, and a couple dogs.

Guy says no you have it confused, we're putting an inlaw suite over the garage. Decker says oh, and the guy says but just to give you a heads up, we're contemplating a *3rd* story, over the back half of the house.

He adds that the permit fees have gotten out of hand, not to mention the engineer reports, so they're not positive just yet.

Decker tells him that's for sure, he thought about putting a pickleball court in the backyard once, and

those fees'll stop you in your tracks . . . unless maybe you try to pay off an inspector.

Guy says unh-huh, but whenever he's up on the roof he gets that unobstructed view of Mount St Helena, and he visualizes that morphing into his third floor . . . and what's life all about, you gotta go for it.

Decker's starting to feel a little sick and gives him a *whatever* . . . and before he can get out of there the guy says by the way, now that we're on the subject, what are you gonna do about the trees?

Decker says excuse me?

He says your redwoods, they're a threat. They're too close to the house.

Decker says gee, we've lived here a quarter century, they haven't changed much, and nothing's ever happened.

Well they need to come down, the guy says, they're a hazard.

Decker says ah, and he tells the motherfucker to have a good day, and sticks on his headphones and fires up the mower.

He ignores the guy for a couple weeks, and the guy's getting in his pickup late on a Sunday (he makes sure to stay in your face with the construction every day,

doesn't miss any) and Decker's wife waves politely and he waves back and starts the thing, and then turns off the engine and comes over to the fence.

This's a good time, he says, since you're both here. I got some estimates for you on the trees. As I've made it clear, he says, they need to be addressed, the situation can't continue as is.

Decker tells him is that right . . . Standing rigid and giving him the death stare, which he's practiced over the years in the mirror and admittedly has worked a few times. Which his wife hates him doing and he's mostly put in the closet--but he can't help it.

The guy kinda squints like it went right past him and continues. Yep, he says, the architect was out here, he says your roots are encroaching on my foundation.

Decker tells him I got some water boiling and it's been real, and his wife politely tells the guy to email us those estimates.

Which of course the mope does right away, that very night, and there's 3 of them, each starting you off with long-winded descriptions of the complexity of the work involved, when all you care about is finding the price.

The lowest being 15 grand. And that's with them dropping the logs on the ground in Decker's side yard

and leaving them. Does include however them taking care of the brush. Very sporting of them. An extra 14 hundred should you want the actual job completed and the wood hauled off.

Decker's wife says that's obscene and how dare he expect us to pay for something like that. Decker tells her you know what, whyn't you relay that sentiment directly to the asshole, instead of being such a friendly neighbor while you're chirping at me from the cheap seats. Hunh?

She doesn't like that and goes down to her sister's for the night and he feels like an ass but meanwhile he's got the blood pressure shooting up and he wants to do damage to this guy.

He gets a certified arborist out there. Tells the guy to give him an evaluation of everything that's near the property line that he unfortunately shares with this piece of garbage.

He has a stand of Douglas firs halfway back which he hasn't given a thought to ever, but now he's worried about those too. Fortunately the arborist not only gives them a clean bill of health, but informs him they aren't firs, they are Western Red cedars. Even better he says, because Western Red cedars' roots wrap around each other.

Then he gets to the redwoods. Decker goes inside, he doesn't want to watch this and freak out. The arborist takes his time, comes back and says they're good, but if you want to be entirely at ease, there are three that he recommends cabling together. That'll reduce the potential sway, he explains, and that in the unlikely event something ever happens, the cabling will keep anything from falling.

So Decker finds a guy, he gets up there with a partner, a half day job, drives in some serious eye-hooks and turnbuckles or some shit, charges him a couple grand and says he's good.

Decker doesn't bring it up to the neighbor, what for. A month goes by and he's hoping the guy's moved on but nah, that never happens, and the guy confronts him when he's putting out the recycling.

Gives it the: I ain't playing now Bud, what's with the trees?

Decker's first thought, he weighs can I take this guy. Decker's bigger but older, and the heavy duty work the guy's been doing, it would be a crapshoot at best.

Still though . . . boot-toe him in the nuts? If you succeed and you double him over and fuck him up a bit, less chance you get charges pressed against you, one

would assume, than if you bloodied him up, or even if he bloodied *you* up while you were trying.

Insane of course, the whole idea, Holy Mackerel. But there comes a point where you see red. You don't know up from down.

He explains to the guy I took care of it, the arborist and the cabling business, which you might have noticed.

Guy absorbs this and says no he didn't and seems kind of pleased. He's looking at the trees now trying to find the cables, which are two-thirds of the way up. He says well that's interesting and I'll run it by my uncle. His uncle's there sometimes, helping him with the construction.

Guy emails Decker the next day, says he appreciates it but that's not going to fly, and which of the estimates does he want to go with.

Decker tells his wife, brings her up to speed. She says only an idiot would waste money *not* taking the trees down.

He says hunh?

She says you don't make sure? You put a band-aid on something and spend our good money to do it?

He says I *made* sure, that's what a professional is for. That the guy was even quoting him out of the Arborists' Handbook when he made his determination.

His wife says there's *real life* making sure . . . you bozo. And she takes off again, he's assuming to her sister's, but this time she's gone three days.

When she comes back she informs him, no trace of guilt, that she was with Kyle up in Mendocino.

Kyle's one of those floaters who they've known for years who makes the rounds. Previously had a fling with Decker's wife's married girlfriend in Sacramento. Decker actually likes the guy, went to a hockey game with him once.

Decker goes about his business as though nothing happened, since he knows that ticks her off. She waits a few hours, says this proves you don't love me. Do you.

He says you have a screw loose and fine with me you want to shack up with someone. She breaks down and he can't help it, he brings her in close and tells her it's okay, nothing we can't work through. Even though it's the beginning of the end.

He gets hold of an old buddy. That guy had his own setbacks early on, pulled himself up being street smart. They get a burger. The buddy says, well one option'd be

start a fire when no one's around. Nothing like a fire to ruin your friend's taste for the rehab business.

Decker says ooh. Maybe burns part of my own house down too though? As a byproduct?

The buddy says sure, that could happen . . . but what's so bad about that, if you have good insurance?

Decker says well that's interesting, he hadn't thought of that angle. That he'd been working it more like: can I cut off part of him with a radial arm saw.

You can't, the buddy says, but you can involve someone working for him. Make it happen that way. Maybe not exactly as you envision, but ballpark.

Fair enough, Decker says. Any other suggestions?

The buddy says yeah, sure, you sell the joint, that'll vacuum the shit off the table period. Next guy inherits it.

I have to admit, Decker says, that option's been a no-go but I've been reconsidering. Problem there, he says, my wife has to embrace it, seeing as how we're both on the deed.

Yeah that can fuck you for sure, the buddy says, shaking his head. No easy fix there even from this guy.

Decker asks his wife that night, what about it, do we bite the bullet and get outa here . . . and she informs him

she's thinking of going up north for a while. With Kyle? he says, and no, she says, further up, Washington State.

She adds that selling the house is a bad idea, it's their only asset and it's been making money every year.

On paper, he says. Not the real McCoy money.

She says you want to get out fine, we'll find a tenant.

Couple days later Decker notices the prick's wife out by the mailbox. She's always been polite. He brings up the weather, and how's high school going for the kid. She's happy to chat, gives you her full attention, asks a few questions back.

He mentions the trees. He tells her something else the arborist told him. The arborist said he hears from people's neighbors all the time. He's out doing something for the one guy, and the neighbor sees him and comes over and starts whining about the first guy's trees.

The arborist has developed a stock answer, Decker tells her. That if you don't like trees, why did you move in next to a bunch?

The gal appears to be considering it. Decker's thinking dang, something reasonable may pop out of her mouth.

We're serving you with a 10-day notice, she says, and brings the mail in.

The guy emails again. Says he understands you spoke with Lucy. Says to make it simpler for you, hit you a little less in the pocketbook, had a cousin of a friend of mine take a look. He can do it for 12, and that includes hauling everything. Think it over, he says, up to you of course . . . but you know the time frame.

Decker's trying to think, did he stuff a bunch of jewelry one time into a safe deposit box? They gave him one free, when the finances were better, for opening a money market account. Hasn't looked in there in years.

And yeah, there are a few odds and ends, something with a diamond being the most promising. He takes it all to a jewelry guy on Main Street, the jeweler looks it over, puts that thing on his eye, says he'll give him 8 hundred for the works. Decker says what about the diamond, and the jeweler says it's low grade, but by all means get another opinion.

So he's got 8, the thing's going to set him back 11-2 now. He schedules it, even though it kills him.

Decker's wife happens to call from Olympia while the job's going on, like she's got a 6th sense. The chainsaws are making a racket, he has to plug an ear.

How are you Hank, she says. Listen, she says before he can answer, I've been thinking, maybe we do sell the place.

Hmm, he says.

I think you'd like it up here, she says. Young people, energetic vibe, good for us.

Us? he says, that's funny, didn't take long to go to the fallback option.

She says she knew how this conversation would work, why did she bother, why didn't she trust her instincts.

Kyle came by, he says.

He did? she says.

Unh-huh, we played some horseshoes, he says.

I'll talk to you, she says and hangs up.

Kyle did come by, he wasn't pulling her leg, and they did play horseshoes and have a couple drinks and watch some football. Decker asked him did he really do his wife?

Kyle said yes, it happened, sorry about that.

Decker said well under the circumstances don't beat yourself up about it.

Decker told him about the tree stuff. Kyle said it happened to *him*, something similar, when he lived in the Central Valley.

Decker said what did you do?

Took care of it, he said, to keep the peace. Even though he wanted to jam the guy in the trunk and drive him around and teach him a lesson.

A week later the neighbor says hi over the fence. Looks great, he says. Hey, I'm sorry to bring this up, he says, must be with the front looking so open now, my wife, she's concerned about the *back* trees.

Yeah, figured she would be, Decker says.

Pardon? he says.

Western Red cedars, Decker says. Roots wrap around roots. Solid stock. Sturdy.

If you say so, he says, but Lucy sees it different I'm afraid.

Decker tells the guy hold on a second, and he goes in the garage and gets the ax.

The other method, Decker says, throw you in my trunk. Little tight in the Nissan but you'll fit.

Now you've lost me, my friend, the guy says.

That, or angle this in your neck, Decker says.

The guy makes sort of a weird sound, like a horse snorting, and walks away.

Decker's bluffing him of course . . . though the thing does feel decent, good balance to it, he's pretty sure he can do it.