

The beat up, red, rusted '86 Ford truck pulls up to the curb. When the doors open two scruffy looking individuals emerge. One appears about sixty with stark white hair and a weathered look. His lean body is muscular and tanned to a leather crispness. His younger assistant is less muscular and but every bit as world-weary.

Rambo, the family terrier, nominally protects the yard though his best protection days are behind him. Glaucoma, obesity and arthritic legs have reduced him to a figurehead sentry. He grudgingly allows the two men to approach the house and ring the doorbell.

Bob Gathers opens the door, looks at the two men momentarily puzzled, then smiles.

"I almost forgot about you guys. You must be the landscapers. I'm Bob"

The older man said, "I'm Gabe and this is Ralph. We're here to do your lawn."

Stepping outside Bob gestures towards the front yard.

"You can see my problem. I haven't spent much time taking care of the yard lately. I've been a little preoccupied with other things. A lot of the shrubs and plants are dying and the lawn is the pits. What do you think you can do and how much will it cost me?"

"I'll tell you what, give Ralph and me about a half hour to look things over and I'll give you an estimate. I think you'll like it."

Ralph fetches a note pad, and then helps Gabe survey the property. Twenty minutes later they are done.

"I think this is going to work out fine. What do you think Ralph?"

Ralph smiles. "You haven't been wrong yet and I don't imagine you'll start today. Besides what choice do we have?"

Gabe writes a few quick notes on the pad. He spots Bob walking towards them and waves him over.

"I've got your estimate right here. We'll make three applications. The first week we prune and trim your plants and apply our special fertilizer. This is not a commercial product but a special organic mix that I developed myself. It is the result of years of research and trial and error. I think you'll be pleased with the results. The second week we will do some more work on the lawn, apply our

second treatment, do some aeration and power raking to get everything stirred up and active. We'll also replant any patches of grass that don't respond to our treatment. The third week we'll apply some final additives and make sure everything is going as expected. I think I can safely guarantee you'll have the best looking yard on the street when we're done."

"That sounds perfect. It's exactly what I'm looking for. Now go ahead and give me the bad news. What's all this going to cost me?"

"Well, it'll be about twenty-five hours of labor for the two of us, plus gas, materials and our other overhead. Let's call it six hundred dollars. How's that sound?"

Bob suppresses a grin. He budgeted a thousand dollars for the project.

"That sounds fine to me. When can you start?"

"We can begin the first treatment right now, if that's okay with you? I'll write up the invoice and give it to you later today."

Returning to the house Bob joins his three sons at the breakfast table.

"I'm going to see your mom. Bobby, remember to drive Rick and Kevin to their baseball game at ten. They are getting a ride home with the Williamses. I want you back here by about noon so you can take care of them."

Kevin says, "Dad, we're twelve. We don't need Bobby to babysit us."

"Don't give me a hard time all right. I've got a lot on my mind. Just do what I say please."

Bobby suppresses a typical teenaged wise-ass remark. "Sure Dad. I'll be here. Don't worry about anything. If you give me some money I'll take them to the movies."

Bob reaches into his wallet and hands forty dollars to Bobby. "Thanks. You've been a big help lately."

Betty Gathers struggles with labored breathing to coax another day of life from her battered body. For the last year her home has been a long care treatment unit of Grace Memorial Hospital. She had been driving her three sons home from a trip to the mall when her car skidded on a patch of black ice, flipped over and tumbled down a steep embankment. Luckily her sons escaped with minor scratches. She was not as fortunate. Her internal injuries were so severe that she had not been expected to live through the night, but being a fighter she still clung stubbornly to life.

Bob enters the room and kisses his wife on the cheek.

"Honey, it's me. How are you feeling today?"

Her glazed eyes drift over to him without a hint of recognition.

"Don't try and talk. You're looking a little better today. Bobby is taking Kevin and Rick to their game and then to the movies. We've raised some pretty good kids. We have a lot to be thankful for... I mean we... Oh God, I'm sorry.. I don't even know what I'm rambling on about. I just can't stand to see you like this."

Betty gives no indication she has heard or understood a word he has said.

"The landscapers came over today to start on the lawn. You remember how you always nagged me to get our lawn in shape. Well I thought it would be a nice welcome home present for you to get the yard in shape. I wish there was something more I could do. I feel so powerless, sitting here looking at you lying in pain in that bed. I don't think I can make it alone, I'm not strong enough. I need you. I love you. Please come back to me, you've got to come back to me."

When Bob arrives home he is shocked to see the transformation in his front yard. Not only are all the trees and shrubs looking trim and healthy, but also the lawn seemed greener and fuller, as if the results of the first treatment had already started to take effect. The bare patch between the shed (where the bikes were kept) and the street actually had new sprouts of grass pushing up through the caked dirt.

By the end of the week Bob's lawn rivals the best lawns on the street. The bare spot has entirely disappeared, the pruned trees and shrubs are lusher than before and the grass is downright carpet-like. When the pickup truck drives up to the front yard, Bob sees Gabe and flashes him a big smile.

"I don't know how you did it. This is absolutely unbelievable. What did you do? How is this possible? Everything is so green. Hell I haven't even been watering."

Ralph smiles and pats him on the shoulder.

"I knew you'd be happy with our results. After you've been in the business as long as I have you learn to recognize a likely customer, someone that we can help..... and who can help us."

Gabe steps forward and smiles. "Ralph means that you'll give us referrals. You see we don't advertise much. We found that word of mouth works best and we manage to keep pretty busy this way. Gabe has a real way with living things. He has concocted his own secret formulas that work on all types of things."

Bob frowns slightly. "What do you mean?"

"He's a very special man. I've seen him bring pets back from the brink of death and even mend broken bones. I know you won't believe me, that you'll think I'm crazy but I truly believe he does the Lord's work. He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."

Gabe smiles wryly, "You'll have to excuse Ralph. He gets carried away sometimes and says things that he shouldn't. I'm just a simple gardener, taking care of my garden, if you will. I do a bit here and I do a bit there certainly nothing to quote scripture about."

"Well, I'm not sure what you're talking about" says Bob walking to his car, "but you sure as hell have done wonders with my yard. I can't wait to see what happens after today's treatments."

When Bob and the boys arrive at the hospital they find that Betty is much worse. The past week has been very hard on her. She is on a respirator, her color pale, her hands cold to the touch. The Doctors inform Bob that her condition has deteriorated and that it is only a matter of days before she dies.

Bob says, "There's got to be something I can do. I won't just sit by and watch you die."

Kevin, Rick and Bobby huddle close to their mom. All three of them fight through tears as they each make their peace in their own way. Bob watches silently, his heart breaking.

"I won't let this happen. I won't."

Bob and the boys return home just as Gabe and Ralph are loading up the truck to leave. The yard almost screams with vitality and vigor.

From across the yard Rambo sprints towards them, clearing the last 5 feet in one enormous leap that lands him in Bob's arms.

"Rambo. What's gotten into you boy? I haven't seen you move like that in three or four years."

"I'm afraid he got into some of our treatment granules. Doesn't seem to have hurt him though. In fact he looks downright frisky."

Bob looks at the dog closely while his mind begins grappling with an insane idea. "My God, this is unbelievable, he looks five years younger. You say he ate some of your fertilizer."

Gabe smiles, "Oh its more than a fertilizer. It's a revitalizer."

"I told you there was something special Gabe. I've seen this before," says Bob "Its God's will I tell you."

"Now Ralph, Bob doesn't want to hear about that. He's got enough on his mind with his wife and all."

Bob looks surprised. "How did you know about Betty?"

"Why you mentioned it the last time we were here. It's a real shame it is."

"I don't remember mentioning it."

"You must have, otherwise how would I know?"

Bob turns to his children. "Bobby, take your brothers inside and start dinner please. I need to talk to these gentlemen."

Gabe gives a subtle nod to Ralph who drifts away, busying himself with packing the truck.

Gabe says, "You wanted to talk to me?"

"I know this is crazy, but would your treatments work on my wife. I can't even believe I am asking this but I'm desperate. I'd give anything to make her live....anything."

"Well, I don't know. I'm just a gardener. I don't claim to be a faith-healer or a doctor."

"Please" says Bob, clutching Ralph's shoulder and looking him square in the eye, "You've got to help me. Please."

Gabe pauses as if weighing his options. "All right I'll help you but you need to understand a few things. First, I can't promise anything. There's a good chance I'll be able to help, but there's also a chance that the treatments won't work. Sometimes things are just too far-gone. Second there's always a price to pay. You may think it's worth it today but come to regret it later. Do you understand?"

"I understand. And don't worry I'll pay you whatever you want, just make her live. I don't care how much money it costs me."

“Oh the cost of her treatments is included in your six-hundred dollar fee.”

“Please just make her live.”

Gabe turns to his son.

“Ralph, finish packing up the truck and head on home. Bob and I are going to the hospital. He’ll drop me off at home when we’re done. That’s okay with you isn’t it Bob?”

“Yes, anything. Let me tell the boys we’re going and I’ll be right back.”

After Bob disappears into the house Gabe and Ralph grin to each other.

“We got another one didn’t we?”

“Yup, I think things are going to work out pretty good this time. The big guy will be pleased.”

The next morning Bob is awoken at 4 AM by a phone call from the hospital. He gets the boys up, packs them into the car and rushes to the hospital. They enter Betty’s room. She is sitting up in the bed eating a lightly buttered bagel.

“Boys, Bob, I, I thought I’d never see you again. Come here and give me a hug.”

Kevin cries uncontrollably. “Mommy, you didn’t die.”

“Don’t worry. I’m all right now. I promise I’ll never leave you again. Oh Bob, it’s a miracle. I feel like I’ve been given a second chance. What happened?”

Bob wipes tears from his eyes and slowly rubs her hands. “I’ll tell you about it later. It’s a long story. A long story that I can’t even believe is true. I thought I was going to lose you. What do the doctors say?”

“They say they’ve never seen anything like it. They admitted they thought I had less than a week to live and had no expectations of me ever regaining consciousness. Naturally they want to keep me in for tests, but we’ve agreed that I can go home in a couple days if everything checks out.

That Saturday Bob, Betty and the kids drive home from the hospital. Outside the car a violent thunderstorm rages on, reducing visibility to almost nothing. Rain falls almost parallel to the ground. Inside the car the air is filled with laughter, laughter that they all thought would be denied them for the rest of their lives. Bob contemplates growing old with Betty, watching the children grow up, get

married and have families of their own. Bobby talks about having his mom going to his baseball games. The young ones animatedly discuss future trips to the amusement park. Betty rests her head on Bob's shoulders and whispers about the second chance she has and whether there is a greater purpose in all this.

Bob turns to his wife taking his eyes off the road. The car swerves slightly towards the centerline.

"This is the first day of the rest of our lives."

Betty says, "When we get home I... LOOK OUT."

The oncoming truck crosses the centerline, slowly, like in a Peckenpaugh movie, while the horror struck family watches it careening towards them. The truck violently smashes into their car, which flips over several times before coming to rest in a ditch. Smoke billows from the engine and the smell of gasoline fills the car. Screams of "Mommy, Mommy" are lost in the explosion.

Betty awakes in a hospital bed, her right arm and leg in casts and intravenous tubes stuck in her arm. She spots a nurse checking her chart.

"Where's my family. Are they all right?"

The nurse comes over to the bedside.

"I think you should wait for the Doctor to come in. He'll be here soon."

"Tell me now, where are they?"

"I'm sorry. They died in the crash, your husband and children are dead."

The next day outside the Gathers house the two men are putting the finishing touches on their gardening.

The man known as Gabe looks up at the darkening sky, sniffs the air and breaks into a broad grin.

"The boss is on his way. Our work here is done. You can pack the truck now."

The man known as Ralph looks at the old man and says, "They're all dead aren't they?"

"All except the women. Not bad for three weeks work. We give back one soul and get four in return."

“And most importantly, all the sons are dead. The master will be pleased Gabriel.”

Gabriel looks back up at the sky as the rains begin to fall, softly at first then rapidly reaching torrential proportions. Thunder and lightning explode around them as the wind howls.

Gabriel and Rapheal remain exposed to the elements waiting for the message they know will come.

From above a voice meant only for them booms. “You have done well. Four dead and one left to spend a life on loneliness and guilt.”

“Is it enough? Does it suffice my lord?”

“No, they killed my son, my only son.”

Lightning cracks, shattering a nearby oak tree. Charred branches plummet to earth just behind Raphael.

“Man in his arrogance claims to know my will. He preaches that I let Jesus die for his sins. Who could sacrifice his son, his heir? No one, not even a god would make that gesture. Well son, I I have not forsaken you. They will pay. One by one they will pay, today and for all eternity.”

Gabriel remembers then good old days, the days of the merciful loving God, the days before God went mad. Slowly he turns, enters the truck and with a final glance at his handiwork drives off. There are more gardens to tend more seeds to sow.