

The Lumberjack

By

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"Some jobs are best left to professionals." I said to myself as I watched the tow truck pull away from the curb in front of my neighbor's house. His soggy mini-van dangled from the back of the truck, dribbling water on the dusty street as it slowly disappeared around the corner. Herb's wife Laverne, a towel wrapped around her head, waited for him just inside the front door.

It all started when the leaves on Herb's big shade tree suddenly turned brown. Alarmed at the prospect of losing the majestic oak he called in a professional to try to save it, but it was too late.

His hope for a miracle dashed, Herb then asked what it would cost to have the tree taken down and cut into cord-wood for his fireplace. Herb is a man not easily separated from his money, and he visibly flinched at the price.

A few days later, I was working in my yard when Herb sauntered over and struck up a conversation.

"Hey," I asked, "what did you decide to do with your tree?" I could tell from the mischievous grin on his face that he was pleased with himself.

"I'm going to take it down myself," he answered.

To my horror I saw that he was serious. "Herb, you don't even own a saw."

"I have it all figured out," he explained, "I can rent a saw for the weekend"

I could tell that he had his mind made up, and I knew it was pointless to argue. Besides, Herb is pretty handy and I thought, incorrectly it turned out, that he just might know what he was doing.

The fateful day came around and Herb was out early, studying the tree and fiddling with the rented saw. I strolled over to where he was working, my morbid curiosity aroused.

The saw was small, gas powered, and light enough to hold in one hand. The idea was, as Herb confidently explained, to climb gradually up the tree, cutting off limbs and branches in pieces so small that they would fall harmlessly to the lawn below.

"You'll fall and break your neck," I objected. "Laverne will use your life insurance to hire a tree service."

"Not a chance," he answered, the smug smile never leaving his face. "Check this out." He reached into the back of his minivan and pulled out a sturdy black harness.

"I'll secure this safety line to a sturdy limb," he explained. "Then I'll cut everything within reach before I move farther up the tree and tie off again. If I slip, the harness will catch me."

"Well, I'll be." I replied. "Looks like you have it all figured out."

I retreated a safe distance to my yard and settled into a lawn chair to watch the show.

At first it looked like Herb really did know what he was doing. He slowly worked his way up the tree, taking great care with the safety harness. He was just about halfway to the top when he had his first mishap.

Herb stretched a little too far trying to reach a limb and lost his balance. The safety harness prevented a nasty fall, but the chainsaw flew out of his hand. It bounced off the roof of the minivan, crashed through the kitchen window, and plunged into a sink full of dishwater. It sputtered to a stop, the hot muffler hissing amid the soap bubbles.

After a brief intermission, during which Herb calmed his wife and dried out the saw, he went back to work. He slowly worked his way up the rest of the tree, cutting off branches and limbs until only the tall, gnarled trunk remained.

Back on solid ground Herb discovered another problem. With the branches gone it was obvious that the trunk leaned toward the house. He circled the tree, trying to figure out how to make it fall in a safe direction.

The next thing I knew, Herb was climbing back up the tree, a hank of sturdy rope thrown over his shoulder. I realized what he was about to do and fetched my cell phone. I wanted to be able to call 911 quickly if his plan didn't work.

He tied one end of the rope to the tree trunk at about mid height. The other end he tied to the minivan's back bumper.

Laverne tried to talk him out of it but to no avail. His mind was set. She reluctantly agreed to help when he convinced her that the rope was long enough that the tree couldn't possibly land on the minivan.

Herb first cut a notch to weaken the trunk in the direction he wanted it to fall. Then he had Laverne ease the minivan forward until the rope was snug.

Herb started the saw and made the final cut. He gave Laverne the signal and she gently pulled forward, tugging the tree in the right direction. It almost worked.

For a few sickening moments the severed trunk remained vertical as the forces of gravity and minivan struggled for supremacy. Herb rocked back and forth on his heels, adding the force of his will to the effort.

An ill-fated puff of wind broke the tie, and the minivan began losing ground. Laverne, now terrified, mashed the accelerator to the floor and the wildly spinning tires slung mud and grass all over Herb. He didn't seem to notice.

The tree crashed through the roof and came to rest on Herb's favorite chair. The minivan slid backward into the swimming pool. Laverne swam to safety through an open window.

Now Herb regarded the chainsaw in his hand as though it were something the dog had left on his lawn. He walked slowly across the street to where I stood beside my pickup and dropped the saw on the tailgate.

"Thanks for returning this for me," he said.

"No problem, neighbor," I answered. "It's the least I can do."

Herb's lips moved as if to say something, but no sound came out.

"Hey," I continued. "Look at the bright side. At least no one got hurt."

"Not yet," he muttered, and with that he hung his head and walked away.

The end