

The Fall of the Romans

I was weeding the flower bed in the dappled sunshine, the light of a clear morning sun flickering through the ruddy leaves of the old dogwood tree. The shade was cool on my back and the little morning breeze was cold. There was a lot of work left to do. Fresh mulch, to start. Fall color for the fence line. I twisted the knob and gave the sprinkler more power. The breeze misted cold hose water on the back of my neck. I sat back on my heels and stretched.

I finally had the peony beds where I wanted them. Just a week ago they had been the lush, heady showgirls of my little yard. And the hostas under the maple were going to bloom soon. The dark green dahlia stalks promised the season's best show in just about a month. A little work in the mornings to keep the weeds at bay and I could have a justifiable bit of pride in the yard even yet.

I pulled at a dandelion. The flower bed was plunged into darkness. A menacing shadow hung in the air for a second and then crossed into the grass.

Thunder crashed behind me and the ground rolled under my knees. I fell forward, grabbing the trunk of the slim, old tree in front of me. I puffed a breath I didn't realize I had been holding. I pried my eyes open with a will and turned to see what bomb had fallen. Behind me, a monstrous concrete form stretched across the yard. It sank into the dirt crushing everything beneath it.

My heart rocked in my chest, but the sound of cartoons, quietly in the distance, reminded me the kids had just gotten up and were still half asleep, in their jimmies, in the house, and safe.

My mind jumped—the dog! I turned in a circle, madly before I saw him cowering at the door. I took a deep breath. We were safe.

I sidled up to the back door and slipped in, my eye on the devastation. I inched onto the couch and wrapped my arms around the children, breathing deeply. “Mo-om,” my ten year old son said, disentangling himself. I squeezed my six year old daughter tightly as she wiggled, glad for attention.

“Did you guys see the statue fall?” I asked.

“Huh?” Trent grunted.

“Go look!” I shoved my son off the couch. He turned his head casually to the sliding glass door.

“Dude,” he said, turning back to the TV.

I pulled Ivy onto my lap and squeezed. She slipped out of my arms giggling. “Mommy, can we have a snack?”

I hip-bumped her on my way back outside.

It was thirty five feet long, my husband told me once. And probably solid. It fell across my yard from East, crushing the good neighbor fence between our homes and knocking down the arborvitae on the west border of the yard. It was mostly face down. Brutus, as we called him, had been staring at us out of the corner of his eye for years. I knew he had it in for us, was watching us. Apparently I was right.

Lying across my lawn, he did not look smaller than he used to. At his narrow waist he was three feet high at least, but his shield stuck out farther, taller than me, at its highest. Any minute now the Digiorno's would be running over, florid with apologies, excuses, and likely just a little bit of blame as well. Where Brutus crossed the fence, at about his mid-calf, the wooden

fence was splintered and my hopeful hostas obliterated. The maple tree was half sheered. I thought there was probably a small pink bike under him as well.

I thought the sound of a thirty foot solidier falling in your yard would be enough to wake the dead. But it was only 7, so maybe the Digiorno's weren't up yet. I'd give them an hour. I squinted into the upper story window that was probably their bathroom, but no lights were on.

Brutus really was an ugly statue and always had been. He had disturbing, pupil-less eyes that made all status look blind. And on a thirty-five foot tall brute overlooking your fence, his vision impairment, combined with his generally hostile manner, was worrying. He had a hooked roman nose, beefy lips and a very thick neck. If concrete could be tested for doping or steroids, this one should have been. He cast his shadow over what had been our rose garden until we moved it and he had always seemed to threaten worse action than shading out our roses if we didn't toe the line. Apparently we hadn't.

I refuse to take the blame for the crisis of statuary our neighborhood has endured. We had to have a retaining wall. Everyone would agree. The lot slopes up to the house and the drive slopes down to the garage. Nothing could be more natural than a retaining wall. And to curve it in an elegant fashion towards the road seemed tasteful. And I hold firmly that our two little lions sitting alert on the ends of the wall are equal parts tasteful and whimsical. Our lions wouldn't think of crashing across the neighboring yard taking out hostas, fences, hedges and small pink bicycles.

My lions were generally regarded as tasteful or in the very worst case, unobtrusive. Two doors down, I feel, is where the trouble started. The Lawn Jockey.

I flinch too when I hear it. Even more so when I see it. This particular lawn jockey is a Caucasian, as though that makes it better. He has a little purple and gold harlequin jersey and white gloves. He holds a tray out. I defy anyone to pass the lawn jockey and not immediately assume the Smythes believe that the South Will Rise Again. We had the lions for three years before the lawn jockey went up. But as soon as he was established the street exploded in concrete.

The Moncreifs erected an obelisk as tall as their gutters. The Falstaff's added a tower on the corner of their single story ranch in concrete block (not even stonefaced blocks.) The Radcliffes established a herd of concrete deer under a cedar tree. And then there were the Ngyuens.

Always quiet, the Ngyuens had never caused a bit of trouble in the neighborhood. But if it hadn't been for the Ngyuen's, Brutus wouldn't have destroyed my yard.

The Ngyuens are Buddhists. And they love the Sage of the Shakyas. They love the Sage twelve feet tall, in the thin, robe clad style with the bangle bracelets and neat little cap. And they love him to be in their front yard, gleaming white, the first thing the Digiornos see when they draw the curtains in the morning. The Digiornos don't love the Buddha in the morning.

Brenda Digiorno came over the minute she had first seen the newest suburban yard atrocity.

"Nadine. Nadine. I mean Buddha! Buddha every time I look out my window! What can I do? We've got to get them to take it down." Brenda was red faced, a thick blue vein throbbing at her temple, two deep lines cut between her eyebrows.

"It's horrid. I agree. But how could we get it to come down?" I poured her a coffee and steered her to the dining room, away from my picture window which also had a clear view of the statue in question.

“Complain to the city. Form a neighborhood committee. Sue. Something. There’s always a way.” She poured cream liberally into her cup and stirred it.

I took a drink. I didn’t like the statue of The Enlightened One but I was a fatalist. If the neighbors wanted to an idol in their yard what could we do about it? Buddha was a minority. He had rights.

“Don’t side with the Ngyuens. If we stick together we can get rid of that hideous thing.” She drank the coffee and made a face.

“But what if we can’t get rid of it? You should have a plan for if the statue gets to stay. Maybe you should plant a tree, one with a sprawling aspect.” A Rose-of-Sharon, properly placed, could hide the cement Wise One fairly well. I wondered if one would grow in our yard.

“I shouldn’t have to block the view from my window. Let them put him in their back yard if they insist on keeping him.” Brenda held on to her mug for comfort but didn’t try to drink any more. I made a note to have a cup of coffee at her house one morning. She had gotten a cappuccino machine not long ago, I remembered.

“If I can’t get rid of that Buddha I’ll get something they have to stare at. I’ll get a giant naked David. See if they like my culture shoved in their face.”

“I don’t think that’s the point, Brenda,” I said with a calm voice and a small smile.

She slammed the mug back on the table and stood to go. “Enjoy your ruined view, if you insist. But I’ll do something. I’ll get rid of it and if I don’t I’ll make a statement that won’t soon be forgotten.

Enter Brutus. Obviously, she couldn’t make the quiet unassuming Ngyuen family remove the statue that was their protected freedom of religion, from their front yard.

Brenda had paced her front porch for more than an hour waiting for Brutus to arrive. When she learned that the tallest roman soldier that she could find made of concrete couldn’t sit in her front yard a stream of choice invective flew from her mouth that was not for children to hear. I turned the TV on loud and early that morning. It seems her front lawn wasn’t stable enough to hold the weight. She was on a slope and needed a retaining wall. Brutus went in the back and glared his myopic hostility on us from then on.

He had always seemed to be at an angle, the leaning tower of Brutus. His brush topped helmet could just be seen over the top of the Digiorno’s roof, but from the front of their home, the rest was as discrete as anyone would wish. Brutus was a complete failure in the vindictive sense. And he was leaning.

It couldn’t have felt secure sitting on patio furniture under him. I moved my patio set across the yard, and I’m glad I did, as it turns out.

I walked the length of the fallen Brutus. The trench he made in my lawn was giving me palpitations. One’s character, they say, is only truly known when one faces a crisis. Apparently my character was of the violent, kicking type. I kicked stupid Brutus again and again.

Trent, my ten year old son had climbed up Brutus’s head. “Hey mom, look at me!” He jumped off and climbed back up. He scrambled the hills and valleys of the statue to the edge of Brutus’s shield, the highest point.

“Be careful up there!” I hollered. He was reaching for the branches of the sprawling oak that had barely escaped destruction. He had a tree fort up there. I could see his wheels turning. From the tips of his toes he lunged for a branch and caught it. He laughed his deep boy laugh, swinging on the branch.

I kicked the statue in his knee cap. My husband came strolling out from the garage.

“What’s this?” Bob asked, scratching his head. He looked from one end of the yard to the other. I assumed his question was rhetorical. Obviously it was the pent up forces of the anger of an ugly statue spent on an innocent yard.

Trent was climbing back up the statue, from the foot end this time. His dad was measuring things with his hands, spanning the statue.

“You know what I think?” Bob asked, with a gleam in his eye.

“That it was suicide?” I sniped.

“I think we could get at it with the bobcat. Break it up and haul it out. They should use the chunks to build a retaining wall.” He narrowed his eyes and scanned Brutus. “You wanna terrace the lawn? There’s enough cement here.”

“I do not want to terrace the lawn.”

“Okay. We could put in a long skinny pool.”

I think Bob thought this was funny.

“I don’t want a pool.”

“I want a pool! Can we have a pool, Dad?” Ivy skipped over to us, her bobbed blonde hair bouncing around her ears.

“No we cannot have a pool.” I crossed my arms on my chest.

“I want to dive off of Brutus!” Ivy said.

“We could use a crane and tip it right back into place.” Bob nodded sagely at the construction dilemma in his yard. “Grab it right there.” He nodded at the chin strap of Brutus’ helmet. “It would go back, no problem.”

From worse to worse. I did not want Brutus to go back.

“I’ll call some guys. We’ll get it taken care of.” He wandered back into his garage.

“Bob! Bob!” I called out chasing him into his cave.

He was fiddling with a radial arm saw. “What hon?”

“Don’t do the anything to the statue yet. Call the Digiorno’s first. See what they want to do.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not yours.”

“Why let them worry about it? We can take care of this.” He was grinning like a school boy. Bob had come upon an unexpected opportunity to play with large heavy toys. The fall of the Roman made him happy.

“It wrecked the yard, Bob.” I said, starting to whine.

“I know.” He draped his arm around my shoulder and kissed me on the top of the head.

“The Digiorno’s should pay for it.”

“What’s it gonna cost? Some beer and barbeque. It’ll be fixed up in a weekend.” He turned back to his saw. Its guts were spilled across the bench. The statue could be taken care of in a weekend. Not this weekend apparently, but some weekend.

I turned to the back yard and stared at Brutus. Ivy had spread a blanket across his hip and was sunbathing on him.

I stomped into the kitchen. I rummaged in the junk drawer until I came across a blue Sharpie. Brutus, Trench, Lawn, Fence and Hedge were all added to the list hanging on the fridge.

A timid knock sounded at the door. I took a deep breath and answered it.

“I saw that statue fall in your yard.” Ann Nyguen said quietly, holding out a tray of small dumplings. “Can I help with anything?” I took the tray and ushered Ann into my house.

“That is so nice of you. I don’t know what needs to be done. I put the tray on the counter. “It’s early still, would you like some coffee, tea?”

She shook her head, “No, I should go back. But come over if you need any help. Thanh is home all weekend. Nothing to do. Come get him if you need an extra hand.” She shook her head sadly as she looked out my kitchen window to the yard. “They should have anchored that statue better. Given it a foundation. What a shame to lose it.”

“Thank you. I’ll come get Thanh as soon as we start working on it. I don’t know what Bob is going to do or when. Surely the Digiorno’s will be calling soon.”

“Oh, no I don’t think they will call. They are in Hawaii.” Ann said.

She picked her way gently across the street when she left, a small, careful person. She stopped at her yard, looked down at the foundation of her Siddhartha, and shook her head again.

I turned from my front window with the nice, quiet neighbor and her idol to the back yard where everyone was settling in with Brutus. Trent had established a dominant position behind the shield at the statue’s waist. Every few seconds he popped up and lobbed a pinecone at the dog who was sleeping on the deck. Ivy had climbed back down and was setting up a house in the shade and safety of Brutus’ thick neck.

I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat at the table. The least I could do was leave a number of irritated messages on Brenda’s phone. I picked at a dumpling, still warm. Irritated messages wouldn’t be neighborly. Bob was content to get to it when he got to it. The kids were happy. I bit into the warm, savory dumpling.

It wasn’t the average suburban breakfast, but it tasted fantastic. Maybe Bob could come in with a machine and bust Brutus up before the Digiorno’s came home from vacation. I felt like smiling for a moment. We could pile the rock in their driveway, a great welcome home statement. Brenda had always wanted Brutus in the front yard. Busting up a few tons of concrete soldier and piling it in Brenda’s driveway wasn’t the way to get invited over for her cappuccinos. I took a deep drink of my coffee. I had always been a plain coffee woman anyway.