

## A Time and Season for All Things

It was a lovely day in late fall and the peasants were out in force, working tirelessly on their outdoor projects. I supervised from a hammock with a cool drink in hand as my lot had long been cast with the visionaries. I approved of the washed windows and raked yards, offered tips on putting rose bushes to bed, and admonished old women reluctant to tarp air conditioners or tape plastic over leaky windows.

Of particular interest was Alaric Visigoth, my neighbor across the street. I called him Weird Al as a shoutout to the celebrated court jester. Al wore his hair long and his beard reached almost to his waistband. He liked to stand in front of his picture window decked out in a wife beater and slippers and wait for the mailman. When he did venture into the community, he favored flowing black robes, braided strands of garlic around his neck and a spiked helmet. I don't know why but some people just do things a bit different.

It's believed that Alaric stables colossal beasts behind his abode in direct violation of City Hall. I don't snoop around like some but I routinely hear low bellows through the night and smell fresh dung when a breeze blow from the east. I could care less as Al keeps to himself.

I was having my own problems. City Hall decided to dust off an antiquated plan for curbside beautification. Grass shall not grow long and weeds are not flowers, proclaimed the founding fathers. I folded the warnings into small planes and launched them toward the street which led to a barrage of placards touting the virtues of refuse collection, recycling and storage options. I swear the collapse of civilization is at hand and the destiny of mankind includes a return to the Dark Ages.

Weird Al does not appear to be so burdened. The man had exactly one tree in his yard, a maple centered in a patch of luxurious grass. This magnificent specimen heralds every season and was currently ripe with scarlet streamers. Imagine a postcard where lovers stroll the boulevard and take photos of eagles perched in wide boughs. Al, in spite of his weird ways, has always maintained a Hallmark home. Then the wind kicked up and every last leaf fell from the tree.

Local customs mandate a prompt assault on any gathering of leaves but Al decided to forego the common practice of sacking in favor of blasting the offenders to the ends of the earth. His weapon of choice was a Yard Pro leaf blower. The machine is a gnarly beast, gasoline-fired, noisy and foul-smelling. Al moved like a man possessed, sweeping the nozzle of the blower furiously from side to side as he advanced toward the street. The desperate leaves swirled around his head in an act of defiance but their fortunes had already been told.

Visigoth stopped momentarily at the curb to look in each direction and then forged on, heading out of town with the speed of windfall. I spoke the obvious truth, announcing to all witnesses that the leaves would naturally return when the prevailing currents changed course, but a powerful gust propelled the debris airborne, into the void. The day went on record as the last gasp of Indigenous Summer and soon after a barren cold settled over the hamlet.

Four years, three months, and 16 days passed. By then the Kunst brothers had finished walking around the world, getting shot by bandits in the process and exhausting 42 pairs of shoes. The sky fell on a frosty morning. I had recently emerged from hibernation and stood watch on my stoop, longing for a touch of warmth, when an unannounced solar eclipse darkened the earth. Dogs howled and an ambulance crashed into a row of garbage cans.

Suddenly the sun broke through the haze in a blaze and leaves of every size, shape, and color filled the sky. There were offerings from the Guanacaste tree, her discarded fronds floating like

giant elephant ears, delicate bonsai blossoms, foliage from the African baobab shed during another great drought, orchids that smelled like vanilla and citrus, spikes of cacti and random shards of bamboo, sugar cane and date palm. The shape-shifting columns marched across the high school football field. I watched in wonder as the organic troops reached the Kwik Trip parking lot, executed a smart pivot and headed straight for my house.

I heard a sound like the serenade of an approaching freight train and it became difficult to breathe. Could this be the second coming? A taste of the elusive afterlife? Or maybe it was just seasonal asthma. I pondered origins, unsure what divine force drove the cosmic humus. Then the mountain of leaves parted and my old neighbor Weird Alaric Visigoth strode through the vortex. The vagabond was back from the wars, a man who'd conquered not only his own pile of leaves, but City Hall and perhaps even Barbarians, all with resolve and one stalwart leaf blower. I must admit he looked remarkably tanned and fit.

On the first day of Spring, I hurried over to the Farm and Garden. It was a Super Store, advertised as the largest horticulture center west of the Mississippi. Aisles big as tributaries overflowed with products guaranteed to help plants propagate, weeds wilt, pets prosper and pests perish. I paddled past barbecue grills and screen tents, gliding toward a mirage of power tools on the horizon.

I picked out a Deluxe Yard Pro leaf blower. The implement cost a pretty pence but she sure was a beauty to behold. Fire-engine red frame, embossed lettering and fancy decals, secured in a mesh backpack with padded straps – one look under the hood revealed a 500-cc, four-cycle Briggs & Stratton engine capable of moving 800 cubic feet of air per minute. This was not your grandmother's broom. The Farmers' Almanac was already proposing an early fall. Bring it on!