

War Pigs of Suburbia

By Emma Eden Ramos

The neighborhood knew it as "The Sideways House."

The main entrance to Leland and Sarah MacLeod's home faced the road, while their built-in toolshed paralleled the next-door neighbors' front porch. "It's a ruse," Leland explained playfully to any inquiring visitor. "Burglars think the shed's the front. They come in, end up leaving with a truck-load of gardening shit."

The MacLeod's two story home lay at one end of a horseshoe-shaped housing community in Long Island. Fifteen years earlier, when the family first left Manhattan, Kelly was only two and the idea of Gordon had just begun to sink in. As a safety precaution, Leland installed a fence that still kept each of his three children from haphazardly wandering onto the busy main road. These days, Kelly and Gordon were mindful of their surroundings. The same, unfortunately, couldn't always be said for Allie, the youngest of the MacLeod children.

When the bedside alarm sounded at 7:00 AM, Sarah knew her husband was already up and moving. As usual, Leland would be outside, his morning cup of Scottish Breakfast in one hand and Sarge's leash in the other. Today, he'd be waiting for the Saturday Paper.

The floorboards creaked as she made her way from their bed to the bathroom. The cold water felt refreshing on her cheeks, and Sarah used a washcloth to clear the smudged eyeliner she'd forgotten to remove the night before.

She dressed.

Tucking her t-shirt into her jeans, Sarah walked quietly out of the bedroom and down the stairs. She stopped by the kitchen, took a tea bag from the open box, fixed herself a cup and headed outside to join her husband.

Sarge stood dutifully next to Leland as he inspected a newly-formed burrow that had, overnight, appeared between the toolshed and the driveway.

"That terrier across the street's becoming a damn pest."

"Could be a possum," Sarah replied, amused by her husband's blatant irritation.

"No, it's the dog."

"You gunna bug 'em about it again?"

"Oh yea."

"Well, I say we have Kelly do it. Their son's around her age; won't sound as angry coming from her."

"I don't want her mixing with that kid. Something's not right with him."

"Gordon could go then."

"Nope, I've got it covered."

"And if they don't listen, again?"

"I let Sarge loose on him the next time he wanders over."

Gordon was up before his sisters. "What time?" he muttered to himself. 8:00. Not bad for a Saturday. He still had time to complete his morning routine before Kelly was awake to tease him.

Gearing up in his red suit, wrestling gloves and sneakers, Gordon headed for the stairs, ready for part one of his daily morning workout.

Reaching the front door, Gordon heard his father's voice coming from the driveway.

"Hey, I've told you..." Leland began. "This is the third time your dog's made a mess of my driveway."

"It's not him." Drew Dolan tried to sound pleasant.

"Well, I hope not because the next time I hear digging out here, I'm sending my Sarge to stop it."

"You do that. You just better hope it's not someone's kid your dog goes after. You know, they banned Rottweilers in Florida for killing kids."

"My dog doesn't go after kids. You just keep yours off my property."

The taste in Drew's mouth was feud-induced acid reflux: undigested milk and sour coffee. He walked through his front door and was immediately overwhelmed by the sound of Black Sabbath and the scent of Marijuana. Nick was off to an early start, he thought, pouring his second cup of coffee.

Nick Dolan savored his joint. Eighteen and expelled from school a month before graduation, Nick had little hope for his future. He'd considered joining the Peace Corps, had even gone as far as cutting back on his drug use in preparation for applying, only to learn that he'd need two years of college to enroll. Now, music, pot, Scorsese films and the occasional household inhalant got Nick through what he considered his "daily, tortured existence".

Kelly MacLeod awoke at 10:00 AM to the sound of her sister's high-pitched screams. Allie, eight, squealed joyfully as their father chased her around in the front yard. Kelly got up, dressed and went

downstairs to join her brother in the kitchen.

Gordon sucked on a strawberry flavored protein shake while flipping through a sports magazine.

"Where's that sexy wrestling suit?" Kelly teased.

"You're funny."

"Allie says it makes you look like a cartoon radish."

"She told you that?"

"Yea."

"At least her insults are clever."

"I know, mine are pretty lame."

"They suit you... Get it, suit? As in wrest..."

"Yea, you should leave the jokes to someone else."

Kelly fixed herself a bowl of cereal.

She and Gordon finished their breakfast and joined the rest of the family outside.

"Allie-kins!" Kelly patted her sister on the head. "Hi, dad."

"Morning gorgeous."

"Where's Sarge?"

"In the driveway."

Sarah greeted her two older children, then went back into the house for a second cup of tea.

Reheating the water in the kettle, Sarah looked through the magazine her son had left on the kitchen counter. The pictures made her smile, the idea of her skinny, almost fifteen-year-old toting those biceps, that six-pack, was quite comical.

Sarah poured hot water over the dry tea bag, then jumped at the horrible yelp she heard coming from the driveway.

It was over by the time she reached the scene. Leland held Sarge, his large hand over the animal's heavily salivating mouth. Gordon kneeled over the helpless terrier, while Kelly tried to comfort her crying sister.

"What the..." Sarah began, then noticed Nick coming out of his front door. His hair was messy, his eyes red and slightly swollen.

"You fuck! You fuckers killed my dog!"

"It was an accident," Kelly interjected.

And, like a pack of scavengers, the neighborhood residents left their homes to survey the scene.

Animal control came and went. Questions were asked, accusations made. Sarah explained that she wasn't present during the attack. Leland said he'd repeatedly warned the Dolans to keep their dog off his property. His kids were too surprised and confused to help.

"Zeppelin," Nick explained, "went out to pee. That little girl across the street called him over, and that man sent their dog after him."

"You think it was done on purpose?" the man from Animal Control asked.

"Definitely."

By early evening, the neighborhood commotion had finally subsided.

"We really need to go over and apologize to the Dolans," Sarah said to her husband.

"It wasn't our fault. I told Drew just this morning..."

"It isn't a question of fault anymore. It would be wrong to just do nothing."

Nick paced his room. I'll kill their fucking dog, he thought, see how they like it. The idea of sneaking into the MacLeod's home was exciting; the revenge was warranted. It would be like that Scorsese film, the one with Robert De Niro and Juliette Lewis. Nick knew how to mix the cocktail his father used to kill raccoons. A cup of Pepsi laced with methomyl fly-bait granules; death was slow and painful.

Only, how to get the dog to drink it? He'd have to wait until dark, when the neighborhood street was empty and no one would notice him. The MacLeod man might hear, though. He'd have to sneak in through a window; the dog would surely bark. It wouldn't work. There was no way, Nick realized, that he'd be able to sneak into a home where there was a giant guard dog, carrying a cup of liquid poison. Something was bound to go wrong.

"There's blood in it. I can see its veins."

"Allie," Sarah argued, "it's salmon. It always has some veins, and you never complain."

"I don't want it. It's nasty."

"You don't have..." Leland began.

"You'll eat it! You sat down here for dinner, and you'll eat it because you made a commitment."

"I didn't make a com.. I didn't promise to do anything!"

Sarah threw her napkin on her plate, stood up and grabbed her daughter by the arm.

"Mom!" Kelly snapped, "what are..."

"We have commitments. We have things we do because. When we sit down as a family, we eat because that's what families do. When our dog kills our neighbor's dog, we apologize because that's what neighbors do."

Rising from his place at the head of the table, Leland took his wife's hand and led her out to the stairway, where they could speak in private. Before exiting the dining room, Sarah noticed her children; all three looked as stunned as they had earlier by the driveway.

"I'll apologize, alright."

"Alright."

"Tomorrow morning I'll go over and apologize."

"Alright."

"You shouldn't take this out on the kids."

"Yea, I know. I'm sorry."

Sunday morning, the air was clear and mild. Leland stood, as he always did, in front of the toolshed with his cup of tea and Sarge, alert by his side. He saw Drew come out, thought about the promise he'd made to Sarah, but decided to wait. Drew had the authority to request that Sarge be euthanized for the attack. Leland wanted to see how Drew handled things before apologizing. He wasn't about to succumb to someone who intended to make his life--his family's life--difficult.

Gordon dressed and headed downstairs. He needed a break from his workout routine and could hear Allie in the kitchen. He wouldn't risk being seen in his wrestling suit. Not after being compared to a "cartoon radish."

Allie sat at the kitchen table, eyeing her father as he readied the waffle iron. "Strawberry waffles, strawberry ice cream and strawberry milk. That's what I want for breakfast. No whipped cream. Only things that are strawberry-ish."

Kelly was still sleeping, though it was after 10:00.

"I was up super-late," Allie declared, upon Gordon's arrival. "I had bad dreams about that dog and the boy across the street. I kept Kelly up."

"She'll be sleeping for a while, I'm thinking," Leland began, turning to his son. "You'll look after Allie"

in a bit while your mother and I go into town."

"I don't need looking after. I'm eight."

"If I go for a run by the road, Al, will you follow me on your bike?"

"I'll go for a ride on my bike, and you can follow me on your feet."

The MacLeod men exchanged smiles.

Nick was tired and hungover. He'd spent the night taking shots of his father's whiskey, smoking and thinking of ways to get back at the MacLeods.

"The jackass didn't say a word to me this morning," Drew had said at the breakfast table.

"I hate them," Nick replied.

"They'll learn soon enough, son. Someone'll teach that man a lesson."

By 11:00 AM, Nick was out of the house. He drove around for a while, planning, then stopped at a gas station. Pepsi (the fly-bait granules were already in the pantry), beef jerky and a box of Tylenol PM; Nick planned to dope the Rottweiler up with diphenhydramine if the original plan got botched. Either way, Nick wanted the MacLeods to lose something they cared about. An eye for an eye. Someone'll teach that man a lesson.

Gordon and Allie walked out of the front door and onto the lawn.

"I'll get my bike," Allie chirped, running towards the toolshed.

Gordon began warming up. Between rounds of jumping jacks, he sprinted from the front door to the fence, and back. The main road was pretty clear, except for a few cars, Gordon noticed. People generally stayed in on Sundays.

Gordon heard Allie ride up the neighborhood street. She tapped the handle bar bell to announce her readiness and circled the small street once more, impatient to get started.

Gordon opened the fence door and called to his sister. Allie rode to the end of the street and stopped, waiting for her brother to join her.

A moment later, before the two could begin their jaunt, Kelly called out from her bedroom window.

"Gordon, come on!" Allie nagged.

"Wait."

Gordon ran back toward the house, unable to hear Kelly from where he stood. Allie stomped her

foot, rolled her eyes and sighed.

"Come on!" she called again.

Allie began to peddle. She made circles, riding from one end of the road to the other, just waiting for Gordon to notice. There was a strip of road between the two white lines that separated the car lanes. Allie noticed and decided to see if she could ride straight, between the lanes, without wavering. As she peddled, frantically looking from side to side to make sure she hadn't gotten off course, Allie failed to see the car ahead of her.

Nick came down the main road, Black Sabbath blasting from the ipod he had hooked up to his car's stereo.

The third line of "War Pigs" was the last thing Allie MacLeod heard before she and her bike were under the wheels of Nick Dolan's car.

The neighborhood knew it as "The Sideways House." The resident, Leland MacLeod, lived alone with his three Rottweilers. When a family of five moved in across the street, they had their nine-year-old daughter bring the "lonely" man a basket of muffins.

"They're strawberry," the little girl explained when Leland opened the toolshed door. "I love things that are strawberry."

Leland smiled at the girl, accepted the gift and went back inside. Commitments, he thought. We all make commitments. Nicholas Dolan, now almost twenty, had a long-term commitment to the nearby penitentiary. Kelly MacLeod was a committed Sociology student at Hofstra University (not far from where she once lived). Gordon was captain of his high school wrestling team; and they all, each member of the MacLeod clan (including Sarah, though she was no longer Mrs. MacLeod), made the commitment to visit the headstone of their youngest member, whose life was a casualty of suburban warfare.

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