In the Line of Duty

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Mark drives his green Lawn Boy riding lawn mower around his large front yard, cutting tight around the trunks of trees and his wife’s flower-boxes. He is in first gear today, taking it nice and slow and easy, every blade of grass severed at the exact same height. His wife comes out onto the front porch and screams his name. “Mark! Telephone!” Mark pretends to not hear her, tipping his head to one side to make sure that the inside wheels are riding exactly three inches inside the line of long grass. He likes straight lines and efficiency. She shouts at him again, but he doesn’t even flinch. “Mark! Phone!” He allows himself to glance around this time, feigning bewilderment, but he deliberately avoids looking at the spot where he knows she’s standing and returns his gaze to the slowly rotating front tire of the tractor as it presses a wobbly path through the lawn. She can come to him; he’s working. He turns left at the right, front corner of his yard, and sees her stalking toward him. Mark depresses the clutch with his foot and roughly jams the mower into neutral. His wife looks irritated. This has become a bigger hassle than she was anticipating. She violently waves gnats away from her face; she’s also barefoot. She might step on a wasp. His face carefully neutral, Mark arches his eyebrows in order to indicate that he’s wondering what she wants from him this time. Mark’s wife enunciates very carefully to be heard over the idling Lawn Boy. She presses her thin lips together between each word. “The…phone…is…for…you.”

Mark arches his eyebrows even further, twisting his mouth quizzically. He wishes he had more sweat on his brow to wipe away. Maybe with a dirty towel. That would be ideal.

“The Phone! Is! For! You!”

Mark shakes his head, shrugs helplessly, holds up one finger, and goes through the exaggerated motions of shutting the lawn mower completely off. He keeps his finger raised until the engine is silent (his wife glaring at him) and then says, “Now…what were you saying?”

“Someone’s on the phone for you.” He can see she’s seething.

“Who is it?”

“I have no idea. He’s been waiting on the phone for five minutes now.”

Mark remains seated, perched on the padded seat of his tractor. “I can’t hear anything over this thing. Can you just tell whoever it is that I’m busy and I’ll call him back later?” She’s about to erupt. He can sense it. She locks her knees.

“No! I screamed at you from the front porch three times. I can’t prove that you could hear me, but I strongly suspect that you could and you just felt like ignoring me. The neighbors were staring at me, and then I came all the way out here after you. If you’re in such a rush to get back to mowing the lawn, then you can take a one-minute break to walk yourself inside and tell him why you can’t talk to him right now. I’m going back inside. I’m not your secretary.”

Mark watches his wife storm back toward the house, although it occurs to him that she is actually very pleased with herself and she is only storming because it’s appropriate for the occasion. She thinks she’s won, pestering him with lesser duties. He waits until she is almost to the door before he starts the mower back up, certain to keep his attention fixed on the important business of beautifying his lawn.

When Mark was a teenager, he mowed lawns for extra spending money. Elderly people with summer houses on the lakes paid him 20 dollars to push his red Toro around the steep banks of their yards until the grass looked presentable. Unless there was an exceptional amount of rain, he would mow the lawns every other week. People on pontoons, drifting past the ends of piers, perched on padded, cracked seats, waved at Mark with slow, leisurely movements.

One day, with dust caking on his sweat-soaked skin and neighbor kids accusing one another of peeing in the inflatable pool, Mark ran over a dead mole with the mower and sprayed chunks of it across the yard. Cracked it open and cut it apart, flung it in several directions. Faintly amusing tufts of fur airborne and brown bones skipping across the sidewalk. The mower, being a self-propelled model, propelled itself forward, leaking oil and bumping over clods of earth. Guiding its uneven trajectory, Mark followed, gagging and laughing.

Mark has a deep-seated belief in the idea that the process of mowing begins with the preparation of the yard. All sticks and stray debris must be removed from the grass before the mower is even rolled out of the shed. Running over branches and rocks not only dulls the mower’s blades, but it leaves messes that make the lawn unsightly. The lawn mower should always be refueled in the shed in order to prevent gas spills on the grass. It
is important to begin mowing in the front yard. Why? Because if an emergency arises and one must quit mowing, it is best to have the side of the house that is most visible from the road attended to. When the mowing begins, the lines must be straight and parallel. The grass must be cut evenly, which may mean shifting into a lower gear in thicker grass or shifting into a higher gear in areas that are sparser. When the mowing is finished, any grass that has been sprayed onto the sidewalk or driveway must be swept back into the yard. This task can be performed after a brief rest break.

Though only four days have passed since Mark last mowed the lawn (an efficient, uninterrupted job that left Mark even more satisfied than usual), several evening rains coupled with warm, sunny days have caused the grass to grow at an alarming rate. Mark tells his son, who is eight years old, to get his toys out of the lawn. His son, lounging in a beanbag chair and watching obnoxious cartoons, says, “Why?”

Mark says, “Because I’m going to mow the lawn sometime today. If you don’t pick up your toys, I won’t be able to see them and I’ll run over them with the mower and they’ll be ruined.” Mark waits for a sign of acknowledgement from his son, which doesn’t come, and goes outside through the back door.

He walks around the back yard and picks up sticks for a while. Then he moves to the front yard, picks up more sticks, and looks through the picture window into his living room. His son is still in the beanbag chair, eating cereal and no longer wearing shoes or socks. Mark goes to the shed, opens the padlock, and fills the Lawn Boy with gas. Then he settles himself on top of the lawnmower, starts the engine, and backs out of the shed, rolling cautiously down his homemade wooden ramp. He drives to the front yard, engages the blades, shifts into second gear, and steers along the edge of the flower bed that lines the front of his house. He is precise and skillful. He looks over his shoulder at the perfect swathe he is cutting through the grass and clover. Decapitated dandelions and swarming, mangled ant colonies.

After Mark makes several passes back and forth in front of the picture window, his son finally realizes that the mowing has started and his toys are in danger. He runs out onto the front porch just in time to see his water pistol disappear under the deck of the Lawn Boy. Its destruction is announced by a chopping, shattering noise. The Lawn Boy leaves scattered fragments of red plastic in its wake.

While his son is crying and shouting for him to stop, Mark drives the lawnmower over an action figure of some kind. It might be Spiderman. Disappointed, Mark realizes that this toy is lying too low in the grass and has managed to escape the twirling vengeance of his blades. Mark notices a small Nerf football lying in the middle of the yard. He struggles with the idea of disrupting his orderly mowing pattern for the sake of a higher cause. He hates to ruin his lines, but if, after proving his point, he returns to his previous system, he should be able to hide the damage. He cuts sharply toward the football, cringing as he feels imperfection spreading behind him. Mark shifts the mower into third gear, hoping to reach the ball before his son can gather his wits. Despite his tears, Mark’s son realizes his father’s intention and runs for the football in a wild panic, snatching it up before Mark can ruin it.

Mark gives his son a stern look, both hands gripping the steering wheel, and turns back toward the perimeter of the longer grass, a smaller, more irregular shape inside the lopsided rectangle of his property. His son, still sobbing over the loss of his squirt gun, not to mention his father’s treachery, scrambles around the yard to gather up his remaining toys. He leaves them in a pile on the front porch and goes back in the house.

Mark will be the bad guy again, he knows, but he’s mowing, for Pete’s sake. This needs to be done. This is landscaping. The Fox Run Housing Development Contract stresses the importance of a well-kept yard. Mark signed The Fox Run Housing Development Contract in blood.

When Mark is through mowing, his detour is not noticeable at all. The lines are straight and parallel, but the small stack of his son’s playthings, an ugly plastic heap next to the porch-swing, bothers Mark with its suggestion of incompleteness. Especially since most of the toys are still intact and unharmed. He wonders if he could justify finishing the job with the gas-powered weed-eater.

Mark’s neighbor doesn’t do his own mowing. Mark can’t respect this. The Neighbor forces his 16-year-old daughter to do it with a large, unwieldy, self-propelled Murray that reminds Mark of the lawnmower that he used when he was a teenager. She, The Neighbor’s Daughter, wears a different
bikini and the same pair of blue flip flops every time she mows the lawn. She keeps her hair out of her face by wearing it in a pony-tail. Sometimes she wears sunglasses. The Neighbor’s Daughter doesn’t quite fill out her bikinis yet, but she will soon.

Mark worries that The Neighbor’s Daughter is going to lose control of the lawnmower and run over her own exposed foot. When he was in high school, Mark’s P.E. teacher would spend classroom time showing videotaped episodes of Rescue 911 instead of lecturing about contraceptives or how to check for testicular cancer. In one episode, a little boy, eager for a mower-ride, ran toward his older sister, who was riding a red Snapper, and slipped on the damp grass, sliding right under the front wheels of the mower, which proceeded to run over him. In the reenactment, you could see the little boy’s Nikes go flying out on the other side of the mower, adorably small and white but, unfortunately, shredded. The kid in the reenactment was a bloody mess. His feet, legs, and stomach were all cut up. The kid’s older sister was hysterical, wringing her hands and sobbing and apologizing. A mower is a tool for men. A lawnmower should not be taken lightly.

Mark’s wife disapproves of his insistence on mowing the lawn whenever he sees that The Neighbor’s Daughter is mowing The Neighbor’s lawn. Mark explains that this is only the case because once the Neighbor’s lawn is freshly cut, it makes their own lawn look shabby by comparison. Besides, there are a lot of times when Mark mows the lawn and the Neighbor’s Daughter is nowhere to be seen. These arguments are true enough to be plausible.

Mark suspects that The Neighbor’s Daughter is not too stupid to realize that he often starts mowing shortly after she does. They give each other friendly waves when they pass each other at the property line that their houses share. Mark is careful not to shoot his grass clippings onto The Neighbor’s yard or The Neighbor’s Daughter. The Neighbor’s Daughter bags her grass clippings. She has to stop every once in a while when the bag gets full. She keeps a small cooler filled with ice on the front porch and when she stops to dump the bag of grass clippings on The Neighbor’s compost pile, she takes a minute to drink directly from a two-liter bottle of Mountain Dew that she keeps inside of the cooler. Mark thinks that she must have a lot of cavities. He thinks it would be interesting to probe these cavities with his tongue.

Mark knew a kid whose father was a mailman. One day the kid’s father was mowing the lawn barefoot. He was pushing a mower up a hill when he slipped on the grass, fell backward, and pulled the mower on top of his left foot. His big toe was severed. The doctors couldn’t sew it back on, but they offered to give it to him in a jar. He refused. He had to give up his mail route to work in the post office. He couldn’t walk as well without that toe. Mark has a vivid mental image (possibly inaccurate) of the kid’s dad’s mower sitting unused in the middle of a half-mowed yard, maybe forever, just rusting into nothing. An incomplete job. Sloppy. A failure, really.

Today Mark watches until he sees The Neighbor’s Daughter returning from a clippings-dumping and Mountain Dew-drinking break and then casually drives up to the edge of The Neighbor’s Yard. He shuts his Lawn Boy off. “You know,” he says from the seat of the Lawn Boy, “when you bag the grass you’re actually keeping your lawn from being as good as it could be. When you let the old clippings stay on the lawn, they decompose and return nutrients to the soil.”

The Neighbor’s Daughter gives him a blank smile. She’s wearing a solid black bikini today. “Well, I just do what my dad says. I don’t really care about the lawn. I just like to get tan.”

“Murrays tend to guzzle oil. You should probably check it every few times you use it. Otherwise you could lock up the engine.”

Her smile broadens. “My dad worries about all that stuff. All I know how to do is start it up.”

The Neighbor’s Daughter’s lack of interest in mowing-related topics is causing Mark to run out things to say to her. As far as he knows, mowing is the only common ground that they share. “Yeah...well...you may want to think twice about mowing in those flip flops. I know I sound old and responsible and nervous when I say this, but you really could lose a toe or something.”
Still smiling, The Neighbor’s Daughter examines her feet, apparently unable to imagine such pretty appendages as anything but smooth and golden. Certainly not as ragged wounds or...or...infected stumps. “Do you want something to drink?”

Mark isn’t thirsty. There is a full bottle of water sitting right in the cup holder just down and to the right of his steering wheel. “Sure, if it’s not inconvenient.” The Neighbor’s Daughter turns back toward her house and walks to the porch.

Mark tears his eyes from the long, shifting curve of her spine, the tiny ridges of her individual vertebrae, and sees his wife watching him from the front window, wallowing in the expensive central air conditioning.

The Neighbor’s Daughter returns to Mark with the bottle of Mountain Dew. The green plastic is slick with condensation and water from the melting ice. The Neighbor’s Daughter takes a long drink, tipping the bottle up with both hands. A little trickle of sticky soda escapes from the corner of her mouth and runs down the side of her chin. She finishes, lets out a startling belch, and hands the bottle to Mark. He takes a hearty swig and wipes his mouth with the sleeve of his t-shirt. Mark hands the bottle back to the Neighbor’s Daughter who takes another drink, lowers the bottle from her lips, and looks directly at Mark’s wife. The Neighbor’s Daughter gives Mark’s wife a little wave.

Mowing is hot, thirsty, sweaty work. Monotonous and time-consuming, but it must be done. A messy yard is the devil’s playground. Rodents and snakes collect in long grass. Insects breed and invade your house. If a man’s home is his castle, the yard is the first line of defense.

Mark doesn’t get home until an hour before sunset. It has been raining on and off all week and the grass in his lawn is far too long. He thinks it looks like a swamp. His wife disagrees. Mark had planned on taking care of his lawn as soon as he got home from work, but then his wife informed him that his son had some sort of school program for Gifted and Talented students that they all needed to attend as a family.

Mark’s wife had said, “Won’t you be proud to see your son acknowledged as gifted and talented?” Mark had known that she was only asking because she was certain that he would say something disdainful and then, because of this inevitable cutting remark, she would have the moral high ground for the rest of the evening. He had spent too long trying to think of something to say that would have been even more disdainful than she had expected, possibly stunning her into silence, and the moment for a retort had passed. She must have mistaken his silence for pouting.

Now, returning home through the solemnly clean streets of the Fox Run Housing Development, Mark notices that every other lawn has been mowed. This mass-mowing probably occurred during the brief window of nice weather that opened while Mark was standing in the back of the auditorium at the elementary school, eating a complimentary banana, and watching his mediocre son humbly accept the Gifted and Talented label. Mark’s house has the only ragged lawn in the entire Fox Run Housing Development. The injustice of the universe further blackens his mood. He parks the car and goes inside to hurriedly change into his mowing clothes.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m mowing the lawn.”

“It’s going to be dark soon! And they’re calling for more rain!”

“All the more reason for you to stop bothering me.”

Mark steps outside just in time to see a neighborhood dog completing a carefree crap in his backyard. He awkwardly hurls a stone at the dog, missing badly, and then is forced to hunt around in the grass until he finds the rock since it doesn’t belong in the yard. This is not the first time he has been assaulted in this way. He wishes he could string razor-wire around the perimeter of his yard. Walking to the shed, Mark curses the darkness which, of course, changes nothing. Storm clouds are gathering as storm clouds do, tumbling clumsily against one another. Mark starts the mower with what he wishes was a defiant roar, but the dropping barometric pressure makes it sound impotent.

Utilizing the headlights on the Lawn Boy, Mark begins in the front yard. He considers shifting into third gear, anxious to finish as quickly as possible, but fears that tomorrow morning he will wake up, look at his yard, and want to gouge out his eyes.

A car packed full of young, reckless people lurches into The Neighbor’s Driveway and unleashes a sustained blast on the horn. The Neighbor’s Daughter emerges from the front door of The Neighbor’s House and gets into the car. The kids drive away trailing a visible aura of contented boredom.
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A raindrop smacks inaudibly against the geometric center of the Lawn Boy’s steering wheel. The wind leaps up suddenly. Mark grinds his teeth together and leans forward, nostrils flared. He feels as if a dangerous, faceless mob is bearing down on him. As he passes the front porch, his wife steps out and shouts, “Mark! Give it up!” Good grief, her knees have gotten ugly. Predictably, lightning flashes and thunder does its ominous thing. Mark putters desperately onward. His wife, disgusted (she’s in a perpetual state of disgust), goes back into the house.

Man, Lesser Machine, and Elements.

Rain finally shakes loose. It pummels Mark and his lawn mower. It makes his thinning hair adhere to his scalp. As the grass becomes more saturated, it won’t cut properly, bending around the metal blades instead of splitting cleanly. Mark squints to keep the slashing rain from penetrating his corneas. It is totally dark; only the headlights keep Mark from plowing right into a shrub or a flower planter. His progress has become impossible to determine.

What would happen if he ran over a skeleton? What if he ran over it multiple times? Driving up the small hill where his yard meets the road, Mark skids sideways and leaves a muddy gash in the turf. The ground, already saturated from the rain earlier in the day, will not absorb anymore water. Puddles and boggy spots form in the lawn. The Lawn Boy’s wheels spin and slide, crushing the grass down into the sucking mud.

Mark shifts into third gear, then, pleased with the higher-pitched whine of the motor, shifts into fourth. He buzzes around the yard in an inconsistent rectangle, jerking the wheel to the left at what he assumes to be regular intervals, veering wildly when an obstacle appears in his path. Branches blown from the trees are noisily ground into pieces by the high-speed mowing and shot off into the dripping darkness. One large, solid stick gets caught on the deck of the mower and leaves a zig-zagging furrow in the earth until Mark dislodges it by kicking at it furiously with his left foot. He loses his shoe in the process. He doesn’t even consider stopping to retrieve it. He’s already forgotten about it. Even in the soaking wet clamor of the storm, Mark can smell the hot cloud of exhaust that hovers around him. It’s exhilarating in a toxic sort of way. Lightning bolts reveal a yard that would have been better served by less zeal from its owner.

Mark’s wife and Mark’s son stand in the picture window, silhouettes against cheap lamplight. They are awed by the spectacle in the front yard. A dark shape is preceded by a blob of illumination, and this shape careens erratically back and forth in their field of vision. Their eyes are wide. They wonder who will win. An especially brilliant crack of lightning, just as Mark is nearest the window, reveals that a horrifying expression of savage, determined glee has become affixed to his face. Mark’s son whimpers.

As Mark turns left in front of the window, he runs over a golf ball that is hidden deep in the grass. Hit into his domain by a stupid neighbor kid irresponsibly practicing his chip shot. The ball is caught by the blades and propelled at an impressive rate of speed through the window of Mark’s house and right between Mark’s wife and Mark’s son. The glass shatters in a way that the average person would probably consider to be impossible. The ball bounces off of the couch and rolls under the coffee table. No one is hurt, but feminine shouting breaks out anyway.

Mark’s son remains motionless, chunks of glass glittering in his hair, wondering what would happen if Mark were to run over, say, a buffalo. Or a General.