

THE LAWNMOWER MAN

In previous years, Harold Parkette had always taken pride in his lawn. He had owned a large silver Lawnboy and paid the boy down the block five dollars per cutting to push it. In those days Harold Parkette had followed the Boston Red Sox on the radio with a beer in his hand and the knowledge that God was in his heaven and all was right with the world, including his lawn. But last year, in mid-October, fate had played Harold Parkette a nasty trick. While the boy was mowing the grass for the last time of the season, the Castonmeyers' dog had chased the Smiths' cat under the mower.

Harold's daughter had thrown up half a quart of cherry Kool-Aid into the lap of her new jumper, and his wife had nightmares for a week afterwards. Although she had arrived after the fact, she *had* arrived in time to see Harold and the green-faced boy cleaning the blades. Their daughter and Mrs Smith stood over them, weeping, although Alicia had taken time enough to change her jumper for a pair of blue jeans and one of those disgusting skimpy sweaters. She had a crush on the boy who mowed the lawn.

After a week of listening to his wife moan and gobble in the next bed, Harold decided to get rid of the mower. He didn't really *need* a mower anyway, he supposed. He had hired a boy this year; next year he would just hire a boy *and* a mower. And maybe Carla would stop moaning in her sleep. He might even get laid again.

So he took the silver Lawnboy down to Phil's Sunoco, and he and Phil dickered over it. Harold came away with a brand-new Kelly blackwall tyre and a tankful of hi-test, and Phil put the silver Lawnboy out on one of the pump islands with a hand-lettered FOR SALE sign on it.

And this year, Harold just kept putting off the necessary hiring. When he finally got around to calling last year's boy, his mother told him Frank had gone to the state university. Harold shook his head in wonder and went to the refrigerator to get a beer. Time certainly flew, didn't it? My God, yes.

He put off hiring a new boy as first May and then June slipped past him and the Red Sox continued to wallow in fourth place. He sat on the back porch on the weekends and watched glumly as a never ending progression of young boys he had never seen before popped out to mutter a quick hello before taking his buxom daughter off to the local passion pit. And the grass thrived and grew in a marvellous way. It was a good summer for grass; three days of shine followed by one of gentle rain, almost like clockwork.

By mid-July, the lawn looked more like a meadow than a suburbanite's backyard, and Jack Castonmeyer had begun to make all sorts of extremely unfunny jokes, most of which concerned the price of hay and alfalfa. And Don Smith's four-year-old daughter Jenny had taken to hiding in it when there was oatmeal for breakfast or spinach for supper.

One day in late July, Harold went out on the patio during the seventh-inning stretch and saw a woodchuck sitting perkily on the overgrown back walk. The time had come, he decided. He flicked off the radio, picked up the paper, and turned to the classifieds. And halfway down the Part Time column, he found this: *Lawns mowed. Reasonable.*

776-2390.

Harold called the number, expecting a vacuuming housewife who would yell outside for her son. Instead, a briskly professional voice said, 'Pastoral Greenery and Outdoor Services. . . how may we help you?'

Cautiously, Harold told the voice how Pastoral Greenery could help him. Had it come to this, then? Were lawn-cutters starting their own businesses and hiring office help? He asked the voice about rates, and the voice quoted him a reasonable figure.

Harold hung up with a lingering feeling of unease and went back to the porch. He sat down, turned on the radio, and stared out over his glandular lawn at the Saturday clouds moving slowly across the Saturday sky. Carla and Alicia were at his mother-in-law's and the house was his. It would be a pleasant surprise for them if the boy who was coming to cut the lawn finished before they came back.

He cracked a beer and sighed as Dick Drago was touched for a double and then hit a batter. A little breeze shuffled across the screened-in porch. Crickets hummed softly in the long grass. Harold grunted something unkind about Dick Drago and then dozed off.

He was jarred awake a half hour later by the doorbell. He knocked over his beer getting up to answer it.

A man in grass-stained denim overalls stood on the front stoop, chewing a toothpick. He was fat. The curve of his belly pushed his faded blue overall out to a point where Harold half suspected he had swallowed a basketball.

'Yes?' Harold Parkette asked, still half asleep.

The man grinned, rolled his toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other, tugged at the seat of his overalls, and then pushed his green baseball cap up a notch on his forehead. There was a smear of fresh engine oil on the bill of his cap. And there he was, smelling of grass, earth, and oil, grinning at Harold Parkette.

'Pastoral sent me, buddy,' he said jovially, scratching his crotch. 'You called, right? Right, buddy?' He grinned on endlessly.

'Oh. The lawn. You?' Harold stared stupidly.

'Yep, me.' The lawnmower man bellowed fresh laughter into Harold's sleep-puffy face.

Harold stood helplessly aside and the lawnmower man tromped ahead of him down the hall, through the living room and kitchen, and on to the back porch. Now Harold had placed the man and everything was all right. He had seen the type before, working for the sanitation department and the highway repair crews out on the turnpike. Always with a spare minute to lean on their shovels and smoke Lucky Strikes or Camels, looking at you as if they were the salt of the earth, able to hit you for five or sleep with your wife any time they wanted to. Harold had always been slightly afraid of men like this; they were always tanned dark brown, there were always nets of wrinkles around their eyes, and they always knew what to do.

'The back lawn's the real chore,' he told the man, unconsciously deepening his voice. 'It's square and there are no obstructions, but it's pretty well grown up.' His voice faltered back into its normal register and he found himself apologizing: 'I'm afraid I've let it go.'

'No sweat, buddy. No strain. Great-great-great.' The lawnmower man grinned at him with a thousand travelling-salesmen jokes in his eyes. 'The taller, the better. Healthy soil, that's what you got there, by Circe. That's what I always say.'

By Circe?

The lawnmower man cocked his head at the radio. Yastrzemski had just struck out. 'Red Sox fan? I'm a Yankees man, myself.' He clumped back into the house and down the front hall. Harold watched him bitterly.

He sat back down and looked accusingly for a moment at the puddle of beer under the table with the overturned Coors can in the middle of it. He thought of getting the mop from the kitchen and decided it would keep.

No sweat. No strain.

He opened his paper to the financial section and cast a judicious eye at the closing stock quotations. As a good Republican, he considered the Wall Street executives behind the columned type to be at least minor demigods - (*By Circe??*) - and he had wished many times that he could better understand the Word, as handed down from the mount not on stone tablets but in such enigmatic abbreviations as pct. and Kdk and 3.28 up 2/3. He had once bought a judicious three shares in a company called Midwest Bisonburgers, Inc., that had gone broke in 1968. He had lost his entire seventy-five-dollar investment. Now, he understood, bisonburgers were quite the coming thing. The wave of the future. He had discussed this often with Sonny, the bartender down at the Goldfish Bowl. Sonny told Harold his trouble was that he was five years ahead of his time, and he should...

A sudden racketing roar startled him out of the new doze he had just been slipping into.

Harold jumped to his feet, knocking his chair over and staring around wildly.

'That's a lawnmower?' Harold Parkette asked the kitchen. 'My God, *that's* a lawnmower?'

He rushed through the house and stared out of the front door. There was nothing out there but a battered green van with the words PASTORAL GREENERY, INC. painted on the side. The roaring sound was in back now. Harold rushed through his house again, burst on to the back porch, and stood frozen.

It was obscene.

It was a travesty.

The aged red power mower the fat man had brought in his van was running on its own. No one was pushing it; in fact, no one was within five feet of it. It was running at a fever pitch, tearing through the unfortunate grass of Harold Parkette's back lawn like an avenging red devil straight from hell. It screamed and bellowed and farted

oily blue smoke in a crazed kind of mechanical madness that made Harold feel ill with terror. The overripe smell of cut grass hung in the air like sour wine.

But the lawnmower man was the true obscenity.

The lawnmower man had removed his clothes - every stitch. They were folded neatly in the empty birdbath that was at the centre of the back lawn. Naked and grass-stained, he was crawling along about five feet behind the mower, eating the cut grass. Green juice ran down his chin and dripped on to his pendulous belly. And every time the lawnmower whirled around a corner, he rose and did an odd, skipping jump before prostrating himself again.

'*Stop!*' Harold Parkette screamed. '*Stop that!*'

But the lawnmower man took no notice, and his screaming scarlet face never slowed. If anything, it seemed to speed up. Its nicked steel grill seemed to grin sweatily at Harold as it raved by.

Then Harold saw the mole. It must have been hiding in stunned terror just ahead of the mower, in the swath of grass about to be slaughtered. It bolted across the cut band of lawn towards safety under the porch, a panicky brown streak.

The lawnmower swerved.

Blatting and howling, it roared over the mole and spat it out in a string of fur and entrails that reminded Harold of the Smiths' cat. The mole destroyed, the lawnmower rushed back to the main job.

The lawnmower man crawled rapidly by, eating grass. Harold stood paralysed with horror, stocks, bonds, and bisonburgers completely forgotten. He could actually see that huge, pendulous belly expanding. *The lawnmower man swerved and ate the mole.*

That was when Harold Parkette leaned out of the screen door and vomited into the zinnias. The world went grey, and suddenly he realized he was fainting, *had* fainted. He collapsed backwards on to the porch and closed his eyes .

Someone was shaking him. Carla was shaking him. He hadn't done the dishes or emptied the garbage and Carla was going to be very angry but that was all right. As long as -she was waking him up, taking him out of the horrible dream he had been having, back into the normal world, nice normal Carla with her Playtex Living Girdle and her buck teeth -Buck teeth, yes. But not Carla's buck teeth. Carla had weak-looking chipmunk buck teeth. But these teeth were -Hairy.

Green hair was growing on these buck teeth. It almost looked like -*Grass?*

'Oh my God,' Harold said.

'You fainted, buddy, right, huh?' The lawnmower man was bending over him, grinning with his hairy teeth. His lips and chin were hairy, too. Everything was hairy. And green. The yard stank of grass and gas and too sudden

silence.

Harold bolted up to a sitting position and stared at the dead mower. All the grass had been neatly cut. And there would be no need to rake this job, Harold observed sickly. If the lawnmower man missed a single cut blade, he couldn't see it. He squinted obliquely at the lawnmower man and winced. He was still naked, still fat, still terrifying. Green trickles ran from the corners of his mouth.

'What is this?' Harold begged.

The man waved an arm benignly at the lawn. 'This? Well, it's a new thing the boss has been trying. It works out real good. Real good, buddy. We're killing two birds with one stone. We keep getting along towards the final stage, and we're making money to support our other operations to boot. See what I mean? Of course every now and then we run into a customer who doesn't understand - some people got no respect for efficiency, right? - but the boss is always agreeable to a sacrifice. Sort of keeps the wheels greased, if you catch me.'

Harold said nothing. One word knelled over and over in his mind, and that word was 'sacrifice'. In his mind's eye he saw the mole spewing out from under the battered red mower.

He got up slowly, like a palsied old man. 'Of course,' he said, and could only come up with a line from one of Alicia's folk-rock records. 'God bless the grass.'

The lawnmower man slapped one summer-apple-coloured thigh. 'That's pretty good, buddy. In fact, that's damned good. I can see you got the right spirit. Okay if I write that down when I get back to the office? Might mean a promotion.'

'Certainly,' Harold said, retreating towards the back door and striving to keep his melting smile in place. 'You go right ahead and finish. I think I'll take a little nap -' 'Sure, buddy,' the lawnmower man said, getting ponderously to his feet. Harold noticed the unusually deep split between the first and second toes, almost as if the feet were well, cloven.

'It hits everybody kinda hard at first,' the lawnmower man said. 'You'll get used to it.' He eyed Harold's portly figure shrewdly. 'In fact, you might even want to give it a whirl yourself. The boss has always got an eye out for new talent.'

'The boss,' Harold repeated faintly.

The lawnmower man paused at the bottom of the steps and gazed tolerantly up at Harold Parkette. 'Well, say, buddy. I figured you must have guessed. . . God bless the grass and all.'

Harold shook his head carefully and the lawnmower man laughed.

'Pan. Pan's the boss.' And he did a half hop, half shuffle in the newly cut grass and the lawnmower screamed into life and began to trundle around the house.

'The neighbours -' Harold began, but the lawnmower man only waved cheerily and disappeared.

Out front the lawnmower blatted and howled. Harold Parkette refused to look, as if by refusing he could deny the grotesque spectacle that the Castonmeyers and Smiths -wretched Democrats both - were probably drinking in with horrified but no doubt righteously I-told-you-so eyes.

Instead of looking, Harold went to the telephone, snatched it up, and dialled police headquarters from the emergency decal pasted on the phone's handset.

'Sergeant Hall,' the voice at the other end said.

Harold stuck a finger in his free ear and said, 'My name is Harold Parkette. My address is 1421 East Endicott Street.

I'd like to report . . .' What? What would he like to report?

A man is in the process of raping and murdering my lawn and he works for a fellow named Pan and has cloven feet?

'Yes, Mr Parkette?'

Inspiration struck. 'I'd like to report a case of indecent exposure.'

'Indecent exposure,' Sergeant Hall repeated.

'Yes. There's a man mowing my lawn. He's in the, uh, altogether.'

'You mean he's naked?' Sergeant Hall asked, politely incredulous.

'Naked!' Harold agreed, holding tightly to the frayed ends of his sanity. 'Nude. Unclothed. Bare-assed. On my front lawn. Now will you get somebody the hell over here?'

'That address was 1421 West Endicott?' Sergeant Hall asked bemusedly.

'East!' Harold yelled. 'For God's sake -,

'And you say he's definitely naked? You are able to observe his, uh, genitals and so on?'

Harold tried to speak and could only gargle. The sound of the insane lawnmower seemed to be growing louder and louder, drowning out everything in the universe. He felt his gorge rise.

'Can you speak up?' Sergeant Hall buzzed. 'There's an awfully noisy connection there at your end -'

The front door crashed open.

Harold looked around and saw the lawnmower man's mechanized familiar advancing through the door. Behind it came the lawnmower man himself, still quite naked. With something approaching true insanity, Harold saw the man's pubic hair was a roch fertile green. He was twirling his baseball cap on one finger.

'That was a mistake, buddy,' the lawnmower man said reproachfully. 'You shoulda stuck with God bless the grass.'

'Hello? Hello, Mr Parkette -'

The telephone dropped from Harold's nerveless fingers as the lawnmower began to advance on him, cutting through the nap of Carla's new Mohawk rug and spitting out brown hunks of fibre as it came.

Harold stared at it with a kind of bird-and-snake fascination until it reached the coffee table. When the mower shunted it aside, shearing one leg into sawdust and splinters as it did so, he climbed over the back of his chair and began to retreat towards the kitchen, dragging the chair in front of him.

'That won't do any good, buddy,' the lawnmower man said kindly. 'Apt to be messy, too. Now if you was just to show me where you keep your sharpest butcher knife, we could get this sacrifice business out of the way real painless. I think the birdbath would do. . . and then -,

Harold shoved the chair at the lawnmower, which had been craftily flanking him while the naked man drew his attention, and bolted through the doorway. The lawn-mower roared around the chair, jetting out exhaust, and as Harold smashed open the porch screen door and leaped down the steps, he heard it - smelled it, felt it - right at his heels.

The lawnmower roared off the top step like a skier going off a jump. Harold sprinted across his newly cut back lawn, but there had been too many beers, too many afternoon naps. He could sense it nearing him, then on his heels, and then he looked over his shoulder and tripped over his own feet.

The last thing Harold Parkette saw was the grinning grill of the charging lawnmower, rocking back to reveal its flashing, green-stained blades, and above it the fat face of the lawnmower man, shaking his head in good-natured reproof.

'Hell of a thing,' Lieutenant Goodwin said as the last of the photographs were taken. He nodded to the two men in white, and they trundled their basket across the lawn. 'He reported some naked guy on his lawn not two hours ago.'

'Is that so?' Patrolman Cooley asked.

'Yeah. One of the neighbours called in, too. Guy named Castonmeyer. He thought it was Parkette himself. Maybe it was, Cooley. Maybe it was.'

'Sir?'

'Crazy with the heat,' Lieutenant Goodwin said gravely, and tapped his 'Schizo-fucking-phrenia.'

'Yes, sir,' Cooley said respectfully.

'Where's the rest of him?' one of the white-coats asked.

'The birdbath,' Goodwin said. He looked profoundly up at the sky.

'Did you say the birdbath?' the white-coat asked.

'Indeed I did,' Lieutenant Goodwin agreed. Patrolman Cooley looked at the birdbath and suddenly lost most of his tan.

'Sex maniac,' Lieutenant Goodwin said. 'Must have been.'

'Prints?' Cooley asked thickly.

'You might as well ask for footprints,' Goodwin said. He gestured at the newly cut grass.

Patrolman Cooley made a strangled noise in his throat.

Lieutenant Goodwin stuffed his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. 'The world,' he said gravely, 'is full of nuts. Never forget that, Cooley, Schizos. Lab boys says somebody chased Parkette through his own living room with a lawnmower. Can you imagine that?'

'No sir,' Cooley said.

Goodwin looked out over Harold Parkette's neatly manicured lawn. 'Well, like the man said when he saw the black-haired Swede, it surely is a Norse of the different colour.'

Goodwin strolled around the house and Cooley followed him. Behind them, the scent of newly mown grass hung pleasantly in the air.