HOW TO CUT GRASS

FLORIDA SATURDAYS

HOW TO CUT GRASS

Blake Gunnels

BLUFFLIGHT BOOKS

HOW TO CUT GRASS

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1

SIX FORTY IN THE MORNING



AT SIX FORTY on a Saturday morning in July, I announced to my wife that I was going out to cut the grass.

I said it the way you say you are going to run to the hardware store. Light. Confident. Like a person with a plan and a working relationship with time.

She was at the coffee pot. She did not turn around.

"Which part of it," she said.

That is not a question. That is a review of the last four years.

Here is where things stood. Our St. Augustine had put on two and a half inches since Tuesday, because it had rained Tuesday, Wednesday, and again Thursday at three fifteen the way it does from June to September, and St. Augustine in a wet week does not grow so much as advance. One runner had crossed the sidewalk and was headed for the driveway with what I would call intent. Another had come up through the seam in the concrete by the hose bib, which a man from the county once told me was not possible.

The yard did not look neglected. It looked ambitious.

Under the cabbage palm the builder put in by the front walk there were two dead fronds down already and a third one hanging. I carried the two down ones out to the curb. The third one I left where it was, because it was not hurting anything yet.

My plan was simple. Mow the front, mow the back, put everything away, take a shower, and have the whole afternoon. I would be done by nine thirty.

I had made this exact plan on a number of previous Saturdays and it had never once survived contact with the yard.

I put on a shirt I would not be buried in, work shoes, a ball cap, and sunglasses. I put the garage door up and stood there a second the way you do, looking at all of it lined up along the wall.

Mower. Edger. Trimmer. Blower. Two batteries. A coil of orange extension cord. A jug of oil. A bag of fertilizer I bought in April and have never opened.

And one red gas can.

All I had to do was make the grass shorter.

2

SEVEN OH FIVE, AND THE CORD



I ROLLED IT out into the driveway, set the choke, squeezed the bail, and pulled the starter cord.

Nothing.

Pulled again.

Nothing.

Every other machine I own starts because I paid for it. This one starts because it feels like it.

On the third pull it coughed one time, which I took as encouragement, because a man alone in a driveway will take anything.

By the seventh pull I was breathing through my mouth. By the ninth, my lower back had filed a formal complaint. Somewhere around the eleventh I began to speak, and I want to say here that I am not a cursing man in general and was raised better, but there is a vocabulary that lives in a man's chest from birth, dormant, and it is released by a small engine and by nothing else on this earth.

Which is when Ronnie Dean Pettigrew came out of his house with a cup of coffee.

Ronnie Dean lives two doors down and is retired from something involving trucks. His mower starts when he looks at it. His grass is Empire zoysia, dark as a pool table, and he cuts it on the diagonal, which nobody asked him to do, and it looks so good it ought to have a tournament on it.

He stood in his own driveway pretending to study the sky.

"Flooded?" he called.

It sounds like help. It is the mechanical equivalent of asking somebody who has fallen down whether he meant to.

"Might be," I said.

I checked the plug wire. I took the cover off the air filter and looked in there with a great deal of concentration, although I could not have identified a healthy air filter if it had stood up and given me its name.

What I was telling myself the whole time was that it was the ethanol.

It is what I always tell myself, because Wendell has trained me to. Wendell runs the small engine shop out on the highway, he is somewhere north of eighty, and he has forearms on him like boat cleats. He has explained to me four separate times that the gas they sell now is ten percent corn, and that corn draws water, and that the water sits down in your carburetor all winter, when you only mow every third week, so that what you have got come spring is not a fuel system, it is a terrarium. He says the word ethanol the way a preacher says adultery. Long on the first part.

He has charged me sixty-five dollars to say it four times. He has been right four times. I have driven home and forgotten it four times.

So I had a good explanation ready out there in the driveway, and the best part about it was that it was not my fault.

Then I opened the gas cap and looked in the tank.

Dry.

Bone dry, and dry in a way that had clearly been going on for a while, and I turned my head slowly toward the garage where the red can was sitting, and I remembered, in perfect detail, standing in that same garage two weeks earlier, picking that can up and feeling how light it was and thinking, out loud, in an empty room:

I need to fill that before Saturday.

I went and got it and shook it.

There was about a half cup rolling around in the bottom making a sound like a threat.

Two doors down, Ronnie Dean took a long and thoughtful sip of coffee.

"Intake," I said, and pointed my chin at the machine like the diagnosis had confirmed my original theory.

He nodded. I have never in my life been so relieved to be believed about something I made up.

3

SEVEN TWENTY, AT THE PUMP



BUYING MOWER GAS should take eleven minutes. That figure assumes you are dressed like somebody a store would let in.

By the time I found the can empty I had already sweated through the chest and the back of my shirt, so that it was no longer a color. It was a condition. There was old grass up both shins. There was a grease mark on my cheek, and my only accomplishment to that point had been removing a cap.

Every pump at the station was taken by somebody buying enough fuel to reach Amarillo. I stood off to the side holding my little red can while a man with an airboat on a trailer looked at it with the sympathy you show a child carrying a dead goldfish.

The pump clicked off at six tenths of a gallon and would not start again, and there was a line forming behind me, so that is what I left with.

Coming home, clouds were stacking up out west, beyond the pines. Florida clouds do not approach. They assemble behind your neighborhood and wait for you to start something.

I turned onto our street and Ronnie Dean's front yard was finished. Diagonal. Both directions laid over just right.

Then there is the spout.

The modern gas can spout was designed by a committee, in a room, by people who have never in their lives needed to put gasoline into anything. It has a collar you press. It has a sleeve you push. It has a locking tab you rotate. To work it you must press the collar, push the sleeve, hold the tab, and lift the can at the same time, using the four hands God did not issue you.

And it does not vent. So it comes in surges. Glug. Nothing. Glug glug. Nothing. On the third surge you put about an inch of unleaded across the top of your right shoe.

I smelled that shoe for two days, and every time I smelled it I was a little bit angry at a committee.

I primed it, pulled once, and it started.

Which should have felt good, and did not, because all it proved was that the machine had been innocent the whole time and I had spent twenty minutes out there publicly punishing it in front of the neighbors for something I did.

It was five after eight. I was now ready to begin.

4

EIGHT OH FIVE. THE AIR



PEOPLE WHO HAVE not worked in a Florida yard in the summer think humidity is moisture in the air. That is true in the same way that the Atlantic is a damp spot.

Everybody asks what the temperature is. The phone said eighty-two and felt like ninety-one. That is nothing. They have ninety-one in Ohio and they play softball in it.

The number that matters is the dew point, and the dew point that morning was seventy-eight, and what a dew point of seventy-eight means is that the air has come to your yard already full. It has no room, and it is not taking deposits today.

The sweat stands up and then it runs. Into your eyes, where it stings. Off the end of your nose in a drip you can watch land. Down your back into country that will chafe by Wednesday. My shirt did not get damp. My shirt got loaded, and went see through, and began to weigh something.

The sunglasses fogged. Not outside. Inside. From me.

And the gnats came. There is a gnat in this state interested in the corner of your eye and nothing else in creation. You cannot swat him, because both hands are on the machine, so you do a thing with your face, a hard blink and a shoulder raise, over and over, until you look like a man arguing with somebody who is not there.

The grass was still wet.

Not rained on. Dew, and the leftovers of Thursday, which in July does not leave. You are not supposed to mow wet grass. It balls up under the deck in a mat about the consistency of cooked spinach, it plugs the chute, and it comes out in clumps that lie there and yellow and kill whatever is under them. Everything I just described is on page four of the manual, which I have read, in the garage, standing up, one time.

What you are supposed to do is wait until it dries.

It does not dry. It will rain again at three o'clock. It rained at three o'clock Thursday and it will rain at three o'clock tomorrow, and if I wait for dry grass in the wet season I will be waiting in October with a yard I need a bush hog for.

So you mow it wet, knowing exactly what you are doing to the machine and to the lawn, and you stop every ninety seconds to turn the mower over and get up in there with a stick.

Never with your hand. I know a man who used his hand. He is fine. Great guy. He counts differently than he used to.

I pushed down the first row. The St. Augustine folded over under the deck, thick as hall carpet and about as willing.

The bag filled in forty feet.

I emptied it twice, took it off, and switched to mulching, which is what I should have been doing all along, because clippings are free nitrogen and they go right back into the ground and nobody has to load a truck. People bag because their daddy bagged. Their daddy was wrong.

The mower promptly began leaving squat green clumps behind it every six feet.

At the corner of the house the air conditioner was running, and the warm exhaust came rolling across the grass and hit me in the face. Somewhere on the other side of that wall a thermostat said seventy-four. I pictured my wife in there with iced tea.

She came to the window and waved.

I raised one hand off the handle with the careful dignity of a man already thinking about quitting who does not want it entering the family record.

5

EIGHT THIRTY-FIVE. THE ONE-THIRD RULE



THERE IS A rule about cutting grass and everybody who has ever read one page about it knows the rule. You do not take off more than a third of the leaf blade at a time. You mow St. Augustine tall, three and a half to four inches, because tall grass shades its own roots and chokes out weeds and holds water, and short grass is a tanning bed for chinch bugs. This is not obscure information. It is on the bag. It is on the sign at the store. A man came to my door about it once.

I know that rule. I have said that rule out loud to other people, in a driveway, in the tone of a man passing along something valuable.

And I stood there at eight thirty-five in the morning with my hand on the deck lever and thought about how if I dropped it two notches, down to two and a half, I would not have to do this again for two weeks.

I want to be honest about what that moment is.

It is not ignorance. A man who does not know the rule can scalp his yard and go inside and eat a sandwich and feel nothing. It is worse when you know. You stand there with your hand on the lever and you run the whole thing out in your head: the root system, the stress, the thin spots that will show up by the fifteenth, the fungus that gets in behind it, the fact that you will pay for this exact decision in September and you will know precisely what you are paying for.

And then you drop it two notches anyway, because it is hot, and you want one Saturday back.

I got about eleven feet before it started coming up tan behind me where the deck had taken the runners down to the stems, and I stopped and put it back up where it belonged.

So now I had a strip through the middle of my front yard, about two feet wide and eleven feet long, cut an inch and a half lower than everything around it. In the light it looked like a landing area.

It stayed that way until the second week of September.

Every single time I pulled in the driveway, I saw it.

6

EIGHT FIFTY, AND THE WET PLACE



I FOUND IT with the left rear wheel, on a pass along the side of the house toward the back gate that I cannot now explain.

Every yard in Florida has one spot that is wet and nobody can tell you why. It has not rained since Thursday. The sprinklers did not run. The sun has been sitting on this neighborhood since seven. And yet, next to the back gate, there is a piece of ground that will take a wheel and think about it.

The mower dropped, lurched, and stopped going anywhere. I pushed. The wheel spun and dug. I pulled. The other wheel came in to help. Inside of fifteen seconds I had a machine buried to the axle and throwing black mud up the front of both legs with real efficiency.

I shut it off and tried to lift it. A mower that weighs sixty pounds in a garage weighs about four hundred pounds in mud. I rocked it forward and back, then sideways, and it came loose all at once and rolled over my foot.

No damage to speak of. Some expansion of the vocabulary.

Some of that mud had gone across the sunglasses. I took them off. The only thing I had to wipe them with was the shirt, and I knew what the shirt was, and I used the shirt.

The wet place had also been supporting a fire ant colony, and they came up out of that ground with the position that the whole thing had been unprovoked.

Here is what people who have not been stung do not know. There is a moment, about a second and a half long, where you feel nothing at all. The nothing is the worst part. The nothing is them getting into position. Fire ants coordinate. They wait on a signal. And then every one of them goes at the same time, and a grown man crosses his own back yard doing a dance that has

no name and cannot be taught. Two doors down, Ronnie Dean's dog started barking, and I could not swear he was barking at anything else.

When it was over I stood there and took inventory.

Front yard half done. Back yard untouched. A muddy rut beside the gate. One shoe smelling like gasoline, the other one full of ants, and something the color of a bruise standing up out west, beyond the pines.

The back door opened.

"How's it going out here?"

"Almost got it," I said.

A marriage runs on a certain number of small stabilizing lies and that is one of the load-bearing ones.

7

NINE FIFTEEN. WATCH YOUR STEP



WE HAVE A beagle mix named Peanut. She is nine years old, she has never bitten anybody, she has never run off, and she has exactly one flaw, which is that she conducts her business according to a system no human being has ever been able to determine. Not the fence line. Not the back corner. Wherever she happens to be standing when the notion arrives, which in a quarter acre with a fence means anywhere at all.

I finished the front at nine ten and took the mower through the gate, and I was making a tight turn by the hibiscus when my wife came to the screen door.

"Watch out for where Peanut…"

There are warnings that arrive in time, and there are warnings that become narration.

My right foot came down with a softness that is not associated with turf.

I stopped. The mower kept idling in my hands. Behind me on the porch, Peanut watched with the calm expression of a subcontractor whose work has passed inspection.

Stepping in it is the good outcome. It is the one you are hoping for. You scrape the shoe on the edge of the concrete, you say a few things, you go on with your day.

Because the mower does not stop for it.

The mower does not even slow down. It turns a blade at three thousand revolutions a minute, and it does not stop that problem, it solves that problem, in every direction, at once, up the back of the house and both of your legs from the knee down.

And the awful part is you do not know right away. You are past it and still going. It takes about eight seconds for the information to reach you, and it reaches you through the air.

I got the hose and stood by the spigot spraying the sole of a shoe while small brown-green droplets hit the fence. A garden hose at full pressure will clean a great many things. It will not restore trust.

"She usually goes by the oak," my wife said.

I said that had not been my experience.

"Well," she said. "Usually."

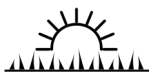
Usually is not a word that means anything in yard work. The sprinklers usually cover the lawn. The trimmer line usually advances. The storm usually holds off until three. And the dog usually honors an informal zoning agreement she has never been shown.

The lesson, and I pass it along at no charge: walk the yard before you crank anything. One slow lap with a grocery sack and your head down like somebody looking for a lost ring.

You will find four. You will miss one. You always miss one.

8

NINE FORTY. THE BACK



THE TRAMPOLINE FIRST. It is not that I cannot get under it. It is that the grass under a trampoline is dying anyway, from shade, and has been dying since the day we set it up, and every time I stand there I think that one of these Saturdays I am going to walk it over by the fence and let that ground come back. I have been thinking that for two years. Nobody in this house has been on it since the boy turned fifteen.

So I did what I do every time. Moved it three feet, cut a strip, moved it back six, cut another, and put it down approximately where it started using landmarks and prayer. Runners had braided themselves around all four legs. There were pale mushrooms under there that had organized.

Our back yard is not large. A real estate listing would call it manageable. A listing will also call a room with no windows cozy.

From behind a mower handle it runs to the horizon.

Then the furniture. Four chairs, a table, two planters, the hose reel, and a charcoal grill. Every one of them standing on grass. Two trips apiece, and at no point is the whole yard open, which is the same arrangement the county uses to resurface a road.

Behind the shed the mower found a cabbage palm frond.

A frond lies out there looking like dead foliage and has the structural properties of rebar. The blade hit it, made a sound like a dropped wrench, and the engine quit.

I tipped the machine up with the carburetor side high, which is the correct way, and which I did not always do. I know what the other way costs because I paid it in 2019, and Wendell did not say one word to me about it while he cleaned out what I had let run down into places oil is not supposed to go. He just did it and handed it back and took my money. There are men who make you feel it worse by not saying anything.

While I was under there I found fishing line wrapped around the shaft.

We do not fish in the back yard. Florida distributes fishing line through the atmosphere.

At twenty after ten I made the last pass and shut it off and stood there in the ringing quiet. The yard was open. It was level. It looked like people lived here on purpose.

Then I turned the mower toward the garage.

Shag along the driveway. Runners out over the sidewalk. Weeds under the fence. Green whiskers standing up around every post, tree, and downspout on the property.

The grass was cut.
The yard was nowhere close to done.

9

TEN TWENTY-FIVE. THE EDGE



I PAID OUT a hundred feet of orange extension cord. By the time I got to the far end of the driveway that cord had been around the mower, a bicycle, the garbage can, and my left ankle.

An edger exists because grass will not respect a property line. It goes out over the concrete looking for a better life and has to be reminded where the lawn ends and the county begins. Mine is electric, which means it has two conditions: too far from an outlet, or wrapped around something expensive.

Here is what nobody tells you about the first real edge of the year. It is an excavation. The St. Augustine had run two inches out over that concrete and rooted down into the sand at the joint, and what comes off is a long strip, like pulling up carpet in a rental, and what is under it is dirt that has not seen daylight since the last election.

The machine started with a shriek. Dirt came up at my face and the guard redirected about eight percent of it.

A proper edge is a narrow vertical line. Mine started out that way and then began to wander. At one point I had opened a trench you could have laid fiber optic in. At another the blade climbed up onto the concrete and threw sparks toward a parked car.

Then it hit something solid, three inches down, and stopped.

Everybody with an irrigation system has lateral line running exactly where an edger is most likely to find it, and I have been into this particular run of it before.

I knew what I had touched about a half second after I touched it. It is a particular feeling. Not surprise. Recognition.

So I stopped. I looked at the ground. Nothing came up. I put my shoe on the spot and leaned on it, and it stayed dry.

The system was not running at the time.

I knew the system was not running at the time. Dry ground with the water off proves exactly nothing, and I have known that since I was twenty-five years old, and I looked at that spot and decided I was satisfied and went on down the driveway with the machine.

A man can want very badly not to know a thing.

I found out at a quarter past twelve.

Up by the mailbox the cord came tight, and a hundred feet of slack came up off the ground at once the way a jump rope comes up, and I turned around in time to watch it take the decorative lantern off the top of the mailbox post, the one that has not produced light since 2023.

It went end over end down the slope of the driveway and came apart into components representing three separate decades of manufacture.

I put it back together with pressure and denial.

Ronnie Dean's driveway edge is straight enough to launch something off of. Mine looked hand drawn during a mild earthquake. But it was an edge and it was mine, and I walked out to the mailbox twice that morning for no reason at all.

10

TEN FIFTY-FIVE. THE WEED EATER



THEY CALL IT a weed eater. It eats no weeds. It eats trimmer line, patience, and the bark off young trees.

It is a four-stroke, which Wendell sold me so I would stop bringing him the other kind, and I had topped it off out of the red can before I started, which is where a piece of that gasoline went.

Mine started on the fourth pull, which for that machine is early. I tapped the head against the driveway to advance the line, which is the entire

theory of a bump feed head. Nothing. Tapped again. Nothing. On the third tap, with some feeling behind it, six feet came out at once, wrapped the shaft, and slapped my calf.

Now, the line in that spool was the cheap line.

There is a heavier line, and it costs about four dollars more a spool, and it does not break every nine minutes against a chain link fence. I stood in that aisle in April with the good spool in my hand, put it back, and bought the other one, and every single thing that happened over the next forty minutes was purchased with that four dollars.

So then you have to open the head.

The inside of that spool looked like a nest built by an electrician. I unwound the whole business and wound it back on according to two arrows molded into black plastic, in black, holding a coil of line that had developed a personal opinion about which direction it wanted to go.

First attempt, backward. Second attempt, correct. I could not tell you what I did differently, and I never have been able to.

Then I went to work. Around the mailbox, the light post, both fence corners, the AC pad, the downspouts, the hose bibs, and the two decorative rocks somebody set out there in 2011.

At the base of the live oak I was careful.

I was careful because I was not careful one time, three years ago, at the little oak on the north side. One pass of trimmer line takes the bark off a young trunk. Three passes around it takes the bark off all the way around, and a tree that has been girdled does not fall over and admit it. It leafs out the next spring like nothing happened. It waits a year and a half. Then one week in July it goes brown all at once and you stand there with a nursery receipt in a drawer somewhere and you know exactly which afternoon you did it and exactly how much of a hurry you were in.

So at this oak I go wide and leave a ring of tall grass standing around the trunk, which makes the tree look like it is wearing a ceremonial skirt.

I would rather have that than the other thing.

Somewhere in there the light changed. Not much. Enough that I straightened up once and looked west and then went back to what I was doing.

I also located the small plastic cap that covers the termite treatment port. I located it by launching it up under the azaleas.

At the fence, the line welded itself to the chain link. At the patio it found the extension cord. At the corner of the house it cut the low-voltage wire that runs out to the decorative lantern. I do not know what that wire was doing. It is not doing it now.

Forty minutes. Everything the mower could not reach had been cut, beaten, stripped, or frightened into cooperating.

I shut it off. My arms kept going for another ten minutes on their own.

11

ELEVEN FORTY. THE BLOWER



THERE WERE CLIPPINGS across the whole driveway, down the walk, and out to the curb.

The blower is the reward.

I know there are people who consider the leaf blower a plague upon the American Saturday. I have read their letters in the paper. They are right about most of it and I do not care, because there is nothing in the domestic life of a man that feels the way it feels to take a driveway covered in clippings and make it clean in one long sweep. The whole place goes from somebody cut this to somebody meant this. Two minutes. Best two minutes of the week.

Then the wind shifted.

Florida wind is never strong enough to cool you off. Its only function is to oppose whatever direction you are currently blowing. The clippings I had pushed into a nice green wave lifted, turned, came back across the driveway, and put themselves down again over a wider area and more evenly than they had been in the first place.

I changed sides. The wind changed sides. I got on the throttle, and the whole business went into the flower bed and settled into the mulch with the confidence of a permanent resident.

The blower also turned up what had been under all of it. Two oak leaves, a receipt, a dead anole, three roofing nails, and the termite cap, which

came up out of the azaleas when I put the machine into that bed. I put the cap in my shirt pocket.

I got a good pile up at the curb, and a pickup came by and the pressure wave off it spread that pile across thirty feet of street, and the driver never slowed down.

I stood there in the road and hoped, briefly and with some detail, that he had somewhere to be and would not get there.

Then I did the thing I am supposed to tell you I did not do.

I blew all of it down toward the storm drain.

Not by accident. I stood there and pointed the machine and watched it go, and I know where that drain lets out, because everybody on this street knows. It goes to the pond behind the Hendersons' and out of the pond to the river, and the county has put up a sign about it two blocks from my house, and I have read the sign, and the sign is right.

I got about eight feet of it in there before I quit.

Then I turned the blower around and worked it all back out of the gutter and into the yard, and got the dustpan, and got down on the concrete on both knees and swept it up by hand, and put it in a bag that was already too full to lift.

I want to be clear that I did not do that because I am a good citizen. I did it because I had already done the other thing and could not stand it.

By noon, the concrete was clean. The edges were sharp from a distance. The lawn lay bright and level in the sun.

I shut the blower off.

And in the quiet, out west, thunder.

12

NOON. THE STORM



IN THIS STATE, radar is not a forecast. It is a live record of whose plans are currently being ruined.

The sky right over my house was still blue. Out west, beyond the pines, the light had gone out of the whole treeline, and the app showed a little red cell moving northeast, and according to the arrow on the screen it was going to miss us.

According to fifty-one years of living in Florida, it had my address.

I started putting things away. The first gust came through carrying oak leaves out of a yard I have never had a reason to look at, and scattered them across a driveway I had finished eight minutes earlier.

The second gust turned over the yard bag.

Then a fat drop hit my forearm, and one hit the mower deck, and inside of four seconds it was coming down like gravel out of a dump truck.

The storm lasted nine minutes.

When it quit, steam came up off the driveway and the sun came back out and the air got hotter and wetter at the same time.

Little rivers had carried clippings back across the sidewalk. The wet place by the gate had been upgraded to a body of water. A low spot in the front lawn was holding enough standing water to attract migratory birds, and I made a note about grading it that I have been making since 2021.

I stood in the garage and watched water drip off the blower nozzle.

The app updated.

Light rain possible.

13

TWELVE FIFTEEN. ZONE ONE



I WALKED OUT to look at the storm debris and Zone One came on.

Rain ought to make irrigation unnecessary. That is true everywhere except a Florida yard, where the timer in the garage operates under its own treaty and does not recognize outside authority.

Three rotors stood up in the front lawn. The first one watered the driveway. The second one watered the street. The third one clicked around

against a shrub and delivered something like four gallons a minute directly to one croton leaf.

That third head has been aimed wrong since March.

I know the make of it. I know which tool it takes and where the arc screw is.

I have walked past it, twice a week, for five months.

I ran for the controller and the driveway rotor came around and caught me across the belt with reclaimed water. Reclaimed water is clean enough for turf and evidently clean enough for a man already wearing dog mess, gasoline, mud, and ant venom.

The controller said SAT 12:15 PM. The county does not allow a sprinkler to run between ten and four. Nobody has told my timer.

I pressed OFF. Nothing. Pressed it again. The screen changed to RAIN DELAY, which I took personally.

There is a rain sensor up on the gutter at the high end of the roof that does not work. The ladder hangs on two hooks in the garage, right over the mower. What I do not have is the personality. So twice a week, in the wet season, my system waters the rain.

And out at the end of the driveway, in the fresh trench I had cut that morning, the ground had gone dark and was coming up wet.

Not the wet place by the back gate. That one nobody can explain. This one I could have explained at ten thirty if I had been willing to.

Zone Two started.

The spray heads in the back came up under the patio furniture I had just moved back. One of them failed to pop and produced a bubbling fountain at grade. Another one shot clean over the fence into the neighbor's yard behind us, and I have wondered since whether it was trying to defect.

Finally I went out and closed the valve at the reclaimed meter, and every head in the yard sank down with a small disappointed sigh.

Peanut came to the back door and declined to go out in it.

That was reasonable. She had already completed her portion of the work.

14

TWELVE FORTY. THE PATCH



TALL GRASS HIDES everything. Short grass introduces it to you by name.

Out by the mailbox, now that everything around it was cut to four inches, the brown patch was back, about the size of a bath mat, in the same place it comes back every year.

I got down on my knees in my own front yard to look at it, which is a posture that causes neighbors to slow their trucks.

A man who does not know anything looks at a brown spot and waters it and goes inside. Takes ten seconds. I got down there and started running the list, and the list in this state is long. Chinch bugs. Webworms. Take-all root rot. Too much water, not enough water. Fertilizer burn from that bag in the garage I never spread.

The blades were yellow at the base. Some pulled free easy. Others held on, and that tells you something, and I could not remember what.

So I did the soap test, which is where you pour soapy water on the edge of the damage and see what comes up out of the thatch. No webworms presented themselves. What came up was two ants, a beetle, and a spider, and I apologized to the spider.

I got out the phone. The first result said chinch bugs. The second said large patch fungus. The third said take-all root rot. The fourth said that my own maintenance practices were most likely responsible, which I thought was unnecessarily personal from a website.

There is a soil test kit in my garage. It has been in my garage since a spring I could name if I thought about it.

I have filled the bag in it. Twice. It is sitting on the workbench right now with dirt from two different administrations.

What I do instead is buy a product.

There are three bags in my garage at this moment and every one of them is partly used, because that spot has had a different diagnosis every year it has been out there. There is a fungicide from the spring I was certain it was large

patch. There is a chinch bug granule from the summer I was certain it was chinch bugs. There is a bag of something with a name like a prescription drug that I bought because a fellow at the store said it was what he used, and I have never once read the back of it.

Not one of those bags is empty. Not one of them is finished. Each one represents about four fifths of a theory.

Ronnie Dean came down the sidewalk. He had already showered and was in a clean shirt.

"Could be fungus," he said.

"Could be."

"Could be chinch."

"Could be."

"Might need water."

"It got a rain and two zones today."

"Could be too much water."

Every fact you have supports two opposite conclusions, and both of them cost money.

He mentioned a product that runs forty-nine dollars.

I own that product. I did not tell him that. I said I thought the spot might come back on its own. We both looked down at it. It had the pale and resigned appearance of something drafting a farewell letter.

I wrote *lawn treatment* on the list for next Saturday, which hangs on a nail by the garage door. It has been on the list for next Saturday since the second week of June.

15

ONE O'CLOCK. THE ENVELOPE



THE MAIL CAME while I was still kneeling out there.

There was a white envelope in it from the homeowners association, and no homeowner in the history of this country has ever opened one of those expecting a birthday check.

Inside was a photograph of my side yard, taken eleven days earlier. There was a red circle drawn on it. Inside the red circle were some weeds along the air conditioning pad, about four inches tall, with no known criminal record.

PLEASE CORRECT WITHIN FOURTEEN DAYS.

I walked around the side of the house holding the photograph, and stood there, and looked at the pad.

The weeds in the picture had been removed by me, personally, ninety minutes earlier, along with the termite cap and a section of low-voltage wire.

The letter had done its real work anyway, which was to inform me that a human being had driven down my street, stopped his vehicle, gotten out with a camera, walked partway up my drive, photographed the ground beside my condenser, gone back to an office, put it in an envelope, and paid the federal government to place it in my mailbox.

The covenants require turf to be "green, healthy, and uniformly maintained." That is a reasonable expectation in a climate that offers drought, flood, ninety-four percent humidity, sand for soil, three fungal diseases, and an insect capable of taking a subdivision before breakfast.

I put the letter on the workbench next to the red gas can, where the important documents go.

Then I looked back at the pad. There was one sedge blade standing up beside the condenser, dead center, that the trimmer had missed.

From where I stood it appeared to be waving at the street.

16

ONE THIRTY. PUTTING IT AWAY



THE UNDERSIDE OF the deck was packed with wet clippings. I tipped it up, correctly, and scraped it out with a putty knife, and heavy green cakes came off it, one of which contained enough soil to farm.

The blade felt dull, and a dull blade tears the leaf instead of cutting it, and a torn leaf goes tan at the tip, and then the whole yard carries a haze on it that you cannot account for.

Sharpening it means taking off one center bolt.

One bolt. That is all it is. That bolt was installed at the factory by a hydraulic system built for bridgework, by a man who has since retired to Tennessee, and it has not turned since, and it did not turn that afternoon, and I put the wrench back in the drawer.

Wendell would have that blade off in four seconds with an impact wrench and a length of pipe, and he would not say one word about how long it had been on there.

The silence is the part I would have to sit through.

Both blower batteries showed one flashing bar, and the extension cord was still in the outlet the charger needed. I had run that cord at ten twenty-five and never pulled the plug.

I did what I could and started fitting it all back along the wall, and nothing went where it had gone that morning, because yard equipment expands during use.

I moved a bicycle. I shifted the bag of fertilizer. I folded the mower handle, then unfolded it when that put it into the shelf, then turned the trimmer sideways, and in the course of all that I knocked over the gas can.

It did not spill.

It was empty again.

Six tenths of a gallon, purchased six hours earlier. Some of it went into the mower. Some went onto the driveway. Some went onto my shoe. The rest of it appears to have been converted directly into noise.

I made a mental note to fill it before next Saturday.

It was the same note I made two weeks ago, and I filed it in the same reliable location.

17

TWO O'CLOCK. THE SHOWER



A SHOWER AFTER a Florida Saturday is the controlled removal of an ecosystem.

I left both shoes outside. One had mud and ant casualties in it. The other one had been through the incident at the hibiscus and will never again be worn in public.

I peeled the shirt off, which took some doing, and emptied my pockets onto the dresser: phone, keys, two pieces of trimmer line, one oak leaf, and an object I elected not to identify. The termite cap was not among them. It turned up in the washing machine that night, in the shirt.

In the mirror my face was striped with dirt where the sweat had run through it. My ankles showed six ant bites, three scratches, and one welt roughly the shape of the state of Florida.

The first water down the drain was brown. The second was green. A twig came out of my hair, and I had worn a hat the entire time.

I kept sweating in the shower.

You are standing in cool water and your body is still going underneath it, still pushing, and there is no way to tell what is the water and what is you. Nothing is being removed. The water is running over the top of it and leaving.

I got out and toweled off and I was still going. So I stood in front of the air conditioning vent in a towel with my arms a little way out from my sides, and I held still, and I waited to be told I could stop.

That is the one that sends people from Michigan back to Michigan inside of two years.

Then I found the sunburn. Back of the neck, where there had been neither collar nor hat brim, glowing like a stove eye. The sunscreen was on the kitchen counter where I had set it out that morning, still sealed, next to the insulated water bottle I had also left behind.

I put on clean clothes and walked into the living room and sat down.

My wife looked up from her book.

"You're done?"

"Completely."

She pointed at the window.

A cabbage palm frond, loosened by the storm, had come down across the front lawn.

18

TWO THIRTY. ONE MORE THING



THAT FROND WAS eight feet long, with a stem as stiff as a closet rod, and heavy enough to require either two men or one aggravated homeowner in clean clothes.

Every yard that is finished contains one more thing.

I changed shoes but not the shirt, which was a tactical error. Dragging it across the yard shed brown fiber over everything I had blown clean two and a half hours earlier. The butt end hung up in the turf. The tip caught the mailbox. When I put my back into it, it let go all at once and came around and hit me across the shoulder.

I got it out to the curb, where yard waste is collected on Tuesday, unless there is a holiday, an equipment problem, a schedule change, or a philosophical objection to palm fronds.

Walking back, I saw that the weed eater had knocked the downspout extension loose, and while I was down there putting it back I saw the wasp nest under the eave.

I backed away from that slowly and with respect.

Inside, there was a sandwich on the table and a glass of tea beside it. I sat under the ceiling fan and ate it.

"That nest under the eave has been there since June," she said, without looking up from the book.

I asked her how she knew that.

"I sit out there in the mornings," she said. "It's a good spot until about ten."

19

SIX THIRTY. THE INSPECTION



BY SIX THIRTY the heat had come down from murderous to merely unreasonable, and I went out to walk it.

This is a thing men do and do not discuss. You do not go out there to fix anything. You go out to look.

The lawn had greened up behind the rain. The edges I cut that morning threw thin shadows along the driveway and made the whole front look intentional. The brown patch was still brown, but from the end of the driveway it softened into something you could call seasonal variation if you were the one saying it. The rut by the gate was hardly noticeable if you came at it from the north and did not look directly at it.

The scalped strip was still visible.

The valve at the reclaimed meter was still shut. I knew that. I left it.

Ronnie Dean was out in his front yard hand watering an area that appeared exactly as healthy as everything around it.

"Looks good," he called.

It is the highest thing one Florida homeowner will say to another. It does not mean the yard is good. It means the visible defects fall within accepted tolerances.

"Yours too," I said, and his lawn looked like every blade had agreed to the same terms.

Peanut came with me down the sidewalk, checking the new borders. At the hibiscus she paused with interest and I steered her toward the oak in accordance with established zoning.

Mosquitoes started coming up out of the wet place. One got my arm, one worked around my ear. The yard, having lost several inches of grass, was manufacturing insects to make up the biomass.

And I stood out at the end of the driveway with a glass of tea and looked at the whole thing for a while.

I will admit this much and no more. It was mine. Nobody came and did it. There is not one thing between Monday and Friday that I can point to and say it is finished and it is straight and it is better than it was when I started. Here at the end of a Saturday that had cost me a shoe, a shirt, a lantern, a section of low-voltage wire, and some skin off the back of my neck, there was a quarter acre of ground that was all three.

Then I looked over at the strip beside the driveway. Not the scalped one. The properly cut strip, the first section I put the mower through that morning.

Maybe it was the angle of the light. Maybe it was the rain.

But it looked taller.

And out west, beyond the pines, tomorrow was already gathering, and in the garage, on the workbench, the red gas can was empty.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Blake Gunnels is a landscape architect in Central Florida who writes Southern coastal fiction under the BluffLight Books imprint. *How to Cut Grass* is the first of the Florida Saturdays stories.

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