Grass

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Une fillette raconte ses expériences aux mains d'un écolier, une petite brute raciste que son père avait engagé pour tondre le gazon. Il avait découvert que le gamin avait été abusé mais avant qu'il ait pu faite quoi que soit, le garçon a assassiné son propre père.

It all went down in the summer of '78 when the parents were killing themselves. Leo Manaro's mother got up before sunrise one glorious June morning and drank a litre of bleach in their garage. Two weeks later, it was Carolyn Finley's father. He had coached me in softball and was a real brute. "Winning is everything!" he would scream at us, the line of ten-year-old girls nervously chewing our gum and avoiding eye contact. Mr. Finley off-ed himself with one of the hunting rifles he displayed in their living room, among all the taxidermied animals that hung on the walls. After Mr. Finley, Manuela Bevis's mother dropped dead. No one said the word "suicide," but we read between the lines. Rumour was she had hung herself.

It was the talk of the neighbourhood. The adults conversed through the fences as they watered their yards and spoke in hushed tones so the children couldn't hear. Their garden hoses forgotten, they flooded large puddles in the grass. They were more interested in the "whys" of the situations while we kids gathered on the streets with our road hockey and baseballs, guessing at the gory details. Mr. Finley's brain was supposedly splattered in a million pieces in the basement. Jimmy Laker said, "You can't clean brains out completely. That stuff sticks."

Nothing like this had yet happened in our quiet Scarborough neighbourhood. Our street, Winifred, was brand new, like the rest of the subdivision. Most of us had moved in at the same time when construction on our houses was completed. That was just four years ago. What it was before didn't matter. It was a place that didn't have a past, only a wide gaping mouth of a future. The neat grid of streets, the wired fences that divided our properties but didn't obscure the views into the neighbours' yards, the young crab apple trees lining our block. You could almost smell the new car smell. We began traditions, with everyone pitching in money to buy fireworks on Victoria Day, and street barbeques during the August long weekend. We politely shoveled each other's driveways, hung tasteful Christmas lights and bought Girl Guide cookies. This spate of deaths was baffling to everyone. It stained our otherwise unblemished record. It had all been going so well.

The kids watched their parents carefully, taking note of unusual things just in case theirs was next. Sometimes, we reported back to each other. Cindy Taylor told us that her father, who cared a lot about how he looked, went to work at the car dealership with a wrinkled white shirt underneath his blue blazer and forgot to shave. Did this mean something? Stephanie Papadakis said her mother forgot to put garlic in their moussaka last night. Was that the beginning of the end? We were gripped with both terror and excitement. My parents were their regular selves. I couldn't detect a thing, which bored me silly. My dad didn't talk to me much, waving me away from him like I was a fly while he watched the news. My mother told me to stop staring at her because I made her nervous. It was like I said, regular. About the deaths, my mother said, "There's more than meets the eye." She liked English sayings. She felt they were profound and great conversation closures.

It was around this time that my dad met Larry Lems,

the school bully. Larry had come to our door one day and asked my dad if he could mow the lawn for him or do any odd job. I ran upstairs to my room like a scared rabbit at the sound of his voice. At school, we all knew to give him a wide berth. Larry tortured kids. He called us by all sorts of names depending on what bothered him about us the most. Manuela was *Fatso*, Damian was *Retard*, Carolyn was *UglyFace*, Jane was *Negro*, Jimmy was *Faggot*, Seema was *Paki*, Linda was *MotorMouth*, Leo was *WOP*, Albert was *Chink 1*, and I was *Chink 2*. He stole our lunches, pushed us over if we were in his way, and challenged all the boys to fights after school. He nearly always won. Needless to say, Larry didn't have friends.

So I was horrified when my dad actually gave Larry the job. He even let Larry use his prized 1974, twenty-one-inch, Model 7263 Lawn Boy with the two-stroke engine. He never let me or my mom touch that thing because he claimed we didn't understand the power of the machine. The Lawn Boy was my father's true baby. He purchased it from Sears the first summer we were in the house. He was pretty lazy about actually mowing the lawn, but he liked to maintain it. The engine was well-oiled and the blades were kept as sharp as Ginzu knives. Larry used it to cut the grass and even weeded the gardens for a dollar. All day he worked. Our backyard was a jungle of neglect but by late afternoon it was pristine. The shorn grass looked neat and inviting. The flower gardens were free of the choking dandelions and clover. It was as if the whole backyard heaved a sigh of relief. When my dad went out to talk to him, I braced myself for the name-calling. My dad had a lot of nervous ticks. His left eye twitched, his arms sporadically shot up in the air, he often elbowed himself in the ribs three times in intervals. All this plus the fact that my dad was also a chink added up to choice meat for Larry Lems. But it never came. I peered at them from my bedroom window above. My dad with his arms akimbo surveyed Larry's work, nodding with approval. Larry, swigging the can of Pepsi that my dad had given him, was actually smiling. He looked different. It occurred to me that I had never seen him smile before.

From that day on, Larry came over often. I still scrambled away at the first sign of him. My dad found him odd jobs to do and gave him a dollar or two each time. He even showed Larry how he sharpened the blades on his Lawn Boy. Larry paid close attention as my dad squirted oil on the bolts and gently removed the blades. He then taught Larry how to hold the blades at the exact angle they needed to be for the grinder to scrape at the edge. Larry actually looked like a kid and not some middle-aged serial killer. My father also seemed to enjoy this time with Larry, giving him a lot more attention than I ever remembered getting.

I wasn't sure if I was more motivated by jealousy or fear of death, but I tried to forbid my dad from letting Larry come over. I told him what a bully he was, how he terrorized all the kids at school, how he hit a teacher once with closed fists. My dad didn't listen. Instead, he told me that people needed chances to show who they really were. I didn't buy it. I screamed and cried, slammed doors—to no avail. My father wouldn't budge while my mother just said, "Those who live in glass houses shouldn't cast stones." I had no idea what she meant.

One day, I gathered enough courage to venture downstairs when Larry was over. He was in our kitchen, bent over a birdhouse that my dad had bought, but never got around to putting together. When I popped in, Larry lifted his head and said, "Hi June." Just like that. Like a normal human being. Not "Hey, Chink number 2. What chinky thing are you doing today?"

I heard dad tell mom once that he had seen long welts across Larry's back when Larry lifted his shirt to wipe his face of sweat. And there were bruises, purple like plums on his arms and legs. My mother shook her head in disbelief, the way she did whenever those commercials of starving children in Africa came on.

One day, I gathered enough courage to venture downstairs when Larry was over. He was in our kitchen, bent over a birdhouse that my dad had bought with his Canadian Tire money, but never got around to putting together. My dad was beside him, reading the instructions aloud. When I popped in, Larry lifted his head and said, "Hi June." Just like that. Like a normal human being. Not "Hey, Chink number 2. What chinky thing are you doing today?"

It surprised me that he even knew my name. I said, "Hallo." My dad gave me a told-you-so kind of grin.

Summer holidays came. It was an especially humid one. While our parents vacated the neighbourhood to their nine-to-five jobs, we filled the days with running through the sprinkler, daily trips to Chuck's Smoke Shop for freezies and Lolas, hanging out in each other's basements watching Love Boat and Fantasy Island and staying cool. Once in a while, games of Truth, Dare, Double Dare, Promise to

Repeat would break out. I spent five minutes in a closet with Damian Jones in a dare once. We kissed a few times and his soggy mouth tasted like tuna fish melts. He even reached into my John Travolta T-shirt to cop a feel of my mosquito bite-sized breasts, but we didn't tell anybody that part. I kneed him in the groin for that. The haze of days lulled us into forgetting the suicides ever happened. We relaxed into the summer heat like a comfortable, swaying hammock.

Larry didn't come over as much. He told my dad that he spent a lot of time with his mother in Mississauga during the summers. His parents were divorced. Everyone in the neighbourhood could guess that Mr. Lems was a drunk. There were days he would come out of his house topless, raging about the damned squirrels on the roof waking him up. Once, he spent the entire morning shooting at them with a BB gun. No one knew much about his mother, but the women on the block agreed that no one could blame her for leaving that. They only blamed her that she had left Larry too. We all knew that Larry probably didn't have it so good. But still. He didn't have to be such a bully.

One day, my dad found his lawn mower missing. He knew where to check first. My dad didn't return until the sun was already down. When he did, he was rolling the Lawn Boy up the driveway. My mother and I watched him from the front door. All it took was a slight nod to my mother to confirm that Larry had indeed taken it. My mother sighed and said, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." He pushed past us inside. We followed him to the living room where he slumped into the lazy boy. In the light, my dad looked real tired. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands.

"That Mr. Lems is a rough man," he began. It seemed that Larry denied everything until his father dragged him to the garage and found the lawn mower stored behind some lumber. My dad watched helplessly as Mr. Lems called Larry all kinds of names that children shouldn't even ever hear. He would have given him a whooping except that my dad was there. I guess my dad took them inside and tried to work something out. Mr. Lems wouldn't hear of anything less than some kind of corporal punishment and even invited my dad to give Larry a slap. No way, no way, my dad had said. He suggested that Larry come over and work for him for free as punishment. Mr. Lems thought that was too easy but agreed. It took a long time, my dad said, on account that he wanted to make sure Mr. Lems, who reeked of Jack Daniels, was calm before he left. Larry Lems was apparently sobbing, and pleading for his life. Empty bottles and fast food wrappers filled the place, my dad told us. "Poor kid," he repeated over and over again.

The next week, Larry did come over. The problem was he didn't come over to help with the backyard. It was a Sunday afternoon, and we were scaling fish in the sink. The silvery bits flashed in the air like rain. We had just gone fishing up near Lindsay and gotten lucky with some big-mouthed bass. My dad heard some sound coming from the garage and went through the backyard door to check. He found Larry by the lawnmower. Larry startled when he saw my dad.

"Stay away from me you fucking chink!" he screamed. My dad froze. "Stay out of my life, or I swear I'm going to kill you and your whole fucking chink family." Larry was crying, tears and snot streaming down his face. He then turned and ran out of the garage and down the street, his knapsack dangling beside him. My dad gazed down the road. He then examined the Lawn Boy and discovered the blades had been removed. I observed the whole scene from the backyard. It made me feel like throwing up.

Four days later, Mr. Lems was dead. He was found in his living room in a huge pool of blood. Apparently, he slashed his wrists. His neighbour Mr. Farley found him when he thought he smelled something gone bad. No one came to the door when he rang, and he found the door unlocked. Damian Farley reported back to us kids what his father saw. The place was filthy, full of garbage and bottles. Mr. Lems was lying on a couch, and the TV was still on. It was officially ruled another suicide although the cuts in his wrists looked more like deep, clumsy gashes that an ax would have accomplished rather than what someone would do to kill themselves. Plus the police couldn't find what he used to do that damage to himself. "I don't know," Damian repeated his father's words. "I ain't an expert but I watch Quincy." Larry was nowhere to be found. His mother surfaced later and told the cops that Larry hadn't been near the scene because he had been with her in Mississauga. We never saw him again.

The next day, my dad packed up the Lawn Boy and drove it to the dump. When he came back, he sat out in the backyard gazing into nothing for a long, long time. My mother and I joined him, pulling up lawn chairs beside him. I wanted to say something to him. But I was only a kid and I didn't have these kinds of conversations with my parents. It was dusk and the sweet scent of the grass enveloped us. The white roses gleamed in the half-light and crickets began to chirp. We heard distant voices of neighbours having a barbeque. I looked across the fences to the expanse of green that was our neighbourhood. It looked like it went on forever. My mother combed her fingers through my hair and murmured softly, "As beautiful as the day is long."

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