

The Mowing

Allan Appel

Even though he had walked the fields beforehand, Flynn probably should have kept his eyes trained on the thigh-high grass in front of him so that he wouldn't hit a rock and destroy the mower's blades. Instead, as he bumped along on the comfortable springy seat, behind wide sunglasses that were catching more and more green-flecked particles, he could not help but look up often at the house they had bought, and smile.

The place cost three hundred twelve thousand dollars, and it was a doozie. A regular American chateau, with a high mansard roof nearly fallen in over the west wing, so that he figured he would have to take it down to the rafters. Still the portico was stately, with columns fat on the bottom, like the legs of an elephant, but narrowing gracefully beneath a pediment with a selection of birds—turkeys and eagles mostly—so gracious you could pretty much ignore the rot that Flynn suspected lay beneath.

Susan had an excellent eye. She picked properties that suited her real estate magic: buy it, fix it, not a complete restoration, but a modernization that provided sufficient comfort and convenience so that people felt they might move right in; then find buyers, preferably with Wall Street cash, tap into their dreams, and then sell for a nice profit.

Only one of the columns appeared to Flynn's eye to be in need of shoring up. There was a long porch, with only a few dangerous boards that could easily be replaced, running along the back of the house that overlooked the creek, which had been a river way back when people around here still spoke Dutch or German. Drop in a few wall-eyes from the state nursery and their ad could read: Fisherman's Dream—a fully stocked creek in your back yard.

"I'll take care of the house," Susan had said. "You take care of the grounds."

There was an awful lot of taking care to do, it was past three, and his wife was still sleeping, although Flynn thought he saw her stirring in the bedroom, and then a few minutes ago, silhouetted in the kitchen window brewing tea. But maybe not. There was AM, there was PM, and then there was Susan. Still, she would get her part of the restoration accomplished efficiently; hadn't she always?

He took the mower out of gear, raised himself up from the seat, and surveyed the house and land. If the weather held, maybe they could finish work on this one in five or six months. Maybe she would hold onto the place a little longer than the others; perhaps she would say she wouldn't sell at all. There were others that she had held onto, of course, for far longer than the business plan called for, because when you do your research, when you plan, when you work on a place, when you can look at a door and remember how the nails are driven, because you almost destroyed your fingers in the process, it becomes like leaving a friend. Well, they had left many friends. And they'd eventually leave this one too.

Yet, Flynn thought, as he put the mower back in gear, she had taken to this one exceptionally quickly, long before any work was even thought through, moving in on these weekends when there was barely a trickle of water in the old kitchen sink, and only one toilet was working, and even that barely.

It was unusual for her to have done this, being a woman who enjoyed her comforts. Maybe this house would indeed be The One, as she had said. The phrase had become part of their marriage, the kind of joke shared by only two people in the world. When a strawberry they had picked at the nearby Pick Your Own farm tasted sweet as sun-warmed sugar, they looked at each other and even without words their eyes said, Maybe this is The One. Even a cheeseburger, cooked to perfection, with melting cheddar and caramelized onions, could be The One. The latest film at the drive-in. Anything could be The One. To Flynn's ears The One always carried the satirical note of *The Matrix* or the Messiah, but for Susan it was a guiding principle in real estate, and more.

He looked for her in the window again, but saw only the draperies moving in the breeze.

Flynn drifted into a zone and made another neat circle around the lawn, but he hardly noticed the azure sky or a wedge of moon visible from behind a large rolling cloud. A proud Catholic school dropout, Flynn was far from religious. Nevertheless this mowing gave him a kind of spiritual pleasure. He imagined God mowing the grass in the Garden of Eden. I mean, Father Matthias had said, Who *else* was going to do it? Adam and Eve were promised that as long as they obeyed, they would not have to work. So where was the Lord going to get gardening help? There were no other humans, and certainly cows, sheep, or horses were not going to be driving the riding mower around Eden. Even in a perfect place, wouldn't the lawn have to be cut? Father Matthias, from long ago, posed the question. Could the serpent do it? The snake, before the Fall, Matthias had taught, had legs, but still no hands to grasp a steering wheel.

Oh, boy, Flynn said to himself, and commenced another wide, stylish curve with the Toro, whose motor, he noticed, was sounding just fine today. Mowing in Eden? Flynn nodded his head, as if agreeing with an imagined skeptic sitting beside them as they listened to some other half-remembered theological point of the genial old Franciscan. Then Flynn tore into another line of high grass. Separating sea from dry land. That which is above from that which is below. In the naming of things, in separation, is the beginning of knowledge.

Another turn, and then another. The higher the grass, the better. It was okay. The mowing was boring so it became like separating the waters so that the children of Israel could walk through in safety. Oh, come on, it was only a property. Flynn adjusted the brown noise-diminishing ear protectors, tuned in the Yankee spring training game that lay embedded in the headset, gunned the engine, and felt very fine for having conquered more of his jungle. After two more revolutions, he paused and again took in the house from another vista. As he peered at this façade, a caved-in calamity that would soon require jacking up, he barely noticed the gray swatch of

color amid the swaying green of the grass: a boulder that lay off to the right.

Flynn stretched his arms skyward as if he had just scored some kind of goal. He looked hard. Yes the house *was* a majestic old ruin. What mattered? Place mattered, he answered. And so did money. So many thoughts came to him, so often unexpected, as he cut, which was why, in the long run, although he had the hundred or so a month to hire the kid from the store, he always craved doing the lawn himself. And then out of nowhere, just like Father Matthias, another idea arrived that he'd never considered before: not a religious or an architectural notion or anything pertaining to the lawn. No, it seemed an answer to a question he had not realized he was even asking.

Flynn angrily threw the mower into drive and then after a lurch forward back into neutral, and halted. He swiveled in the seat turning first from the house to the road and back again, so that if you had been driving by and seen him, he would have appeared perfectly ordinary, a man mowing and adjusting his position before tackling another acre. Nevertheless, this thought was there, gaining in volume now even over the ballgame playing away in the headset: When the work on this place was complete, he knew he would leave her.

There was no particular reason to do so. And no particular urgency. Just the notion that was now there. After twenty-three years of marriage, and twelve house restorations, and Sam, Samantha, the one child, grown and out in the world, it was just enough. That was the thought. It probably didn't even deserve the name of thought. For it had popped into his head, just like that. Maybe it was a line from some TV program they had recently watched—I'm going to leave her, or I'm going to leave you—or from some movie, and it had lodged in him and emerged now due to the vibrations of the Toro beneath him and their effects on the secretions in his brain chemistry. It was no more germane to his life now than the errant teachings of the Catholic school brothers that had floated up to him from the

grass. You can't base your life's decisions on such things, a thought of absolutely no valence. Still, while he felt an impulse to reject it precisely because it was baseless—he also knew he could not.

Flynn wiped droplets of sweat away from above his eyes, then took the Toro out of gear and stood up again to survey how much more remained. Behind him stretched the pleasing green pathway he had just created curving intriguingly out and around behind the pond. He stood, and climbed carefully up on the seat to peer further around the curve.

As he balanced above the mower's seat, the tall grass swayed and rustled all around him like the skirts of a squad of hula dancers, and Flynn got caught up in a festive, almost sensual mood. A little to the left, a little to the right, he swayed along with the tall weeds, and estimated four, maybe five acres of lawn to go. At twenty minutes an acre, he still might finish in time to take a quick dip in the pond, run into town to pick up the burgers and hot dogs, fire up the barbecue, and get the dinner ready.

As he was rotating his hips to keep rhythm with the breeze-blown grass, Flynn also was making a mental note not to forget to buy buns, when his eyes suddenly filled with several sharp bursts of sunlight that registered at the corners of his vision like small yellow bolts. He was astounded that light could cause pain because that's what he felt at his temple, as if a migraine had concentrated its fury on just one point above his right eyebrow.

He lost his balance and toppled but because of the seat's springiness he was sent into a kind of sideways arc. His hands moved out protectively in front of him, interlocking like a swimmer's on a high dive into the pool, but the fingers didn't quite touch. Then, for the briefest instant, Flynn felt positively serene, until the boulder, whose size and angularity he had not noticed before, came right at him. First, he felt the grass grazing his face, and it was surprisingly rough, like a curtained doorway you pass through. Then impact and then darkness, and silence.

Susan had left him once. Actually left them, when Sam was only ten, and long before they had begun to buy and sell properties. His gardening jobs—he was an urban landscaper—were freelance, he had had time for the childcare, it was true, that was their arrangement, for Susan was an executive with a financial planning company. She had risen high enough to have commanded a glitzy office in the city and to have stayed put, at least stayed in the country, because Sam was not an easy child and adjusting to the pressures of fifth grade were not bringing out her best. In fact, she was in full rebellion against Ms. Donaldson, who had Flynn come in for conference after conference because Sam refused to organize her binder properly, refused to clean out her desk. Cried at odd times, had tantrums, and threw her My Little Pony collection of horses across the room on show-and-tell day.

I don't mean to be sexist about this, said Ms. Donaldson, at the third conference. Her exasperation seemed as long and formidable as the thick French braid she wore down her back to her waist. Really, Mr. Flynn, I also would also like to speak to Sam's mother.

Well, said Flynn, for that you'll have to go to Saudi Arabia.

Excuse me.

She travels. She's working there for six months, maybe more.

Why didn't someone tell me?

Well, said Flynn, it never occurred to me. I'm a parent too. Right? What's the problem?

It wasn't only that Susan's company was very conservative and almost an all-male show that never had had a female apply to be put in charge of the company's Saudi-based operations. They just assumed that none in the small handful of women they employed would put her hat in the ring, until Susan had. Flynn was proud of her. "You're capable, it's your turn. Hey, go for it," he had said. It was the seventies, and she added, "I'll sue the hell out of them if they don't give me that country."

And they did. Sam liked the idea, in theory, as her mother had

painted it for her. You'll come over on your school vacations and we'll ride camels. Each of us will have our very own camel. Daddy can be Flynn of Arabia. They all laughed, and the first trip was good. Susan lived in a special compound for westerners; there were three servants, a large pool with thrillingly blue water fringed by huge date trees. Even though Susan kept saying she would give it up, she stayed three years. She sent pictures of herself in the hijab, then in a burkha. In the next photo, she had the burkha flung wide open and she was in a bikini.

During the last year Flynn and Sam did not visit at all. After Ms. Donaldson there was a sixth-grade teacher who didn't appreciate Sam and then the first year of middle school, both nightmares he bore pretty much alone. He kept explaining to Sam that, No, she could not have servants like her mother, he himself was not her servant, nor were the other kids. He did not grow as close to Sam as he craved—and felt he deserved—despite all their time together. So much of that time was spent talking about someone who was not there. It didn't make it easier when Susan wrote that she was considering becoming a Muslim.

After he parsed her sentences to determine if she were really serious, and couldn't, Flynn realized he had not a stitch of interest in any religion. Still he defended her independence of mind, as he always did. He read with Sam books on Islam that Susan began to send home.

Because Sam was understandably sensitive to being an oddball of a kid—the one whose mom was *always* traveling—and because there were no Muslims in her class, or in the school for that matter, Flynn went out of his way to find, among his clients, a third level chargé d'affaires of the Pakistani consulate, whose daughter, Safira, was roughly Sam's age. He organized numerous play dates with them, to provide his daughter with a Muslim friend roughly her own age, especially if Sam's own mother was going to become a Muslim, and perhaps she herself would too.

Apart from the girl's Muslim potential, however, Sam hated

everything about her, and Sam's only friend became her father. But this did not go well either. Flynn and Sam became like friends who had been assigned to each other, roommates, but ill suited, and Sam grew into a demanding child, president of the drama club, but when not awarded the leading role, quitting it. She kept very busy, but had few friends, and Flynn could not say no to her. Then Susan changed her mind. Sorry, Allah and Muhammad were not The One.

When she returned home, a current of unhappiness, sharper than in the past, began to flow through the three of them. They spent time on the sofa poring over photographs, putting them into albums, Susan lingering over pages of her camel rides and photos of her servants. Yet as these evenings moved toward bed time, the family didn't talk all that much.

Within another two years, there was a corporate merger and shake-up, and it became opportune, financially, for Susan to leave her job. Although she now had more time for Sam, Sam did not seem interested, and when a distant relative made the suggestion, she went to finish at a private high school in California. Flynn, whose landscape business had flourished despite all this, traveled more than he had before.

The buying and selling of properties, the excitement of it, and all the opportunities the new business offered kept them very busy. It enabled Sam, as she grew into a beautiful young woman, to be a very popular college student, inviting her friends over to have parties at the latest property purchased by her parents. Flynn's new week-end routine became the collection of an awesome number of beer bottles and cans strewn all over the floors, porch, and lawn, courtesy of his daughter's friends. Although Sam struggled with grades and a senior thesis on feminism in Saudi Arabia, she finally graduated.

She traveled to Thailand and taught English there for six months and then returned home, found a boyfriend, an aspiring rock musician who slept in far later in the day than Flynn approved of.

After a few months, Sam packed up and went to California with the musician, and they had some kind of life. They were both moving

ahead, she wrote, but Flynn and Susan, who saw her less and less, were still always sending her money. Since there was enough money to go around now, with real estate so profitable, the past's discomforts were mollified in memory. Still, they had become an odd kind of family—exchanging lots of phone calls, having occasional holiday visits, and frequently exchanging expensive and often exotic gifts.

It never occurred to Flynn, a decent and smart man, that he was viciously angry at Susan for her indulgence and selfishness, for what it had done to their child at a crucial stage of development, and had suppressed it all these years. It all fired through Flynn's brain, a rocket that took off and delivered its full payload of life's new data to him, just as his head cracked against the stone.

Only in a sentimental narrative does Flynn wake up from such an experience, ask "Am I dead?" and then have his wife and perhaps even daughter, breathless from the coast on the red-eye, stand ministering by his bedside.

In fact, Flynn was a goner. Twice over at least.

If planting his head into the rock had not done him in, his awkward celestial ejection from the mower had also dislodged the gear shift, and the machine was on the move now on its own.

Without a controller, it nevertheless seemed to be moving towards him, as Flynn lay there, his body splayed red across the rock like a human sacrifice lost to all view in the tall grass. Flynn's consciousness was not quite extinguished, and the Toro somehow knew it.

For Flynn had left the steering wheel turned, and he was aware the mower seemed somehow to be tracking him. He thought he heard singular Toro engine sounds but they came to him like small ripples in the blanket of his darkness. He felt no pain but a kind of total physical confusion, of being more tired and exhausted than he had ever felt in his life. Each arm and leg was pulling away from his body, like heavy blankets falling off the side of the bed, but in different

directions at once. Flynn let them go, his limbs limp in the grass, dropping away and now dangling only by a filament or tendon in the grass.

But I can't be that damaged, he kept saying to himself. I've only had an accident. And somehow he thought that the accident, which followed his decision to leave Susan, had also somehow been caused by it. And if this was not a sign that he had been rash and stupid, then what was? Flynn was willing to reconsider. He'd have to recover first, of course. In the meantime, he would remain quiet. Lie there, and not cause any more damage to himself. Soon Susan would come out, with tea or lemonade, and discover him there, where he'd slid off the rock and lay in the grass. She couldn't sleep forever.

In the meantime, the Toro was making frequent zigs and zags toward him.

Would she bring out a tray of tea or that pink lemonade, with the rinds floating amid the ice cubes like tiny capsized sailboats? The lemonade would taste so good on his dry, caked lips. And, yes, twenty-three years was nothing to dismiss on an angry whim; he still loved her, as the saying went, not in spite of her faults, but because of them.

He wished he could cry out to her, I'm The One. I'm The One now, honey! He determined to say those words to her when she found him.

Flynn's senses merged in a kind of swoon, and he smelled green gasoline or he thought he heard the screen door wafting the odor of the slapping toward him—or was that the loud backfire of an engine touching him with warm yellow sunlight?

Susan, who had now awakened from an excellent nap and gone to the window, thought she made out the shape of the mower in the distance. It was a riderless silhouette, but it was not moving—or was it? How odd. No, Flynn was likely down at the pond. She scanned the lawn in the twilight, called her husband's name, and headed for the water.