

BORIS KELLY

## MOW

David Winter assumed a Zen frame of mind whenever he trimmed the edges of the lawn. He assumed the Zen frame of mind as a strategy for the achievement of excellence, a means of extracting the best possible performance from the edge trimmer and, after it, the lawn mower, and, after it, the rake, and, finally, the broom. By his own design, the “low maintenance” formal English garden had several hundred meters of concrete edges where turf butted against low retaining walls, crept across paths, or encroached on flower beds. His wife, Carol, called the edges a design flaw because the friction caused by the spinning polymer cord of the trimmer resulted in tiny chips of concrete edging being dislodged into the surrounding airspace and occasionally flying off wildly. David wore protective glasses to guard against this hazard. The edges were, therefore, pockmarked and unattractive, which put Carol’s argument beyond reasonable doubt. Furthermore, the velocity at the point of contact between plastic and concrete gradually heated the cord until it disintegrated into small purple shards of polymatter or volatized into invisible puffs of toxic vapor. As a result, the edge trimmer chewed up a lot of cord, which then needed to be replaced at least twice, but, depending on David’s performance, often three or even four times during a trimming session. The Zen frame of mind not only ensured that the edges, once trimmed, had the appearance of being free from invasion, if only momentarily; but, equally importantly, the Zen frame of mind helped to contain David’s feelings about the pockmarked concrete and the ever-diminishing polymer cord.

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One sunny Saturday afternoon, as he guided the trimmer along a stringy edge of kikuyu, his neighbor Peter Woods came out of his house and stood watching by the fence. David cautiously looked up, wanting to both acknowledge his neighbor’s presence and maintain the Zen moment, but it was immediately clear that it was an impossible conjunction, so he eased his finger off the trigger and raised his head.

“Hard at it?” Peter said, as he brushed something off his shoulder.

David’s mind flashed through an animated sequence of his neighbor’s face being shredded by the lethal spinning cord, leaving him horribly disfigured for life.

"It just keeps growing," he heard himself say, and they both laughed a neighborly laugh as Peter removed some golf clubs from his station wagon and David resumed his trimming, both men knowing that within two hours Peter would be trimming his own edges to avoid any unkind, whispered comparisons.

Carol appeared with a glass of ice-cold lemon cordial. David wiped sweaty grit from his face as he drank. Carol looked around the yard.

"Looks nice," she said.

"Good. That's good," he said.

"It'll look much nicer when you've mowed. It always does."

"Not quite ready to mow yet."

A wood pigeon cooed from a pine tree.

"I'll let you get on with it then."

David drained his glass and handed it to Carol, who disappeared into the air-conditioned recesses of the house.

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There had been an occasion, only one, when David had intentionally and experimentally let the lawn get away from him. For several weeks during the late spring, he had observed the grass on the verge in front of the house as it grew ankle-high and longer, populated with yellow dandelions, clover flowers, lazily floating bees, and the occasional dragonfly. Once, a huge butterfly wafted past, all blacks and creams and pale blues, as David sat drinking his tea, watching the breeze shimmer across the miniature meadow. Occasional passersby muttered and coughed and lowered their heads, but nothing was ever said to him directly. Finally, aware that the experiment had gone too far in the biological sense and conscious that his wife was nervous about her parents coming to lunch, he mowed the lawn in a Zen frenzy at sunset.

David had a friend who often came to mind when he mowed, especially during the trimming phase. Controlled daydreaming was permitted in the Zen Zone. This friend had been a sculptor of a sort, a modernist type or maybe even postmodern, depending on definitions and the like. His sculptures were humorous assemblages of found objects. He gassed himself in his car in the driveway of his parents' home one quiet morning near a river. David thought about the length of the hose for a second or two as he worked his way around a statue in the center of the garden, a nice centerpiece in his estimation. An

antique sandstone urn on a plinth that had perhaps been originally designed for a graveyard or maybe a gothic garden with a big sandstone house nearby. Carol had bought it at auction. The urn had two finely detailed, identical heads on it, man-goat heads, like Pan, with curly beards, horns, wild eyes, and flaring nostrils. The plinth sat on a bed of small, white pebbles, but the bed was not large enough to rake, unfortunately. It was not a rakeable area of white pebbles at all, in the Zen sense, and David privately regarded this as a design flaw.

The gassed friend drank a bottle of good whiskey and died with a volume of poetry in his lap. Perhaps it was Keats that made David think of the gassed sculptor whenever he was trimming near the urn. Keats wrote a poem called "Ode to Indolence." Maybe that was it. He'd often wondered if the book had been opened to a particular page, but never had the affront to ask it of his late friend's grieving widow, who had since remarried and moved on. The artistic temperament, David said quietly to himself. Like the *flâneur*. He liked that word. He whispered it softly. *Flâneur*. The day he found it in a magazine article, he read it aloud to Carol, and she said it sounded like a French pasty. Half right, he had said. Some months later, when they were traveling to Thailand, he wrote *flâneur* in the Occupation line of his immigration card, but nothing ever came of it. He wasn't stopped in Customs and asked by the officer to explain what, precisely, a *flâneur* did, but if he had, he would have said it was someone who walked around cities in a leisurely, observant manner, occasionally wrote about what he observed, and had lots of affairs.

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David Winter's shadow lengthened behind him across the lawn. A tiny spider, brown and leggy, abseiled from his elbow toward the earth like an escaping Lilliputian. Releasing the trimmer trigger, he gently detached the spider and watched it dangle for a moment before easing the little fellow into a bed of agapanthus, where it scampered for cover in the dark green foliage. Yep, he said to himself, the artistic temperament. He wiped his eyes from under his protective glasses, then, recovering his senses, squeezed the trigger and resumed the Zen state of mind. A shard of purple polymer lodged in his sock. The lawn mower beckoned from its dark place in the shed.