

Mowin' Round the Dead [W-I-P]

by Smiley McGrouchpants Jr.

**"God is romantic to a fault. Like a bird
say- is beautiful and then it's killed. I'm not
ing it's romantic, it makes you shudder, it's
tragic"] gross, but in some way super compelling."
[Rachel B. Glaser, "My Boyfriend, but**

I bit into my peanut butter & jelly sandwich. I always took my lunch in the car[1] while the working-class folk at the graveyard where I toiled lunched semi-boisterously in the room provided by the state.

Admittedly, there were four other guys my age working there for the summer, but they all knew each other, and, even without consciously being "aloof" in their behavior towards me, perpetrated a sort of implicit clique that was hard to break into, if you hadn't known the ropes all along.

Also, I guess I was more what you'd call the "quiet type": bookish[2], introverted[3], listened to R.E.M., U2, and the Pixies[4].

12:50. Ten more minutes until I had to trudge back and get carted off in a truck to push a lawnmower around the graves of people long dead & gone in the sweltering upstate N.Y. summer heat.

I took a last slurp from my grape-juice box, and reached to open the ashtray conveniently located on the dash itself, midway between the radio and the glove compartment. It was invariably overflowing with butts — I was too lazy to keep stopping at gas stations[5] to

empty it as often as I should — and, prying it open invariably lead to a few stray butts tumbling out onto the floor.

Invariably.

My jeans were always stained with grass. Not just "grass-stained" — that implies a swatch of green color, rubbed off onto the blue denim — but "stained," like "painted," like colored glass or canvas with lumps of paint on it. Pieces of grass clung up both my jeans' legs to just below the knee, owing to the near-constant exposure to the[6] output shaft of the lawnmower[7].

I had to give up on them, ultimately. Two pairs were allocated for "work use," and no amount of washing, however regular, could counteract the daily accrual of severed lawn blades. I would have been washing them down to nothing: a Sisyphean task. So I let it go.

Sometimes I would go to my girlfriend's house, on my lunch hour or more directly from work (after I got off for the day). She lived in fairly close proximity to the graveyard, since it was a fairly-well-off graveyard for fairly-well-off corpses and her family was of the comparatively well-to-do strata of folks in town. She was Muslim, so our relationship was strictly *sub rosa*, even to this day[8]. She needed a date for the school dance[9] and her friend had told her I liked her so she should ask me. It was true enough, so I said yes, and we stuck together after that. We never did "do it," however — even though she "consented," it was more like saying, "go ahead, do it!" to someone ripping off a band-aid than from any real affection or physical desire or combination thereof, and I didn't need any Muslim doctor parents coming after me for deflowering their daughter. Islam was an unknown quantity to my 17-year-old Catholic-raised, suburban boy self, but I gathered the margin of error in such areas would likely be less than tolerant or accommodating.

I'm not sure how the grass blades I undoubtedly left in her bed during our make-out sessions never got us in trouble. Maybe she was fastidious about cleaning up, or a good excuse-maker[10].

The truck lurched to a stop.

"Dave!" The guy driving the truck — Derek, I think his name was — yelled my name, to indicate this was my "plot" for the next four hours. "This is you."

Shit, I must have been drifting in my thoughts . . .

The sun beats down on you, it's hot, you push the mower around graves. The sun beats down on you some more, you sweat more than you would like, you angle the mower using the long rectangular metal handle-thingee around a stone or place where it happens to get stuck.

Repeat.

By the time I was born, my parents — I'll call them "B." (man) and "P." (woman) — were already sickened, blackened, blighted people. When I was three, I sensed an opportunity to dash into the room where their one-year-old, a girl, was resting. I could read to hear, a kid's book about a farm. Otherwise, it never would have happened. It never would have occurred to them[11].

Years later, P. sent me a mouse-pad she had made. She had started working in computers some years before, so could be even more completely "sucked into the machine."

The photo on the mouse-pad was of the three-year-old me reading to the one-year-old girl, breathing "life" into her. A round of pictures had been taken that night, as though this was a commemorative and innovative occasion, heretofore unexpected and inconceivable, and therefore needing capturing before it disappeared, like Haley's comet streaking across the sky.

I was now supposed to drag my mouse over it, gradually obliterating it.

For some reason, I ended up telling one of the aforementioned guys my age a particularly unsavory story I had heard about a gal who went to one of the private girls' schools with which the crowd from my boys' school tended to run. He knew her personally because he lived in the same school district she did, despite the fact

that she went to a private school and he, the public one nearby.

Actually, I know why I told him that story full well: after some several weeks of being out on crews with various members of their four-fellow "clique" (to use that term nonjudgmentally), I had had occasion to have bits of conversation with each or a few of them here and there from time to time, and now, this day, I found myself comfortable enough with him to talk for a longer stretch, and this was a tale I actually had to *tell*.

Like an awful lot of time-killers in 80's suburbia — "nigger" jokes, Polish jokes, hair-metal bands, recounting myths about our immediate social circles as though they were the stuff of legend, trips to the local shopping mall, and endless other activities that those of us as "ground level" were more than welcome to participate in — it was *something* to do. (As the Ramones, I later learned, once said of glue-sniffing.)

The story?

"I heard she got drunk at a party, and was sitting on the toilet taking a shit, but then felt like she was going to barf, so she swung around and puked in the toilet and up shitting on the floor."

"Eww . . . nasty!"

(Yes . . . you're *welcome!*)

The pants don't fit, the shirt don't fit, and, yes, it's partly because you're a *teenager* and your own *body* don't fit, but—

But still.

The \$19.99-or-so denim jeans everyone wears 'cuz they're available at the local mall and *who cares that much about clothes anyway? that's so uncool* don't serve you well and you can be annoyed as you like, unable to vent your frustration, one more thing you're supposed to "table" or "put on the back-burner" as an adolescent growing up in suburban 80's America.

But still.

That sort of thinking doesn't help you any when you've got to get through a 40-hr. week at this way-below-your-potential-level job your "Dad" got for you just to make himself look good, feel better about

himself, pull a string he has the ability to pull without anything like "due regard" or "regard" at all for how you'll be spending most of your waking laboring hours during that elusive ten-week period bookended by the 4th of July and Labor Day most identifiably — so if it gets to be Aug. 4, and you're sweltering in the sun, and you take the bottom of your shirt to mop up your brow, all the while it flashing across your mind that someone could see you doing this, your underdeveloped chest & belly exhibited and therefore open to the cutting, offhand criticism it can take you months to forget (if ever) and all but impossible to retract or retort to some time after the fact—

If your steel-toed boots are clunky and your socks stink and no-one's around—

If no-one's even seen you naked (as a "grown-up") so you haven't gotten to slough off the perpetually-with-you insecurity that you won't "measure up" and find yourself having survived it and joined the ranks of people who live in their bodies by virtue of having *used* them . . .

If nobody's around, why do you care?

(Sigh.) But still. *(Hand clumps down on the mower handle, gazes into the distance. Rows of rows of stones: like a golf course for the dead. All this land for the rich and the dead, and the rest of us, ostensibly living, running around, without much to do . . .)*

"How was school?"

"Fine," the answer like a parry, B. already looking above me, scanning the table. My answer intersected his, hung in mid-air.

P. sat chewing her food, the bland Chicken à la King she had decided early on in my childhood was one of the four dishes she would rotate, was "exotic," and we would "like." She was a successful homemaker. She gave herself an "A" for effort.

That decision out of the way — a foundation firmly in place, a hatch resolutely battened down, tried & tested & proving itself secure — the rest of us down out 1,147th meal of bland, hardly-spiced and just-out-of-then-can fare while pondering our day(s).

I was just beginning to get a bead on the situation how this was supposed to work: I used my knife and fork adroitly, as if staving off — well, god knows *what* — a *weight*, I guess. It hung in the air.

I risked a glance at "K.," my kid sister. She had taken to the program without question, and mulled over whatever-it-was 15-year-old gals think about, while staring down at her plate. "Don't bother me — I'm *thinking!*" her look *seemed* to say, which, paradoxically, was a mode she seemed equipped to abandon on a moment's notice, and say whatever — since it was just "whatever," the routine cost to be paid, w/o question, for the privilege of allowed to keep herself burrowed down inside herself — something she did as unthinkingly as you'd toss 25¢ into an automatic toll to cross a bridge.

The thing was, though: this was also *conversation* — or what passed for it — and there was nothing *but* that . . . *ever*.

By night, [...]

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS:

1. The typically \$800-or-so junker, good for about 2-3 years usage, that distinguished me & mine from the other 50% of vehicles in the student parking lot at my prep school, which were invariably that year's Range Rovers, Saabs, Sterling Silvers, or the like (also, invariably, plastered with Grateful Dead stickers).
2. If by "bookish" you mean: Douglas Adams, Stephen King, and *The Far Side* — not much was published of interest to a male adolescent in the sterile Reagan 80's that your local B. Dalton would carry.
3. More of a "listener" than a "talker," I suppose — though, more accurately, I was much more of a "preliminary listener" before I would decide to enter into a debate with someone.
4. The 4 fellas I mentioned seemed big on Heavy D and the Boyz that summer.

5. . . . or other, non-"home" locations . . .
6. (albeit physically *safe*)
7. . . . or whatever the technical term for "output shaft" . . .
8. (unless she has since fessed up to her parents about it)
9. The girls' prep school where *she* went, was located across the street from the boys' prep school, where *I* went.
10. Actually — come to think of it — *yes*. "Yes" to the second one. I can *vouch* for the fact that she was a good "excuse-maker."
11. Suffice it to say that — without B.'s aunt, who had read to *me* as a toddler — I, too, would have been lost.
- 12.

