



# LAWN MAN

by Dave Housley

**THEY** called him Lawn Man. “Lawn Man don’t give a fuck!” they would shout, as he pushed the mower up and down the grassy expanse around the big house. He knew they were referencing something, some movie or show or Internet thing he didn’t know about, but Fernsler didn’t care. He would give them the finger, hold it toward the source of the noise while he kept his eyes on the always straight rows of fresh cut grass, and they would cheer and send one of the younger ones out to give him a beer, which he drank while making his way down the next row. He would throw the cup toward the big porch where they liked to sit in their chairs and watch him mow, or toss the football back and forth, or talk to girls or

play on their phones, and it would start again in a few minutes. It was an okay enough way to pass the time, and he needed to be out there anyway, cutting their grass for the nine fifty an hour Reichenbach paid and proving to Mr. Bricker that he could hold down a job without breaking the terms.

He could see movement in the big front room where he would wait later while they texted and shouted and called people to track down the one who would pay him. A few of the windows slid open on the upper floors. He recognized most of them by now, the ones who shouted Lawn Man, at least: the redhead, the fat one, the twins, the one with the New York accent. He knew they were students but only a few looked old enough to be in a bar. None looked like anybody at Stoney's or Sharkie's. He made a pass along the edge of the yard and the red-haired guy leaned out a first floor window, shouted "Lawn Man don't give a fuck!" There was a round of cheers and Fernsler held his middle finger up and soon enough, there was a kid waiting with a red cup full of lukewarm beer.

By the time he got to the back they had lost interest and he relaxed. There was no audience but their parents' cars and the recycling stacked high with Yuengling cans. He thought about meeting Reichenbach and the rest of the guys at the Tavern. He usually kept to himself, but

something about this job, the frat house, always made him want to be with people for a little while at least.

He was finishing up the final row, thinking about his meeting with Mr. Bricker and the things he'd have to say: *no, I haven't been drinking; yes, I been working; no, there haven't been any thoughts about fire or problems with the gasoline; no angry thoughts or even thinking about anything much at all, really; yessir; god's honest.* He pictured Mr. Bricker nodding his bald head and scratching away at the sheet on his clipboard, each of them just filling up boxes, passing the time until they could go about their own business, until Fernsler either got himself in trouble again or he didn't.

He was rounding the corner, just about finished with the back, when he saw her: blond, tall, wearing cutoff shorts and a Penn State t-shirt. She was holding a red cup and waving. He left the engine running, walked to where she was standing.

She smiled, handed him the cup. "From Rusty," she said, pointing toward the house. "Red-haired guy?" she said.

"Oh," Fernsler said. He felt like he should say something else but couldn't imagine what that would be. She pushed the beer closer and he took it and watched her walk back toward the house. At the door, she

waved. He held out the beer like he was toasting, then finished it as the door closed.



Fernsler went home and turned on the television. He put his Budweiser next to the chips. He had all this time stretching out in front of him at night, a five AM alarm. It was more like the eighteen months in Rockview than it wasn't, and for no reason other than to fill the time, he had started watching television. He'd never really paid much attention to it before. It seemed like something other people did, sober people with dining rooms and parents who went to bed before Letterman and woke up before school was supposed to start.

Most of the shows were stupid and what he understood of the news was awful. But then he found *Friends*. It was pleasant enough to look at—the two blonds and the sharp, good-looking brunette—and it seemed like there were so many episodes he would never be in danger of seeing them all. He had missed it the first time around—even if there had been a television in any of the houses he grew up in, he doubted they would

have been tuned to *Friends*. Now he watched it the way other people watched the news: he hated it, hated everything about it—it drove him crazy and he watched every chance he got.

He clicked over to the station that ran *Friends* from seven through nine, hoping for one he hadn't seen yet. This one seemed to be something about a cat. The funny blond was singing and Ross and Rachel were mooning at each other as usual. Fernsler went into the kitchen and brought back three more beers. Fucking Ross and Monica and their rich parents, their expensive sweaters that they never wore more than once. Fucking Chandler with his hot mom and silly office job. Fucking Rachel and the other one who wasn't as good looking as the others, supposedly working waitress jobs and living on, what? On tips from coffee? Fernsler finished a beer and watched Chandler and Joey leaning back on the same recliner. Joey was supposed to be the poor one, and even he had a bullshit job. Actor. He wasn't mowing lawns, doing dishes, ripping up the Visa bill without opening the envelope, writing checks to the apartment management company the day before payday and hoping. Fuck them. He finished a beer and turned up the television. Fuck all of them.



Fernsler knew the college kids were gone for the summer, but didn't expect it to be so deserted. First he picked up the trash—red cups and beer cans, mostly, mixed in with sandwich wrappers and chip bags and a few textbooks. Graduation party, Reichenbach had explained. There was a pair of women's underwear and Fernsler thought about putting it in his pocket but remembered how they would usually sit in those windows, watching him, shouting "Lawn Man don't give a fuck," and he put them into the container with the rest of the garbage.

He wasn't being paid to pick up trash, but after the first time, the time they weren't sure and had charged him with public mischief, he had done his public service working for the town, and that was real trash, stink and broken glass and people's perfectly good things and all the feelings that made him feel—so he didn't mind so much picking up red cups and panties off a lawn. Here he was at least getting paid, not standing by the side of the road with a vest on that might as well have said "asshole." It would be better, though, still, if there was a kid standing off to the side with a red cup full of beer.

They had paid Reichenbach in advance for the summer, as simple as one kid's signature on a piece of paper, so at least he didn't have to go

inside and stare at his shoes while they came and went and texted each other to find the one who would pay. He fired up the mower and made a single pass along the outside, a giant square, then cut a line over to the corner. A light came on and then went out along the hallway on the first floor. Reichenbach had told him the place should be empty but sometimes they came back for a party every now and then, or the town kids snuck in and did whatever they did. Fernsler's job was the lawn, and Reichenbach made it clear his attention should stay on the ground.

When he passed the big room on the first floor, he caught a glimpse of what was inside, two people on the bed, on top of each other. The next time, he knew what to expect and saw a little more. The girl's shirt was off and she was on top of the guy, who judging from the red hair, Fernsler was pretty sure was the one they called Rusty. On the third and fourth passes, what he saw was the back of the girl's head, moving up and down. On the fifth pass, Rusty gave him the thumbs up.



Fernsler turned up the volume. The friends were having another one of their fancy dinners. Monica was supposed to be some kind of cook and they did this way too often, all of them together in their outfits and clean skin and perfect hair, none of them worried or hungover or not sure about where to sit or what to say. Fernsler had never lived in New York, never even farther away than Altoona, but he was pretty sure dipshits like this would not be able to afford these kinds of apartments in any kind of real city.

He could hear his neighbors, students from one of the Asian countries, laughing and shouting through the walls. There were three of them and he could never figure out who was with who: sometimes the one with the glasses seemed like he was the boyfriend, sometimes the one with the long hair. If he could understand what they were saying, maybe it wouldn't be so goddam annoying. Maybe it would be more like watching *Friends* and he could follow along, listen in as Asian Ross fumbled to court Asian Rachel.

Onscreen, the real Ross was giving a toast, thanking his sister, Monica, and his girlfriend, Rachel. Now they were smiling at each other like idiots, or like they had finally figured out how nice it was what they had, how they were all rich, good looking Friends.

Fernsler finished his beer and let it drop on the floor. He wondered about eating dinner, but there wasn't anything easy in the fridge and no money for pizza. It was nine o' clock.



The girl called it a sex on the beach, and when she handed it to Fernsler she smiled like she knew it was stupid but liked it anyway. Jenny was her name and she was tall and blond and would have fit in pretty good in that stupid coffee place where the Friends traded jokes and moved their plots along. He stole glances at her and tried not to think about her head bobbing up and down through the curtains.

He was less sure about the guy. Rusty. The big one who started the Lawn Man thing and who called him 'guy' and 'chief' and said everything like a game show host, like there was some audience somewhere out of sight.

"Wait wait wait!" Rusty said now, pointing to Fernsler's drink. He reached into a plastic bag and came away with a paper umbrella, fixed it

to the top of the red cup. “Now it’s a proper summer drink,” he said, and made a gesture that Fernsler translated as “drink.”

He sipped and then gulped. Peaches and vodka and something else sweet. “Pretty good,” Fernsler said. He drank again. Already he could feel the alcohol in the back of his head, something starting up slow, but starting. It was pretty fucking good. “Pretty fucking good,” he said.

“Right?” Jenny, said. She slapped the table and gave the finger to the Rusty.

“Hey, watch out,” Rusty said. “That’s Lawn Man’s move.”

“Fernsler,” Fernsler said.

“That’s Fernsler’s move you’re rocking right there,” Rusty said.

They were sitting at the big table in the side room, the one with all the big pictures. Fernsler couldn’t stop looking at all those pictures—each single frame filled with twenty or thirty of them, all wearing the striped blue and red tie, with a year—1975, 1987, 2004, and on and on—in big type right in the middle. He liked the way the hair styles changed as you moved across the years, and then they came back. The way most of them had one guy who was the wacky guy, wearing a funny hat or making a face. He pictured those wacky guys now, pointing out the places where

their lawns weren't mowed right, sending back their food, hurrying from one place to the other in their ties and brown pants and tucked in shirts and not a wacky hat to be seen.

“This is an auspicious start,” Rusty said. As usual, he pushed his voice out toward some studio audience, waited for the laugh track. “I told Jen we'd find some cool summer friends and sure enough, here we are with the Lawn Man.”

“Fernsler,” Jenny said.

“I really gotta get to finishing that lawn,” Fernsler said. “Before it gets dark out.”

“Here's to summer friends,” Rusty said. He extended his cup and they toasted. Fernsler finished his sex on the beach. He looked at the grass, black-green in the dusk. He held his cup out and Jenny poured.



Fernsler put his six-pack on the table and turned on the television. Monica's mother thought she was a fuck up, called fucking up “pulling a Monica.” The last time he had gone out with Reichenbach and the rest of

them, he had overheard Bates and Old Snyder whispering about something getting all Fernslered up, and every time Monica's mother said something awful, he took a gulp and wiped his brow and was surprised to find that he was sweating.

Fernsler could smell himself, all grass and sweat and gas and beer. He went into the bathroom and washed his hands again. The Friends all looked so clean. He took a shower and went back to the TV. When he finished his last beer, the smell was still on him.



Fernsler worked through his first three jobs and got to the fraternity early. He started the mower, acted like he was waiting for it to warm up. He checked the gas, went through the motions of what he'd do to check the oil. Nobody appeared on the big patio, nobody opened any windows.

He stood there for a moment and then realized he didn't have another plan, that he was standing behind a running lawn mower and staring at five inches of rolling fraternity lawn. He cut a line from the sidewalk over to the edge of the house, then followed the edge over to

the doorway. He paused when he got to the big room on the first floor. As usual, the curtains were open a few inches and he could see inside.

She was on her belly, sleeping on top of the sheets, her blond hair spread out like a sunset around her perfect face. She was wearing a tiny little shirt and no pants, her underwear riding up on her backside. Fernsler thought about knocking on the window, about sneaking into the room and closing the curtains, sneaking out without waking her. He wondered what it would be like to be out at the Tavern, drinking sex on the beaches and watching her slap the table, give the finger to him in that funny way while Reichenbach and Snyder and even Mr. Bricker watched.



Fernsler wondered which of the Friends he could beat in a fight. Chandler and Ross, definitely. Joey he wasn't sure. Was Joey supposed to be some kind of boxer? Or was that the guy who looked like him on *Taxi*?

On the screen, Ross and Rachel kissed. Fernsler imaged himself busting down the door. He would separate them first, say “whoa buddy,

whose woman you think you're looking at there?" Ross would make a joke or his stupid puppy face. Fernsler would make sure Rachel was okay, walk her to the sofa, sit her down. He would turn his back to Ross, knowing he wouldn't do a thing.

He would give Ross a chance to take the first swing. As soon as he started to wind up his fist, Fernsler would headbutt him. When Ross recoiled Fernsler would say something like "who's laughing now, funny boy?" and he would punch Ross right in the face with one hand, and then the other, and he would keep on doing it until Rachel begged him to stop.

As he dumped the gasoline around the room, she would look at him, at first questioning and then proud. They would make out, her chest full and warm against his, the fumes pushing up into their heads. He would light the match and take her hand.



"You been staying out of trouble?" Mr. Bricker said.

Fernsler nodded.

“Still doing the landscaping. Working for mister... Reichenbach?”

“I am.”

“Anything new? You keeping a low profile? Got it under control?”

Mr. Bricker took off his reading glasses and looked Fernsler in the eye. This was his big question. Fernsler knew he was just looking forward to getting out of there, that he'd be bellied up at Sharkie's in a half hour.

Fernsler nodded. “Yessir. Under control.”

“You keep up the good work,” Mr. Bricker said.



They had been drinking on the patio for a few hours, Fernsler and the girl with their sex on the beaches, Rusty and a new guy trading swallows off a bottle of scotch. The new guy was older, maybe forty, with a beard and long pants and glasses and a grumpy air about him that made Fernsler think he was some kind of professor. They introduced him as Hunter and Fernsler wasn't sure whether that was a first name or last but he was guessing at first.

Hunter and Rusty were talking about some book and Fernsler had Jenny to himself. It was easy to talk to her, especially after two or three sex on the beaches. She asked questions and he answered them. She told him stories about people he didn't know and he laughed. Every now and then she stood up and stretched and Fernsler's entire body felt like it needed to shiver and he wanted to hit something. Then she would sit down and ask him a question or tell him about some party she had some time with people he couldn't picture and would never meet.

Fernsler felt exposed there on the patio, with the lawn half-done and the mower sitting in the middle and Reichenbach's tendency to drive around in his truck in the afternoons, checking up. He would have to either finish up in the dark or come back first thing in the morning. He could break the machine, bring it to Reichenbach in the morning for fixing, but that seemed like a worse excuse than Jenny, sitting there in her short shorts and her tan stomach and the thought of her ponytail moving up and down in that big room on the first floor.

Fernsler finished his sex on the beach and poured another from the pitcher, then topped off Jenny. "Yes," she said, and slapped her hand on the table. She made a face like she was making a joke and laughed. Fernsler didn't get what she was getting at sometimes, but he was sitting

here drinking sex on the beaches and watching her stretch and listening to her stories and he didn't care.

Hunter and Rusty stood. "Hey we're gonna..." Rusty said. He looked at Jenny like she could hear the rest of the sentence in her head.

"Yeah yeah," she said. "Me and Fernsler are good to go."

*Me and Fernsler.* He sat up then sat down again. The lawnmower needed to be put back into the truck. He would have to do that later, then drive over to Reichenbach's and try to sneak it into the garage. She was telling him about horses now, riding lessons. She sat back in the chair, her bare feet up on the table, her legs long and tan and muscular. Her shirt was too small and kept riding up, revealing her flat, bare belly. "You believe that?" she said, and put a warm hand on Fernsler's shoulder.

Fernsler felt it again, the need to shake himself like a dog. He stood and walked to the edge of the patio and looked out over the trees to the campus. The sun had just gone down and the buildings glowed pink in the distance.

"What you doing, Fernsler?" Jenny said.

She was standing next to him before he realized she had gotten up. There was a fair amount of liquor in those sex on the beaches, he

thought. She put a hand on his back and he flashed to Phoebe and Monica and Rachel. Before he could allow himself to wimp out, he turned to Jenny and kissed her.

“Whoa what the fuck?!”

It was Rusty, standing by the door with a bong in his hand. Fernsler backed up. Jenny had a hand on her mouth and she looked more sad than anything.

“Fernsler, I...” she started.

He ran past Rusty, standing there with his hands on his hips shouting something out toward whatever studio audience he wished was watching, past the professor, smirking like Ross or goddamn Chandler, past the lawnmower and the truck and the trees lined just right along the summer streets.



Fernsler stared at the television. He tried to let his mind go blank, a trick he'd learned from his first cellmate, an Asian guy who was in for dealing. He called it meditation but to Fernsler it was just spacing out, making the

time go as quickly as possible. He had finished all the beer and knew he wouldn't go out for more, couldn't face the streets and the students who would be making their way from one place to another. He stared at the screen, tried to let his mind go, but even with the beer, there was something in there that wouldn't unlatch.

He closed his eyes and leaned back. On the television, Chandler cracked a joke, Joey said "how *you* doing?" The studio audience laughed. Fernsler felt like he was rising, moving upwards. He opened his eyes and he was floating over the apartment, *that* apartment, could see the tops of their heads, Chandler and Ross watching television while Monica worried over a pot of something. He couldn't see them but knew that Rachel and Phoebe would make their entrance soon, that a pie would drop and Chandler would make a joke and what seemed like a big dilemma would just bring them all closer together. He saw another figure sitting at the table, wearing a familiar baseball hat. He could smell gasoline and thought about shouting, telling them they better be careful. He could feel the heft of Rachel in his arms, could smell her hair and feel her taught body against his as they made their way down the stairs, the sound of sirens getting closer, smoke filling their lungs.



Fernsler leaned back and clicked on the remote. In the distance, the first sirens tearing down the street. The television was large and flat and the sound was wired into the speakers. This is how they lived, he thought. Even in this in-between place they had flat screen televisions and pretty blond girlfriends and friends who came over for sex on the beaches and in the end they all knew everything would be fine—*I'll be there for you*—no matter how many pies dropped on the floor, whether the lawn was mowed or Mr. Bricker checked this box instead of that one.

He clicked around until he found an episode of *Friends*. They were larger on this screen, more clear, almost lifelike. Fernsler took off his shirt. The gas smell wafted up into his nose and he held it like a bong hit, exhaled when he couldn't hold his breath any more. He found one of Rusty's shirts on the floor, smelled it, and put it on. The sirens were getting closer.

He turned up the volume and it was almost like he was really there this time. It was almost like any minute she would come home and find him and he'd make some lame remark and she would crack a joke and the

studio audience would laugh and laugh and laugh until the screen went dark.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave Housley's third collection of short fiction, *If I Knew the Way, I Would Take You Home*, was published in January by Dzanc Books. He is the author of *Commercial Fiction* (Outpost 19) and *Ryan Seacrest is Famous* (Impetus Press, Dzanc Books eBook Reprint). He is one of the founding editors of *Barrelhouse* magazine, and a co-founder of the Conversations and Connections writer's conference. Sometimes he drinks boxed wine and tweets about the things on his television at [@housleydave](https://twitter.com/housleydave).

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