

# THE LAWN GUY

by Daniel Middleton

It was one of those things that passes nearly unnoticed in conversation. Happens all the time, and with a frequency unsurprising when you consider that psychologists say we really only pay attention to about ten percent of what the other person is saying anyway; too busy thinking about what *we're* going to say next.

You're standing there talking and then suddenly there it is, an unexpected speed bump in a dialogue you're really not following too closely in the first place, and like a physical speed bump, it's there and gone, jolting you alert too late to do anything but blot the spilled latté off your pants with a paper napkin. Gone before it even registers.

Of course, with current economic realities being what they are, I probably need to update my metaphors. *Used* to be a latté, maybe, but that was months ago, before the economy went south and my morning Caffè Misto and vanilla almond biscotti from Starbucks was painfully downsized, corkscrewing down like a dying biplane trailing smoke into the tree line. Now it was a large BK Joe® and a breakfast croissant passed through my window in the Burger King drive-thru... and even that was only a couple times a week. Usually it was a bowl of Grape-Nuts and coffee at home, or a Nutri-Grain and a juicebox if I was running late.

But the latté was just the most glaring example, a five dollar cup of coffee poster boy for the unnecessary excesses that got us into this mess in the first place. But it wasn't just the latté, I was cutting back wherever I could like everyone else.

The single annoying exception in my experience to this otherwise national phenomenon was the guy I was talking to over the top of my cubicle. Bob Boyer was a coworker and persistent prairie dogger, his head appearing above the fabric-covered partition this time to remind me he had to leave early.

But it was the *reason* he had to leave early that caught my attention.

"Did you just say your *lawn guy*?" I asked, interrupting whatever he had moved on to by the time that last thought actually registered. I had no idea what it was, of course, nestled into that ninety percent void I wasn't paying attention to in the first place.

"Yeah," Bob said, annoyance peaking briefly in his voice to alert me to the fact that whatever I had interrupted was – at least from Bob's perspective – pretty damn important. Experience told me, from *my* perspective, that I probably wasn't missing a whole lot. "My lawn guy. I need to leave a little early, I'm supposed to meet him at my house at," he shot his sleeve – just another annoying, self-important mannerism Bob was the acknowledged master of in our little fabric-walled world, "... four-thirty, so I'm gonna have to duck out. I was just wondering if you could cover for me."

"Cover for you?"

"Yeah, you know ... answer the phone, run interference with Bird Man, tell him I'm running an errand or something if he stops by. You know, *cover* for me. Can you do that for me, buddy?"

Okay, for starters, I'm not really Bob Boyers' buddy – tell you the truth, like most everyone in the office, I barely like the guy. And Bird Man – our supervisor, actually 'Bridgeman,' tall and thin and constantly hovering above our tiny workstations – was going to see right through the fiction that Bob was out running errands. If I tried to cover for him, it would be my ass on the line... so, no way.

Bob Boyers doesn't sign my check, if he thought I was willing to go out on a limb for him, then he had obviously mistaken me for his Japanese houseboy, and so instead of answering, I changed the subject.

"You still have a lawn guy?" I used to have a lawn service, too, but now weekends meant sweating out under the hot sun, every free moment dedicated to keeping the grass trimmed back and the weeds sprayed into submission, the delicately manicured effect achieved by someone else doing all the work long since replaced by the new standard of bare maintenance.

Apparently, Bob hadn't had to cut back.

"Well ... *yeah*." At least he still had the decency to be uncomfortable with my question.

My raised-eyebrows look was enough for him to explain.

"Just pushing the wheelbarrow, buddy. Making those deals."

*Pushing the wheelbarrow.* That's what Boyers called what he did. We were both salesmen, but in Bob's mind I guess '*pushing that wheelbarrow*' sounded more like an honest day's work than peddling policy upgrades to the minimally-insured on straight commission, and '*making those deals*' implied Bob was a bigger player than reality made him out to be.

*Of course,* I had to admit – albeit begrudgingly, *if Bob still has a lawn boy, then he must be doing a lot better than me. A damn sight better.*

Bob reached down for his coffee and took a sip while I considered his proposal; it was a Starbucks' cup, and Bob was unaware that was almost the deal breaker. But, hell, it wasn't Bob's fault I wasn't writing any paper, not his fault I hadn't sold a single policy in over a week.

Come to think of it though, Bob had come in with a Starbucks' cup every morning. *Every morning, and five days a week at four bucks a shot was twenty bucks, and that was not counting the biscotti.*

No, rather than running Bob Boyer down, I'd probably be better off trying to be more like him. Kind of like those old Gatorade commercials with Michael Jordan, only mine would say '*I Want To Be Like Bob.*'

Or maybe not. I wasn't there yet, but he must be doing something right.

"Okay, look," I said, "I'll answer the phone for you, okay? Take some messages. But that's it. Bird Man asks where you are, you're on your own, understand? I don't know nothing."

"No prob," Boyers grinned, disappearing back into his cubicle to gather his things before gophering back up like an annoying Jack-in-the-box. "And thanks, buddy. You really saved my butt."

*Yeah, I grumbled as he slipped out the door, and if saving Bob Boyers' butt was part of my job description, I might actually be making some money in this shithole.*

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Bob stopped by the water fountain down the hall on his way to the elevator, rinsing out the Starbucks cup and drying it carefully with a paper napkin, one of a fistful he'd picked up from the break room. After so long the Styrofoam was actually beginning to break down, the sides of the cup growing soft from use. In another week or so he'd have to think about investing in a replacement; either that or start drinking plain tap water instead of the weak and watery

instant he refilled it with every morning before leaving the house. It was probably a combination of the heat and high acid content in the coffee that was breaking down the chemical bond of the Styrofoam, affecting its strength and structure... so, yeah, come to think of it, tap water probably was the best idea.

Cutting through the multi-level parking garage next to his building – Bob smiled and waved at the security guard in passing – he squeezed through a tight bank of high shrubs separating it from the residential area behind.

The houses on this first street ran roughly parallel to the lot, and the owner of the second house was an elderly gentleman on a fixed income Bob had first met peddling policies door-to-door, like back in the old days. For thirty-five dollars a month he let Bob park his car in the driveway of his cracked-stucco bungalow; fifty bucks less than the parking garage and a problem only when it rained... and hell, like the song said, it *never* rains in Southern California.

As an added bonus, the brisk ten-minute walk twice a day allowed Bob to cancel his gym membership, and that was another seventy-five bucks a month.

The drive home took a little better than an hour, the rambling back streets taking a little longer and requiring a touch more gas than the Foothill/Eastern, but a meticulously calculated cost analysis had proved to Bob's satisfaction that the route actually saved him more than twenty dollars every month on toll charges alone, even with the additional mileage factored in.

Arriving home a little later than he had planned, Bob juggled his keys as he hurried up the walk. It would've been faster to enter through the garage, but that option had been unavailable since February. Closing the door behind, he went into the bedroom he shared with his wife – she was out babysitting until later that evening – and changed out of his work clothes, hanging both the suit and the shirt in the open air, fluffing them briefly before leaving them by

an open window where they could air out in the slight breeze. If he was careful, tried not to get too warm at work, changed out of his clothes immediately when he got home, and rotated his available suits carefully, he could go a month sometimes between dry cleanings (depending on the humidity).

He changed into jeans, tennis shoes and his Dominos shirt before checking his watch. The cap he kept in his glove box. The second job was why he'd had to leave work early. He had to clock in at five-thirty, and coming home early had been the only way he'd have time to meet with the Lawn Guy.

He glanced out back along the privacy fence to make sure the fiberboard lean-to was ready to be shown. It wasn't much, but that wasn't the point. It was in the suburbs and it was safe, it kept the weather off, and came with bathroom- and limited kitchen privileges. The real selling point, though, emphasized on flyers posted down near the Friendship Shelter in Laguna Beach, was it was on private property, and that kept tenants from getting hassled by the cops.

Boyers was pretty sure being homeless wasn't any fun; it was something he was doing everything he could think of to avoid.

It bothered him a little that he referred to the man he was waiting for as the 'Lawn Guy,' but in the specialized niche of property rentals that Bob had carved out for himself tenant turnover was common, and as a landlord, he couldn't be bothered by remembering a whole new set of names every few weeks. He'd found – not to his surprise, he had to admit – that most of his tenants were transients, and most of them went by street names anyway; it was easier to refer to them by where they rented than remember a list of constantly changing names.

Vincent Martinez was the exception. He had been the first, and so far had been here the longest – nearly six months – and by virtue of stamina and familiarity had avoided designation as

simply the Upstairs Guestroom Guy. On the other hand, The Second Bedroom-, First Bedroom-, Family Room-, Garage-, Attic-, Storage Room- and Utility Shed Guys hadn't been so lucky, but then most of them were just passing through anyway; Bob hadn't been lucky enough yet to find long-term tenants for what he liked to call his self-contained, single dwelling neighborhood.

The Lawn Guy would be Boyers' latest addition to his little community... that was, if he could sell the guy on the idea of the lean-to, although Bob admitted it was a long shot. His strategy was to really push the benefits of the no-hassle bathroom policy and kitchen privileges, as well as the fact that the Garage Guy had conceded 'bad weather privileges' to any outside tenants for a discounted rent (credited *per diem*).

If everything worked out, this newest addition would bring the total up to nine, with rent for each based on a sliding scale determined by square footage and amenities. It was confusing, and at times a little crowded, but tallied all together it almost paid both mortgages.

Like everyone, Bob had been forced by pressures of a frustrating economy to make changes in his habits, changes that were inarguably inconvenient, cumbersome and sometimes awkward to explain to the occasional nosey neighbor, but Bob told himself in the end that it was all just a matter of perspective.

Perspective and appearances, and the thing that was most important to Bob Boyers was maintaining the illusion of his former lifestyle, which was more important than the pain of cutting back. And in order to make that happen ... well, you do what you gotta do.

Pushing that wheelbarrow. Making those deals.

That's what it was all about.

THE END