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FRESHLY SEEDED LAWN

BY KETH NORBURY

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As she vacuums the carpet, Susan Betts gazes through the living-room window just as an object about the size and shape of a gorilla plummets into the freshly seeded lawn. She drops the vacuum hose, clenches her fists at her side and screams, a violent shriek that shudders her entire body. Whatever has crashed into the lawn is wearing camouflaged combat fatigues with what looks to Susan's civilian eyes to be an unopened parachute pack attached to his chest. She thinks "his," presuming that a man is more likely to fall from the sky than either a gorilla or a meteor, although she cannot know for certain from this distance or in her present state of mind that this is in fact a man.

Before she can move, the shadow of a jet departing the nearby airbase sweeps across the puddles on the freshly seeded lawn. A whistling roar overwhelms the sound of the vacuum cleaner, which is still running, and shakes the pane with that furious rattle neither she nor her husband Michael had experienced until after they closed the deal six weeks earlier on their two-bedroom bungalow. As the pitch of the jet's roar fades, her right hand cradles her pregnant belly as if the baby has already entered the world. She isn't due for another month but Susan is manically preparing the nest as if the birth will happen any moment. Michael is already overdue. He left three hours earlier with his buddy Ted to pick up another load of furniture from the old apartment.

What's taking Michael? Susan asks herself.

And why did he have to take Ted of all people?

She imagines her water breaking and staining the carpet, which the vacuum cleaner has already passed across twenty times in her futile effort to capture every last fleck of construction dust. Michael will be able to replace the carpet if necessary — he's an apprentice carpenter after all. No matter what happens, everything will be fine.

He'll fix the lawn. Somebody just needs to remove or rescue the gorilla or the meteor or the man or whatever it is. Somebody needs to phone for an ambulance but her phone hasn't been installed yet.

She and Michael are just moving in, to their brand new house with its freshly seeded lawn. Its earliest sprouts of grass peek randomly through the soil like week-old stubble on the first beard of a teenage anarchist. Right now the freshly seeded lawn is little more than a swamp, nobody having taken the trouble to pack the soil with a roller. Yet Michael fell in love with the possibilities of the yard, enclosed by yellow warning tape held aloft at the corners by bamboo stakes. By association, Susan loved the lawn and leveraged that love to convince her mother,

who had just struck a Keno jackpot, to front them the money for the down payment.

Susan closes her eyes, stops pushing the vacuum hose and remembers to breathe, like the public health nurse with the lazy eye taught her at the lone prenatal class Susan and Michael had attended. The machine is still running, only now it's as loud as the Briggs and Stratton rider mower, a housewarming gift from his parents, that Michael will mount this summer to shave the virgin grass.

She opens her eyes and it's clear that a man in military attire, including a helmet, has crashed into the lawn. Her cheeks flush for the few seconds it takes her curiosity to turn to courage and cajole her out of the house. Before she got pregnant, she could have skated like a water bug across the mud. Now she's a behemoth whose plodding steps plunge several sticky inches as she slogs to the edge of the crater in the middle of the lawn.

Neither of his chutes has opened. He looks even more like a man than he did from the other side of the window, even though a helmet and goggles cover his head and eyes. Mud from the perimeter of the crater is already oozing over his legs. Blood trickles across his cheek from the crease of his mouth. He must certainly be dead. Only a dead or paralyzed person could remain for even a second in that contorted posture. His left elbow is bent at the opposite angle as nature prescribes. It's the same with his right knee.

Another jet screams overhead, even lower and louder than the earlier one. The roar slams through her skull, turns orange and ignites a headache that combined with the sight before her eyes makes her sick to her stomach.

Across the street, an abandoned Caterpillar teeters on the edge of a partially excavated basement. Similar scenes of subdivision genesis dot the landscape. Susan envisions the orderly metamorphosis — neighbors pulling dandelions and planting narcissuses as their children maneuver their tricycles — after the mud on the asphalt is cleared away.

To test that she isn't dreaming, she plucks a single auburn strand from her cascading hair. Tears dribble onto Susan's cheeks across half-circles as red as his blood. She scampers across the lawn, stomping tracks eight inches deep, to the home of her nearest neighbor.

No answer. Susan trudges from house to house, some barely framer's skeletons, until she reaches a two-story house clad in dilapidated siding on the edge of the subdivision. About fifty yards from the house, a ten-foot-high chain link fence topped with razor wire stretches into the distance north and south. Beyond the fence, a lush prairie of four-inch grass reaches just as far to the west, interrupted only by the graying tarmac of the runways cutting through it. A control tower rises out of the ground about two miles away flanked on either side by hangars and other massive buildings that from her perspective look like models from a child's play set.

As she rings the doorbell, which clangs like a gong stuck with a sledgehammer, a wind shears across her face, assaulting her nostrils with the stink of recently spread manure. That's something else she hadn't noticed six weeks ago.

A spindly grey-haired man wearing two hearing aids — a man she has seen only once as she and Michael drove by his home — answers his door.

"There's a man with a parachute who's crashed on my front lawn what should I do help I think he might be dead My God, how can this be happening?"

The man urges Susan to repeat herself several times, punctuating each request with a guttural "What?" until he finally notices her extended belly and says, "You're having a baby!"

"Yes," she yells and barges past him. "I need to use your phone. Mine hasn't been installed

yet.”

He gives way and follows behind her, muttering, “Certainly, certainly.”

A yellowed list of emergency numbers held in place by masking tape clings to the wall by the phone. “Ambulance” in faded red lettering tops the list. Her finger slips off the dial (this must be the last rotary dial phone in the country) before she completes the fourth digit. She tries again, her hand quivering as she concentrates on each orbit. Four rings and fifty heartbeats later, a recorded message answers.

“Nine-one-one!” the man shouts.

How could she be so stupid?

She dials. A dispatcher answers before the second ring.

“Police, fire or ambulance?”

“I don’t know,” Susan says.

“Is there a fire?”

“No.”

“Anyone hurt?”

“I think he might be dead.”

“I’ll dispatch an ambulance and police. The address?”

The phone line hums for a second as Susan thinks. She doesn’t know.

“My front lawn I just moved into the new subdivision not far from the airbase his parachute didn’t open he just fell from the sky there’s a big hole I don’t know if he’s alive I can’t believe it hurry help please...”

“Everything’s going to be fine,” the dispatcher says calmly. “Take a deep breath and relax. Do you know the street?”

Susan has to think again for a second. “It’s a type of tree. It’s... we just moved in and it’s near the airbase.”

“Cedar?” the dispatcher asks.

“No. Something deciduous.”

“Elm?”

“Oak?”

“Pine?”

“No no. Longer.”

Susan turns to the man while the dispatcher considers trees with longer names.

"Do you know the street?" she asks him.

"You'd like a seat?" he says and fetches a chair.

"Street! Street!" she says, crying as she presses the receiver tight against her left ear.

"Hold your horses! I'm getting it."

"Cottonwood?" the dispatcher guesses.

"Something like that," Susan says, her eyes sparkling through the tears. "Yeah. Yeah. Dogwood Street."

"That's right here!" the old man says as he sets a chair down beside her. "Corner of Dogwood and McDonald Park Road."

"Thank you," Susan says and plops her backside onto the chair.

"Your number?" the dispatcher says.

"I told you I don't know the number."

"Your phone number."

"I don't have a phone yet. I'm calling from a neighbor's."

"The number there, then."

She looks on the phone for the sticker in the center of the dial but there isn't one."

"What's your number?" she asks the man.

"What?" he says.

"Your phone number?"

"Sure, sure," he says and goes over to the kitchen counter, opens a drawer and pulls out a phone book.

"I'm sorry," she tells the dispatcher. Susan is crying again. "I don't know the number please just send the ambulance he might be dead."

The dispatcher can barely understand her through the sobbing.

"It's all right, dear. Just be there when the ambulance arrives." The dispatcher hangs up.

Susan drops the phone without re-cradling it on the hook and takes the old man by the arm and leads him out the door. Yet another jet screams overhead, right over the man's house and directly toward Susan's home as if it's pointing the way for them. The roar makes thinking difficult, although one thought that does occur to her is the man's state of hearing may be related to the location of his home. Susan walks as quickly as she comfortably can in her condition. The man isn't any more agile and has a slight limp that becomes more pronounced with each step. Neither says anything to the other until they reach the crater on Susan's front

lawn.

"My God," the man says. "We'd better call an ambulance."

"I already did," Susan yells straight into his closest ear.

"Oh," he says. He turns to go back but Susan has a lobster-claw grip on his sleeve.

She pushes him toward the fallen paratrooper. The old man stutters through the soft ground, approaching cautiously as if expecting the young man to spring into a combat stance. Kneeling over him, the old man unfastens the zipper on the tunic. Susan covers her face at the sight of the jelly-like blood clotting on the old man's hands. He feels for a pulse and his face brightens when he detects one.

"He's alive!" the old man says.

Susan doesn't respond, as if she's the one who's hard of hearing. She shivers, diving her hands into her pockets even though it's a mild, clear and sunny spring afternoon.

The old man extracts a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes the blood from his hands before reaching an arm around Susan to console her.

"I hope the ambulance arrives soon," she says.

"Ambulance! Yes, I'll go call one immediately," the old man says. "Wait here. Don't touch him. He probably has extensive internal injuries."

She doesn't try even to stop the old man but watches as he hobbles back down the road toward his house. Her hands slowly drop from her face to hang limply at her side. She looks toward the airport in the distance and avoids the paratrooper. Her attention turns to the partially constructed houses and the otherwise uninhabited neighborhood. The baby kicks her and she caresses the spot then locks her hands under her belly to take the weight briefly off her back.

Did everyone hide when they saw this man fall from the sky? Did they know something is about to happen? Or is there no activity because the houses aren't finished and therefore unoccupied?

These thoughts cycle in her brain for several minutes without arriving at any answers before turning to another question: What is taking Michael so long?

Actually, that's easily answered. He's with Ted and Ted has talked him into some sort of detour. On the night of their second prenatal class, Ted kept Michael at the pub to watch a hockey game. It was the Olympics, the Miracle on Ice, they said. Ted is single and has no sense of responsibility at all.

Why has Michael taken Ted along? The answer to that is also easy. He's the only one of Michael's so-called friends who offered to help.

Susan wishes she had a watch as she looks up at the sky and finds the sun. It offers her only a vague clue of the time. It's mid afternoon.

She walks toward the door of the house but decides against going inside, in case she can't hear the ambulance when it arrives. So she turns around and trudges back across the freshly seeded lawn and stops ten feet from the depression. It would not surprise her at all if the paratrooper were to rise out of the mud and ascend to the heavens. The ground would be

consecrated and a ziggurat erected, around which Michael will have to learn to maneuver the Briggs and Stratton.

Tears dribble over her cheeks and into the corners of her trembling mouth. She begins to shimmy like an old car with an abused engine. She closes her eyes, half expecting that when she reopens them she will find herself back in the old apartment and thrashing her arms at the shrinking walls.

When she does open them, she sees her shoes up to her ankles in the muck, and ten feet away the figure in the fatigues lying contorted in the mud hole. The old man reappears behind her and wraps a blanket over her shoulders. Confident that the blanket is real, Susan removes it from her shoulders and drapes it across the paratrooper.

"The ambulance will be here any minute," the old man says. "What a terrible connection I had on the phone. I could hardly hear a thing."

"Sure, sure," Susan says, wondering again if the man's hearing problems have anything to do with the subdivision's location beneath the approach to the airbase's main runway.

A siren blares. As Susan stumbles toward the sound, the ambulance speeds past the house and turns around in the cul-de-sac. She waves her arms like semaphore flags to attract the driver's attention. The old man signals in similar fashion as he stands near the paratrooper.

The ambulance races right toward them, missing the driveway and plowing across the lawn, the wheels carving two ruts a foot deep before stalling in the mud. The tires are mired but the driver insists on churning them deeper until the ambulance is floating on its axles. As mud and whiskers of grass spatter the driveway, a paramedic scoots out of the passenger side of the ambulance and rushes over to the paratrooper.

"Did either of you see this happen?" the paramedic asks as he opens his satchel.

"He fell from the sky," Susan says.

"Unless it was a suicide attempt, I'd guess his chutes failed," the paramedic says as he begins a cursory examination. "He's extremely fortunate. Unconscious but still breathing. Two broken legs, fractured collarbone, dislocated shoulder, disjointed hip, a concussion. I don't dare move him until a doctor gets here."

The paramedic signals for the ambulance driver to radio for a physician. Then the driver brings a board over to the edge of the hole. The two men try to slide it under the paratrooper but the mud is too sticky. Afraid of injuring him further, the paramedic says to forget using the board until the doctor arrives. They check the visible parts of the paratrooper's body more closely for signs of trauma. As one of them takes the paratrooper's pulse, the other fetches a cervical collar from the ambulance.

Suddenly, a jet zooms over their heads and they freeze for a couple of seconds as if the enormous sound has switched off their brains. They even duck slightly as the plane passes, although it is a hundred feet above them. Just as suddenly, they return their attention to the figure splayed within the muddy crater.

They work calmly and quickly but encounter a snag when neither can remove the paratrooper's goggles. Puzzled, they continue to do what they can, monitoring blood pressure, inserting an intravenous drip, and cleaning and sterilizing his wounds.

Satisfied they have stabilized the paratrooper's condition, the driver sees what he can do about freeing the ambulance. The wheels spin, unable to gain any traction as they bite deeper into

the soil. The driver gives up and returns to the edge of the depression.

“The hospital is going to call the air force and report the incident,” he says.

No sooner has the air swallowed that sentence than a Jeep pulls up beside the ambulance and imprints a new set of chevron-patterned tracks on the freshly seeded lawn.

An officer, six feet or taller, in starched parade dress, hops out of the passenger seat and jogs, back erect and shoulders straight, over to the depression. The Jeep’s driver, a sergeant, remains at the wheel as the vehicle idles.

“I’m Major Tom Franklin,” the officer introduces himself to the paramedics. “We’ll take over now. Our ambulance will be here momentarily to take the casualty to the base infirmary.”

“I don’t think that’s wise,” the lead paramedic says. “His injuries are severe. We’ve called for a doctor to examine him more thoroughly before moving him.”

“I am a doctor!” the major says sternly. “And this is a military matter. It is a military-related injury incurred in the line of military duty. Our infirmary is better-suited to treat such an injury than any civilian medical institution.”

A second ambulance, carrying a doctor in the passenger seat, pulls parallel to the other vehicles already mired in the mud of the freshly seeded lawn. The doctor hurries over to the paratrooper and leans over him to begin his examination. The major leans over the both of them, introduces himself and outlines his position on the matter.

“The man’s condition is critical,” the civilian doctor says. “We must get him to a hospital immediately.”

“How?” Susan interjects. “Both ambulances are struck to their axles on my lawn.”

“We’ll have an emergency vehicle here any minute,” the major says.

“Good,” says the civilian doctor. “It can take him to Municipal General.”

“Not on your life,” the major says.

“He’ll die if we don’t get him to the hospital immediately,” the civilian doctor says as he attempts to loosen the paratrooper’s helmet and goggles.

“You should have done this already,” he tells the paramedic.

“I couldn’t,” the paramedic says.

“You’re wasting your time, doctor,” the major says.

“What are you talking about?”

“That’s classified. As I said before, this is a military matter. You’ve interfered enough. Now step aside.”

“But he needs immediate medical attention.”

“You’re forcing me to take sterner measures,” the major says he unfastens the holster of his

service revolver. "We must be patient..."

The major is still talking when a jet drowns out his voice. It's just a coincidence, Susan thinks, wondering again why she didn't notice any aircraft noise during the open house. Where the hell are they going? Where is Michael?

Everyone on the lawn except for the major, his driver and the paratrooper watches the jet until its sound fades to a leaf-like rustle.

The civilian doctor turns back to the major, who winks at him. Winks!

The doctor steps back and the major's hand releases his weapon. Susan, the old man, the paramedic, the two ambulance drivers, the major and the sergeant form a semi-circle around the pit. The shadow of a utility pole splits the paratrooper in half and, just because it's that time of day, creates a line separating the two camps, which are still at a standoff when a tow truck arrives. The truck backs over the lawn and stops about six feet from the first ambulance.

The lawn now resembles the ground in a rodeo ring. The tow truck's dual wheels provide adequate traction to free the ambulance but create twin channels of their own. As the tow-truck driver attaches the hook to the second ambulance, a third ambulance, the military one, careers around the corner, sideswipes the tow truck and skids across the lawn into the passenger side of the Jeep, which the mud had prevented from smashing into the other ambulance.

Seeing that the ambulance he had arrived in is now the only one undamaged, the civilian doctor says to the major, "I guess that leaves us no choice but to get this man to Municipal General before anything else can happen."

The major strokes his holster and says, "I'm sure my men can manage with one of your vehicles, under the circumstances."

"But how are going to get him safely out of the hole?" one of the paramedics asks.

"Yes," Susan says to the major. "How will you remove him? He's sinking."

The crater is crumbling around its edges, the mud enveloping the man's legs.

Moving only his upper body, the major slowly, quietly and methodically scans the scene.

"Do you have a shovel?" he asks Susan.

She shakes her head, no.

"What for?" one of the paramedics asks.

"Are you crazy," the civilian doctor says.

"We'll have to dig him out," the major says, shading his forehead with the flat of his hand as he widens his scanning to encompass the neighborhood.

"I have an idea," the driver of the second civilian ambulance says. He draws a grimace from the civilian doctor but continues. "See that Cat across the street?"

"Perfect," the major says, "If only someone could operate it."

“That’s what I was going to say. I drove an identical rig up north. It’d be a snap to hot-wire.”

Guided by the major, the sergeant and the two other paramedics, the ambulance driver steers the Cat through the wreckage. He gingerly sinks the bucket into the ground under the paratrooper and lifts him out like a clam on a spade. The civilian doctor watches with a slackened jaw as the others pick the paratrooper off the bucket and place him on a stretcher. All covered in muck, the first ambulance driver and the military paramedics load the paratrooper into the undamaged civilian ambulance and speed off, leaving the others on the lawn beside the now even larger, muddy hole.

Unable to look at the major, the doctor or the remains of the lawn, Susan closes her eyes and plucks a hair from the back of her head, hoping its tiny shock will transport her to a reality that doesn’t include a severely injured paratrooper, his would-be rescuers or a chewed-up lawn.

As she peacefully incubates that wish, the tow-truck operator asks the old man if he can use a phone to call for another wrecker.

“Sure, sure,” the old man says. “But don’t you think you should use my phone to call a tow truck?”

Susan opens her eyes to see the wrecked vehicles are still there amid the swirling ruts of mud. She lumbers back to the house, her body shaking nervously, to wait for Michael. She grips the vacuum cleaner by its neck and thrusts its snout back and forth across the carpet beneath the picture window.

A second tow truck drags away the second ambulance as a Jeep equipped with a winch extracts the air-force ambulance.

Hurry, Michael. Hurry! But he doesn’t show before the doctor, the major, and the rest of the drivers and paramedics take their leave. They depart quickly and quietly with no goodbyes. As they drive away, she is still staring at the paint chips, rust flakes and shards of turn-signal lenses that glitter in the mud. Spirals of tire tracks radiate from the crater.

Susan closes her eyes again, this time on the chance that when she reopens them she’ll awaken in bed. Any bed will do. It can be in the old apartment, the room she grew up in at her parents’ house or even in the hospital. Her wish fails, although the next thing she knows, she is vacuuming the living-room floor. There is nothing she can do about the lawn but the carpets will be clean, by God.

The vacuum scoots back and forth, as if of its own mind, as her meandering thoughts conjure up a worrisome idea about her husband. If a perfect stranger can fall onto their lawn, Michael also could have had an accident. The odds in fact are much greater. She sees splintered drawers, blankets, bras and an embroidered nightgown strewn on a highway guardrail — secrets of her life exposed like the entrails of her dead lover.

But he isn’t dead, after all. When he pulls the truck into the driveway, her knees wobble, partly because he has survived her great fear, partly because she fears how he’ll react, but mostly because he doesn’t drive across the lawn.

Michael is, however, so distracted that he fails to apply the brakes fully until the last second and narrowly avoids crunching into the garage door.

“My God, Susan, what the hell happened?” he asks as he rushes into the house.

Ted, his moving buddy, follows slowly behind and stares, as he backs over the threshold, at

what remains of the lawn.

Susan has a mind to scold Michael for being so late, inquire about where he's been, and berate him for having been there. Yet even though she smells five beers on his breath, the pregnancy having heightened her senses, she parries instead of thrusts.

"It wasn't my fault," she says.

"It looks like a natural disaster," Michael says.

"You'll never believe it," she says.

"I already don't believe it," he says as a roar shakes the picture window and grinds his words into inaudible mush.

"I knew you wouldn't believe it," she says, a bubble of blubbing preventing her from elaborating.

She charges into the bathroom. Michael bolts after her and sticks his foot inside the jamb just as she slams the door. She plops onto the toilet and turns her back to him. In order to look her in the face, he has to climb into the bathtub. He nearly slips on the enamel.

"It's OK, honey," he says as he places a hand on her shoulder. "We'll fix it. We can always plant a new lawn. I know how much it means to you. Cheer up."

She shrugs into the corner and cries softly.

"I thought you'd be so angry," she says.

"It's just grass," he says.

Just grass! He's the one who fell in love with the grass or at least the promise of it. She's whimpering now.

"Hey, want to hear something funny? I heard it on the radio on the way over. A guy fell 2,500 feet from an airplane and he's still alive. Right Ted?"

Ted is just outside the bathroom door, where he is drinking a beer that he found in the fridge while Michael and Susan were in the bathroom talking about the lawn.

"Something like that," Ted says. "I was kind of zoned out."

Susan's sobbing intensifies into a hyperventilating fit until she faints.

"Everything all right?" Ted asks.

"She's been working so hard today," Michael says as he picks her up and carries her toward the bedroom. "Do me a favor and bring in a mattress so I can lay her down."

"There's a first-aid kit in the truck," Ted says. "I'll get some smelling salts."

A few wafts revive her. Through watery eyes, she focuses on Michael. A glaze of sweat shines on her face. His smile creases twin dimples — proof this isn't a dream. He promises to let her explain about the lawn whenever she is ready, but he suggests she try to get it out of her

system as soon as possible.

“Thank you,” she says, as if she has just filled in the hole, eliminated the blood and smoothed over the memory. “I’m so glad you understand.”

“Rest,” he says. “Our little fortress looks great.”

He leaves the room and she falls asleep. She dreams of marigolds and violets blooming in the garden as tricycles quietly gouge narrow tracks across the front lawn, creasing the freshly mown blades of grass.

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