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They say the first death hits you hardest, but they're wrong. I don't feel a thing. That's why I volunteer to go to the house. Mom thinks the mower might have been left out, the rusty Sears rotary her father was pushing when it happened. Heart attack. Leave it to Mom to think of tidying up after something like that.

There hasn't been much for me to do since I flew in from New Hampshire, where I teach at a prep school. The arrangements have been made here in Cleveland, and I wouldn't have been part of that anyway. Since doing anything else seems somehow disrespectful, we're all just sitting around, my brothers and sisters and me, the five of us waiting to be told what to do and watching TV without talking, without moving, without even blinking, it seems. When Mom announces, "Someone has to go to the house," my brothers and sisters look at me without saying anything, then turn back to the TV. I say, "I'll go," though it takes some time before I can bring myself to leave the couch.

To get to Papa's house, you drive on flat roads for a couple of miles, then you go down a steep hill and curve up to the street where Papa lived with Gramma until her stroke three years ago. She's in a nursing home; Papa just couldn't take care of her by himself anymore. I wonder if she knows what's going on. As I turn up the last stretch toward the house, the lumbering station wagon enters the shadowy vault of maples and oaks that line the street, the snarled woods of a fairy tale. Patches of light flicker through the canopy like ghosts on the windshield, and the air has a charge to it, a density, as if crossing a threshold.

I park at the curb and step onto the potholed street. Now weathered a graying white, the shingle-sided house with its diamond-shaped dormers is built on the side of a hill. The front porch droops like a clown's smile, white posts and gray floorboards listing toward the stone steps. The lawn with its scorched, bare patches falls away in a lazy S to the top of a wall of tumbled sandstone blocks about waist high, the grass still trim

from the last mowing. Tufts of grass shoot out from between the rocks where the mower couldn't reach. Between the bulging wall and tree lawn is a sidewalk of sandstone slabs laid end to end like the dominoes Papa and I used to play. A flat black stump is embedded in the tree lawn, an elm that, before it was claimed by disease, had begun to raise the driveway. The stump's rim is eaten away by weather and years and the bite of the lawnmower.

I ascend the dark tongue of the driveway, oil-patched and crumbling at the point of its greatest slope, pass the tinny screen door on my left, and come up to the low-slung, flat-top garage, set back in its own little bluff. The back end of Papa's great finned car sticks out of the garage, the door half-closed on its trunk as if devouring a gigantic fish.

"Why don't you let us clean it out back there so you can pull it in all the way?" Dad had offered many times.

"Ah, why bother?" Papa always said, slapping his hand at the air, "Where would I put all the crap?"

To the left is the backyard, flat for a stretch beyond the porch, and much smaller than I remember. At the end of the porch, a huge forsythia leans greedily into the neighbor's yard. There's a short hill up to another rectangle of lawn boxed in by a rock wall like the one out front. Terraced, though Papa never would have used that word. Above the wall, even steeper than the lawn, are the woods that climb to the houses at the top of the bluff. The ground is covered in rotting, broken limbs, sprawling vines, and brown, wet leaves, half-decayed, with ivy and pachysandra poking through.

Did we really play football on that tiny patch of lawn with all our cousins, Papa joining in when the ball rolled down the hill toward the grill where he was cooking? He'd snatch up the tumbling ball with two hands, timing the erratic jumps perfectly, then punt the ball back up the hill, getting more loft on the ball than we could ever dream of. "Show us how, show us how," we would beg. "All right," he'd say. "I have a minute." He'd line us up on the second level, show us how to drop the ball to the top of the foot on the inside (not the toe) and let each of us kick the ball down the hill, so that it looked like it went twice as high. Meanwhile, the first round of burgers and hot dogs would burn to charcoal. "Stop playing with the kids and keep your eye on the barbecue," Gramma would

scold out the window. "He thinks he's 12 years old," she'd say as an aside to anyone who cared to listen.

And there's the lawnmower, just where he would have been standing while coaching us, in the middle of the lawn on the first level, stopped in mid-stripe. The taller grass to the right is trampled. A double track leads from where I'm standing to the mower. Must be from its wheels, I think. Then I realize. No, the gurney. I turn away.

On the back porch sits his cooler, one of those red metal types you see only in antique stores, with a bottle opener screwed to one side. He never did yard work without it. An empty bottle, which must have rolled off the porch, lies next to the cross-hatched trellis stitched with spider webs and spattered with dirt. Another bottle, half-finished, stands next to the cooler. Stroh's. Papa's last beer. He wouldn't be happy that he didn't get to finish it.

I do what Papa would have done. I walk to the porch, take off the cooler's lid, and set it aside, the smell of rust and stale water rising from within. Inside I see the rest of what must have been a 12-pack toppled like bowling pins. I reach into the tepid water and pull out a bottle, shake it off and wipe it on my jeans, then pop the cap by shoving it into the bottle opener and pulling down hard, even though it's a screw top. Papa didn't believe in screw tops. I raise the bottle toward the house, then bring it to my lips. The beer is warm and yeasty, more potent, as if it has fermented even more in the last few days.

I walk to the mower, sipping the warm beer. I'm just going to put it away, but when I jostle the handle, I hear the gas slosh in the tank. Someone shut off the mower, at least. Without really planning to, I set the bottle down, grip the mower's handle, and pop a wheelie to free the blade from the grass. With one hand propping up the mower and one hand gripping the cord, I pull once, twice, three times, and with each pull the engine spits and sputters and chokes, closer to ignition. I pull again and again and finally the engine burps and catches, unsyncopated, until I adjust the throttle to a rough roar, still out of timing, but as close as I'm going to get.

I drop the front end to the ground and begin to mow. Slowly, steadily, back and forth on the flats, horizontal on the hill, careful. After the first pass, I'm taken up with it, like reading a good story, only the story is what I'm doing, and I'm lost in it, in the fresh, damp farmers' market smell of

the cut grass, in the oily catch of the exhaust in the back of the throat, in the cushion of sound like a force field around me. I know I should feel bad about the pleasure I'm taking, but I don't. When I finish what Papa left, I go back to what he had already done. The grass has grown since Saturday. I work my way carefully around the borders, weave in and out of the crevices at the base of the wall on the second level, where I shiver in the sudden coolness.

I don't want it to end, but there's nothing left to mow. I let the mower freefall down the hill, running after it like a kid, my chest huffing. Once I catch it, I veer toward the driveway, still running, then skid to a stop just behind the car with wings. The engine is louder on the asphalt, and higher pitched. I listen to its harsh music, and finally I've had enough and cut the throttle. The engine coughs to a halt. Into the vacuum created by this sudden absence rushes everything I haven't been thinking since Mom called. To my surprise, I find that I am weeping.