

Lawn Work

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The lawn was getting out of hand, and it badly needed mowing. It's just that with Nathan Barrow's new job, not a lot of time was set aside for his usual chores. Nathan had recently changed careers and that meant longer work shifts. In time, Nathan knew that life would get back to normal but learning a new job is always a time consuming process. The evenings were spent with his small family. Dinner was prepared just in time for The Wheel of Fortune and usually continued through most of Jeopardy. After dinner was over, the cleanup began and usually lasted well through Final Jeopardy. Pam Barrow was Nathan's wife and while she felt somewhat lonelier with Nathan gone so often, she knew that his career move would bring better opportunities for the three of them, especially for their seven year old son, Ryan.

Ryan sat on the floor staring blankly at the wooden toy blocks that kept his interest on most days. As a toddler, the Barrows knew that Ryan wasn't quite up to the norm for where he should have been, but as he got older they discovered the disheartening truth. Several visits to doctors and psychiatrists eventually confirmed that Ryan was autistic. A sweeter boy they could have never hoped for. He created no problems whatsoever, which was in large part due to his inability to show emotion. He never smiled or frowned or laughed or cried. His face rarely ever changed at all. His communication skills were all but nonexistent. In Ryan's seven years he had never spoken a word. There was never a Ma-Ma or a Da-Da or anything that resembled speech. Ryan's parents waited for the first words that never came.

Nathan and Pam took Ryan's differences in stride the best they could. They were hurt that he would never lead a normal life but like any parent, they loved him for who he was. They tried to see the bright side of their son. He wasn't incapable of participating in activities. Ryan would play with his toys quietly when he chose. He would spend much of his time drawing, at times, very creative pictures. He built small structures with his blocks on the floor and sometimes he would even bounce a tennis ball off the side of the garage. He played on his own but still never showed much alertness. He wouldn't look anyone in the eyes. It was almost as if he were only aware of himself.

Ryan had good days and bad days. On the good days, Ryan was very active. If nothing else, he would stroll around the yard picking at the flowers or looking for rocks. Actually, Ryan seemed quite fond of the outside, especially the lawn. Over the years Ryan became extremely interested in Nathan's lawn mower. There was nothing special about it, really. It was just an average mower-one of those self-propelled models that the owner only had to walk behind and guide. Ryan, however, seemed to be drawn to it. As soon as he heard the engine running he made his way outside. Unlike most men who considered mowing the lawn a time-consuming chore, Nathan felt differently. For Nathan, mowing was something he looked forward to because he knew that Ryan enjoyed it so much. Since the mower was self-propelled and easy to operate, Nathan would allow Ryan to help him guide it. Ryan would stand in front of his father and put his hands out on the handle bar and they would both operate it. It was a special activity

because it was something that Nathan and his son could do together. It was their time to bond, and they both enjoyed it, especially Nathan.

On that day, the grass was high, much higher than it was ever allowed to get. Because of Nathan's late evening work habits, the lawn had been ignored. This made Nathan feel disheartened, and a little guilty even, because he knew that he wasn't only neglecting the lawn, but also Ryan. Dinner had finished up and Final Jeopardy was over. Ryan was sitting in the floor playing with his blocks, as he did on most evenings. Nathan had checked the weather forecast and the threat of rain and storms seemed imminent for the coming days and the grass couldn't wait any longer. Frankly, neither could Nathan. It was time for some lawn work.

Nathan smiled at Ryan and told him to come out when he was ready. Paying no mind, Ryan continued to play, his face frozen in its normal blank expression. Nathan patted his head and then proceeded to the garage. He dragged the mower out when he heard the faintest sound of thunder in the distance. It was a very modest yard which usually only took a short time to mow, unless the weeds needed whacked as well. Nathan figured he could finish the job on that evening before the storm hit. He knew that if he didn't get on the ball and get it cut, it could be days again before the lawn work would get done. He filled the mower with gasoline and then cranked the rope. The machine fired right up and filled the area with the sound of the motor.

Pam was in the kitchen wiping down the counter when she heard the mower start. Her first reaction was always to find Ryan because she knew that he would make his way outside. Sure enough, there he went, to the door as if drawn in by some sort of magnetic field. She smiled as he approached his father and took his position behind the mower. It had become routine. The same as many children hunt for the baseball when their father puts on the glove, Ryan went to the mower when he heard it start. Nathan once again patted his boy on the top of the head, waved to his wife by the kitchen window, and then he and Ryan began to go forward mowing down the high grass.

Father and son guided the mower down one row of grass at a time. When they got to the end, they would slowly turn it around and come back, keeping that front left wheel just over the line making sure not to miss any. Row after row, it was a steady routine. It was their time to bond. The work of it was secondary. This was their "ballgame," and while mowing, Ryan was the only thing that mattered to Nathan in the world.

Rain drops began to fall as the thunder returned. Nathan peaked up towards the sky and noticed that it had grown darker. The wind picked up something fierce and all of a sudden, a storm was approaching. They didn't have much left to cut. Nathan almost considered sending Ryan back into the house so that he could finish the job quicker, but he didn't. Ryan stayed out and continued to mow with his father. The rain started to come down harder and lightning began flashing all around. It was getting dangerous. Even though the storm was growing violent, Ryan paid no attention whatsoever. He showed no fear and kept up the pace with his father. But the thunder grew louder, the rain came harder, and the lightning flashed closer.

Pam Barrow was nervous. The whole house grew dark as she watched her husband and son mow the lawn from the kitchen window. She knew they were almost done, which is the only reason she didn't run out and make them stop. Only two rows left and they could come into the house. She had already planned on yelling at Nathan

to get into the shower, knowing that he would be soaked to the bone and have grass up to his knees. She had planned on giving him a hard time because he should have known better than to cut the grass in the middle of a storm such as that one. And then it happened. A bright flash of pink and yellow light shot down from the sky and struck the lawn mower. A loud explosion occurred and Pam jumped back from the window and let out a startled shriek. When she gathered her thoughts, she saw Ryan lying on the ground next to his father. They had been struck by lightning.

Pam sprinted towards her family, scattered on the wet ground. The rain and the storm continued, but it didn't hinder Pam's efforts to check on her family. A nearby neighbor stepped outside to inspect the commotion. When he saw the Barrows spread out on the ground, he started running for them. Pam yelled for him to call an ambulance and the neighbor followed her instructions. Pam first tended to Ryan. She tried to shake him, but he wouldn't wake. Crying, Pam tried to rouse Nathan. She got the same response from him. The tears matched the rain that fell and her shaking became uncontrollable. She didn't know if they were unconscious, or if they were dead. The panic set in as she heard the faint sounds of the sirens coming from the distance. The rain fell harder and the thunder roared louder while she anxiously looked upon her motionless family.

The hour in the waiting room was the longest of her life. Finally, the doctor had some news for her. The popular opinion was that both of them were going to live. The bad news was that there was no way to tell if any brain damage had occurred. It became a waiting game for them to wake. Pam stayed in their room and had never been more afraid in her life. She was afraid of what would happen if she would lose her husband or son; afraid that maybe somehow they would be different; afraid of everything. And then, Nathan woke up.

Pam's husband sat up in his bed and looked across the room at his wife who sat, half asleep, with her head leaning against the wall. He made just enough noise to startle her out of her doze. When she saw that Nathan had woken up, she rushed over to him and hugged him tenderly, thankful that he was alive. She asked him if he was all right. He slowly nodded his head, but didn't speak. She decided it best to talk to him later and simply let him rest for the moment. But Nathan didn't feel like resting. He stepped out of bed and walked around the room, as if just being born and inspecting his surroundings. He had a little trouble moving, but he was doing fair considering the damage he had suffered. Pam became a little worried that maybe something was wrong with him. She expected a little more reaction, but the more he moved around and the longer he went without speaking, it became clear to Pam that there was a good chance her husband had suffered brain damage.

Pam rushed to get the doctor for his immediate diagnosis. The doctor tried conversing with Nathan, but Nathan wouldn't verbally respond. Of course, more tests would have to be administered, but the outlook wasn't good. It was still way too soon to tell, but the doctor's belief was that Nathan did appear to have brain damage.

The news hit Pam hard. She thought about Ryan. Nathan had been so great with his son, but now Pam wasn't sure how he would help take care of his son. She told Nathan that Ryan was still asleep and asked if he wanted to go over and have a look at him. Nathan lowered his head and fixed his eyes on the ground. He slowly turned

toward Ryan's bed and then headed in that direction. Pam followed and together they looked down upon him. Pam whispered, "I love you," and Ryan opened his eyes.

The emotion was just too much for Pam to accept. She began to cry freely at the sight of Ryan's alertness. He looked up at his mother and father. As Pam cried tears of momentary relief, Nathan's expression remained unchanged. He reached out his hand and tenderly stroked the side of his boy's face. Ryan's next movement shocked his mother like nothing ever had, including the sight of her family being nearly electrocuted. Ryan looked at his mom, smiled, and said, "I love you too, Mommy." Pam hugged her son like she never had before. Her son had just spoken his first words. Even Nathan seemed to notice this. He smiled and let out a little laugh, but still no speech. He stood by his son and his wife with his hands folded and his eyes to the ground.

The following weeks were confusing for Pam and the many doctors she spoke to. Nathan's brain damage was classified as major but not severe. She was told that it was possible for Nathan to learn how to speak again but the odds of him ever recovering were slim to none. She was told to prepare herself for the realization that Nathan would never speak again. In fact, he would do well to become self-dependant. He had difficulty with common chores like showering, eating, and sleeping. Pam would have to deal with it because even though Nathan had become disabled, he was still her husband.

Ryan's case was a little bit trickier to understand. The lightning strike had somehow triggered his ability to communicate and speak. He was still autistic, of course, but with his newfound abilities, the doctors assured Pam that with the right education and improvement he would probably be able to lead a somewhat normal life. She was overwhelmed with the situation. She was emotionally drained due to her delight that Ryan could speak but also devastated that her husband had lost his ability to be the same husband and father that he was before.

Pam frequently thought back to the conversations that she and Nathan would have about Ryan. They always said that if by the grace of God they could trade places with Ryan, they would do it. Pam realized that Nathan had now traded places with him. It was just the plan that fate had delivered to them. She believed that her husband had made a sacrifice without knowing it, and it was in large part due to this notion that helped Pam get through the long days and hard nights. Sometimes, Nathan, although right beside her, seemed distant. Much like Ryan used to. But still, she thanked God every night that she still had them both, different or not.

Life went on for Pam, Nathan, and Ryan Barrow over the next couple of years at a fairly steady pace. Ryan seemed to do a little better each day with his development and his communication. He was nine years old and enjoyed playing with others and writing, and drawing, and talking like every other child his age. He still had his disabilities and challenges, but he showed great progress. Nathan also showed some signs of improvement. Roughly, a year had passed when he was able to take a job working at the library. He would resshelf books and straighten up what needed to be straightened. At least it was something. He tried to speak occasionally but nothing came out except awkward sounding noises. Storms frightened him badly. In fact, most loud noises made him very uneasy. He still moved very slowly and physical tasks were often very difficult for him. He simply lacked the coordination. During the fall he would help Pam bag some leaves, and he was able to take out the trash. Pam learned to mow the

lawn on her own. Sometimes, Ryan would go out with her and watch, but he never helped her guide it as he had done with his father. It just wasn't the same, and Pam knew it.

One sunny day in late August almost two full years after the accident, Pam started up the mower. The grass was high, even for her. The past week had been rainy, and she refused to cut it with any dark clouds in the sky. But this one was sunny, and she knew she needed to get it done. She put it into position to start mowing when out of the corner of her eye she spotted Ryan. He ambled toward her with a look of determination and excitement on his face. "I want to do it, Mommy," Ryan said. "Like Daddy and me used to. I want to see if I can do it by myself." Pam wasn't sure how to react. He was plenty big enough to operate the mower, but still she couldn't help but be nervous. She put Ryan behind the mower, pulled the lever down into the slowest gear, and let him go. He went down one row and started back down the next. He made it back to her and he smiled. He was having a good time.

Someone tapped Pam on the shoulder. She turned around and it was Nathan. He concentrated his hardest and then he opened his mouth to speak. "I – want – to – help," he said, slowly but clearly. Pam's hand went over her mouth in disbelief. Her husband had spoken. He continued, "It – has – been – a – long – time – since – I – mowed. Pam hugged her husband and then looked at her son. Nathan stood behind Ryan and smiled at him. Ryan stopped, just long enough for Nathan to grab the handle, and then they were off. The two of them mowed the rest of the lawn that day. As she watched her husband and son doing the lawn work, she couldn't help but cry herself into the biggest smile she had ever had.