

“No More Four-Letter Words,” Dusty Quinn

Four AM comes early for anybody, but I am a natural night owl—always have been. Most times the alarm goes off, this real cheery man with a false southern drawl, and he’s got a caller on the line, the two of them razzing some country singer who’s not there to defend himself, and I’ve only got four hours sleep.

Everyone knows the routine. Dreams still on the edge of your vision, you roll to the side, slap the top of the clock, and you cover your face. I personally hiss a sharp cuss word, like in the movies, one every ten minutes until the snoozes run out. Four forty-five rolls around, the radio man is happier than last time, the caller is a woman this time with an over-excited, nasal voice, and I jump off my little pile of blankets onto rubber legs. I wonder who these people are who try to call up and win a t-shirt before the sun can even be seen in the trees. I pull on the same jeans, cuss a few more times at the clock, and I show up late for work, coffee in hand. I’m sure my face is pitiful.

I work at the local golf course—Hidden Lakes. God knows why. I think, when I applied three months ago, that I expected to get free golf—and maybe a hand-me-down set of clubs from one of these guys that you meet who sees promise in your swing and who “hasn’t gotten around to using these anyway.” Either such people don’t play at Hidden Lakes, or there is no promise in my swing, because I still have my rusted Wilson’s, which I can’t afford to use—the free golf for employees was cut off last year.

Just last week, straggling in fifteen minutes late (I’m normally only five or ten), my boss, Tim, decided he would hassle me a little. In his eyes I could see that he regarded me with the kind of impatient contempt that morning people have for those like me—people that he thinks stay out, burning the candle at both ends, getting drunk and reckless amongst other new-agers and their frisbee-wielding floozies.

“Why don’t you just set your alarm earlier?” he said. He didn’t pause for a response and I didn’t have a good one ready to give him. This early in the morning I find it hard to answer even simple questions, questions like: “What are you doing this weekend?” or, “What’s your name?” So I got on my mower and idled out of the shed toward hole one. The sun was just beginning to glow on the mountains and there was steam rising off the river. There is no doubt, no matter how much sleep I got or didn’t get, that this place is a paradise.

Sandpoint, Idaho has been written up, just in the last months, by both *Sunset* and *Outside Magazine*, declared as one of the ten top spots in the country for luxurious small-town living. Just last week *National Geographic* was in town to write us up for their forty million subscribers. A friend of mine who works at a restaurant recalled to me that they wanted a shot of the huge lake off the back patio of the restaurant.

“Could you get us a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine?” these men with the cameras asked.

“Of course,” said my friend, who’s the daughter of the owner.

They wanted these items on a table in the foreground to compliment the scenery. When the bread and wine was brought out they took their pictures, the items arranged just so in the dimming light, and then they settled in on the patio. They ate the bread and drank the wine, paid for nothing and left no tip.

“Scumbags,” said my friend who has forbidden herself from harsher words. “They think we want these people all over the world to show up and build their McMansions next to the lake. They think we want their money in our town and so they think we owe them in advance for their publicity.”

“Scumbags,” I agreed, feeling, as always, a little hypocritical because I have been here less than a year myself.

My job at Hidden Lakes is that of a Tee-Box Technician. This is a job title I created myself, and it is a euphemistic way of saying that I mow these little round areas where the red, blue and white balls stick into the earth, designating men’s, women’s and senior’s tee-off spots. I find the job satisfying, on an aesthetic level. I’ll explain that.

Perhaps the best thing about being a tee-box technician is the lines. What are “the lines”? you might ask. And I would respond by saying that there are two types of lines in the world of a tee-box technician: light and dark. These two types of lines are made in essentially the same way: by mowing over and over them in the same direction, again and again and again, mowing “into the light” line—which becomes the dark line when you turn around. There are many metaphors on a golf course, but I’m not sure what this one means. Perhaps it has something to do with “light” and “dark” being a matter of perspective, or that light and dark are the same are created only by repetition (culture). It is said that Einstein conceived his best ideas while shaving. I know that somehow, riding my John Deere over the same lines in the same wet grass at dawn, thinking of golf course metaphors that capture the essence of good and evil, I can understand that. If only I could remember in the afternoon the genius that overtook me at dawn.

Another good thing about the job is that by ten or eleven in the morning your work for the day is done. You can go home, fall back guilt free in bed, sleep the day away, and wake up just as the others who work at the golf course are going to sleep for the night. Of course this only perpetuates the cycle, causing you to stay up until midnight again and wake up to the same radio guy, then show up late again and hope Tim doesn’t see you and hassle you, suggest you get checked soon for STD’s and ask if you were the one that left beer cans in the number six bunker. Somebody goddamn well left beer cans in the number six bunker.

The basics of tee-box mowing are grasped and mastered only by one who has a liking (a need, in fact) for precision. Proper timing and dropping of blades, a sense of evenness and roundness, and an overall ability to perfect shape and line-placement—these are the essentials. One has to feel the landscape and the shape of the earth, and place their lines accordingly. One who will excel in tee-box mowing also must possess the ability to repeat this perfection day after day without becoming drowned in a feeling of redundancy, and to do all this careful

work with the utmost efficiency, moving on to the next box, then the next hole, and getting out of the way of golfers. A word about golfers:

I, after three months mowing, no longer get out of the way of golfers. There was a time when I followed the trend set for me by my constituents (veteran mowers, most, and the water guy, Al, who taught me so much), but I have now taken to intentionally making golfers wait, taking more time and care with my mowing while they stand impatiently to the side of the tee-boxes, drivers at the ready, gnawing on expensive cigars and tossing their wrappers to the wind. I have no reasonable explanation for this change in attitude. Perhaps it is the effects of three months of sleep deprivation. Maybe it is the same scorn I have held from the time of childhood—that unwillingness to be obsequious toward authority or clientele, to be quiet when there's something to be said, or respectful of senseless custom. Perhaps I have some kind of growing contempt for rich people (it's seventy bucks a round at Hidden Lakes) and I somehow glory in my moment of right-of-way.

Maybe it's all three—but the sleep thing is the big one. I've turned cold and bitter toward golfers.

But sometimes I do wait, depending on mood, circumstance, and whether I prefer, on that day, to have the extra few pennies that come with waiting an extra few minutes. When I decide to wait for golfers to tee off, I pull to the side of my tee-box, kill the engine, and I tell them to go ahead. Some golfers say that I should go first, not wanting an audience, but I decline, chewing on a grass stem, saying that I get paid to wait while they have parted with hard-inherited cash to be here. I sit no more than ten feet from where they plug their tee into the earth, and I like to casually stare at them, smiling, and kick my leg up on the steering wheel. I watch the routines of these groups of golfers and I sip my coffee out of a dirty mug.

The routine of a golfer as he sets himself up is more akin to superstition than athletic form. Most golfers kind of cock their wrists, taking a few half-punches with their oversized drivers in the direction of the ball. Their knees pump and slowly shimmy to a bent position, their rear-ends jouncing into a fitful but complete stillness, sometimes twitching like slow death until full concentration is reached. Their feet often paw at the turf in the manner of a cat, lifting then placing the spikes of their cleats, and their noses alternate between the fairway and their ball and back again. They repeat this order a number of times while their hands writhe nervously on the grips and their shoulders tense and relax.

Before the face of the club strikes the ball, there is a moment of profound silence. It is for this moment that I often find myself waiting for golfers, rather than making them wait for me. It takes great courage, more than you might expect, to make the slightest noise during this long and breathless moment—but it is a courage that I have found. For I have been known to slap down a sudden mosquito (some of them around here are the size of birds), or rearrange my leg just so, making the springs beneath the seat of my John Deere whine like a squashed mouse.

After the ball has been struck, I sort of cringe along with the golfer if the ball goes into the trees. When the time is right, I offer my comments.

“Back swing was a little high.”

“That’s a damn good driver. You can drive the green with that driver if you hit it right.”

“Must be a dead ball.”

“Mulligan?”

“You’ll find it.”

Some people are surprisingly warm to the feedback. They think that because I am a bona fide tee-box technician, a sort of keeper of the garden who rides through the morning mist on his mower, that I must also be a superb golfer. I don’t argue. I’ve even hit a few thousand-dollar drivers based on this assumption. People just hand them over, looking for someone to show them the way to a better swing, and they stand to the side with folded arms as I advance the ball backwards or ten feet ahead. This actually has happened.

Last week there was a man who golfed alone. He was with his wife, but he was a man who, when he golfed, gave it his full competitive attention. I had seen him before. He wore some kind of silken looking pants this morning, a translucent white parachute with a collar for a shirt. He had a fat gold chain on his neck that mingled with the hairs on his chest and the kind of hybrid cowboy hat that someone (Jack Nicholas?) first wore, and then patented. The man came upon me suddenly, walked into the middle of the tee-box I was mowing, and plugged his tee into the earth. He began stretching, the club over his shoulders, and he tested out his cleats in the grass.

“Watch this,” the man said happily, flexing his forearms on his shaft, working up enough muscle tension to squeeze shit from a snowman. “The best one you’ve seen all morning.”

“Sure,” I said, wondering if he knew that he was the only one on the course.

The wife, sitting inside the cart, thin legs crossed inside a black skirt, smiled to let me know this was a joke. I had only seen her once with the man. I nodded my recognition of his humor.

I pulled off to the back of the tee-box, killed the diesel engine and sat there, almost close enough to catch his back swing in my chin. There is an unwritten social golf rule that, since he was the one who interrupted my mowing, he could not ask me to move again, back out of his way so that he could hit. Maybe this would be admitting that the “longhair” boy on the mower—the help—in his dirty pants and backward hat, could affect the quality of your swing. I can’t explain this rule or how we both knew it, but having not expected to see a golfer for another hour and many tee-boxes left to mow before the rush, it made me feel good to exploit it. Plus, the guy was an asshole, and assholes and sunrises don’t mix.

The man hit a clean, hard shot down the fairway, but at the last second the ball sliced toward the river, bounced and rolled for a ways and, right on the edge, dropped into the water. You could see the splash. The man’s wife, sitting primly in the cart, made a groaning noise indicating harsh and unbelievable injustice. She pinched her chin and re-crossed her legs and stared forward.

“Good till the river got you,” I said.

The man turned and gave me a subdued but severe look. "How you doing?" he said. It was an obvious indictment.

I shrugged amiably and waited for the glow light to go out, meaning I could safely start my engine. "Yourself?"

He made a gesture toward the river and the lost ball. He scraped at the grooves in his driver with the tip of his tee. The man was very pissed off.

"You could hit another one," I told him. I started the engine, which coughed out blue smoke, and started to engage the blades.

He leaned in close where I could see the redness of his cheeks. "Fuck you," he said.

And he walked to his cart and pulled the sock over the head of his driver. He said nothing to his wife who was looking at him, and they stormed ahead through a puddle to the red tees, where she set up and put her ball in the exact middle of the fairway, then covered back into the cart.

I went back to mowing feeling very awake, very pleased for the wife and her drive (as if it were my own conquest against tyranny), and a little lucky that I didn't get my ass kicked.

Gravely, as I replayed the incident in my head throughout the morning, I wondered how it had come to this between golfers and me.

The first man I met, when I came to turn in my application at the clubhouse, was a "Golf Pro" by the name of Jamie. I thought a golf pro was somebody on the PGA tour, but apparently some of them are bosses at resorts instead. I still don't understand this confusion of terms.

When Jamie first saw me standing outside his office, he treated me with the utmost courtesy, smiling like a man greeting an old friend, until he found out I was looking for a job. He lost his benevolence and crooked a finger summoning me forward, closer so that we could talk privately. I came forward into his doorway.

"You want to work here?" said Jamie. There was a woman sitting fifteen feet away through a door in an adjoining office. She looked up from her computer.

I nodded that I'd like very much to mow here.

"Then turn your hat around," he said. He made a little twisting motion near his crown and a zipping noise with his mouth. A smile of derision crossed his lips.

I did what he asked and Jamie winked and gave a thumbs-up, then forgot I was there, turning his face down toward the papers on his desk. The woman went back to typing, a discreet smile on her face.

I said, "Do I have the job then?" I modeled the forward-facing hat.

"Careful," warned Jamie.

He called for his secretary through his intercom and "Bev" materialized from behind another door. The woman summoned me in the same fashion and I followed. In another room she scanned my application, copied three forms of ID, and gave me a cup to piss in and directions to the men's room. When I returned and tried to hand Bev the amber-colored cup, she recoiled as if from a sudden

flame and said that was for “the clinic.” She asked me a few questions and checked a few boxes, gave me directions to the clinic and a copy of my application. She sent me to the maintenance shed where I met Tim.

I still had the cup of urine on my knee when I sat down to an interview with Tim in his office. It didn’t seem to bother him much so I swished it around and contemplated it when he asked me questions.

“Any golf course experience?”

I told him I’d worked at a driving range in Oklahoma in high school. I’d done plenty of mowing and a great deal of customer service. I knew a thing or two about tractors, mowers, weed-eaters and even batting cages. I sold myself as a sort of virtuoso of grass-maintenance.

“Oklahoma?” he said, then kind of barked under his breath and sighed privately.

“Why do you want to join the maintenance team?”

“I enjoy mowing and I want to golf for free.”

Tim smiled and then frowned. He explained the situation. The company felt that last year, and the years previous, the employees had too much free reign of coveted tee-times. Paying customers were being turned away to accommodate mere mowers, restaurant workers and cart mechanics. It was a business move, said Tim, unfortunate but necessary, and passed down from the very top. He wasn’t a golfer himself, but there were plenty who had quit. He was prepared to end the interview if it was a problem. He waited.

“Why not designate certain times for employees when traffic is slow?”

Tim sat passively in his swivel chair next to a box of range balls.

“You could have employees play only during the weekdays, in the mornings.”

Tim shrugged and somehow made it clear that he wanted to stay out of the controversy. Tim ran the maintenance shed back in the cedar trees. He liked black coffee in the early mornings and a dip of Copenhagen in the front of the lip. He had a wife named Nancy, a big hawk-eyed woman who took care of the bunkers and watered the flowers, and in the winters they had two snowmobiles and two large guns and a double gun case. Nancy liked to skin and he liked to season the meat. All the politics and tumult of the clubhouse he didn’t want to hear about.

I swished the piss around in the cup, creating a tornado. I knew I would take the job anyway. I was broke and had no other leads.

“You are a morning person, right?” asked Tim. It was the same look that some people get when they ask if you’ve been “saved.”

And this is when I told my first lie. I told it like an old pro—details, enthusiasm and everything.

Tim was very happy. It was as if I had joined a family. “Be here at five-thirty on Monday. Make it five for paperwork.” He smiled. “I’ll have Joe train you on tee-boxes.”

“How’s Wednesday?” I held up the cup. “It takes a few days to have this tested.”

Tim seemed to notice the cup for the first time. He bent a little to have a good manly look at it. His face became grave with concern. "It gets hot out here in the summer," he said. "Staying hydrated is important."

And I left that day employed, but with a heavy feeling in the stomach for the sorrowful state of my own piss.

Most jobs you have introduce you to a new community of people. Hidden Lakes is no different.

There's Joe who trained me on tee-box work and who has been here for ten years, since the course was bought and rebuilt into a resort. Joe likes to pass me on his faster mower and lean down low out of the wind like a bike racer, eating chips out of his crotch. Joe is always eating chips out of his crotch, and when he gets off his mower to move a sign or something else, he often has to hold his crotch and the chips in a double-handed grip and walk low to the ground and somewhat level, which makes for complicated maneuvering. For some reason Joe likes to make gang signs at me whenever we see each other on our mowers. He drops his head to his chest and flips his fingers like a retard with a switchblade and places them on his chest. Then he smiles and waves it off to let me know that he's not really in a gang. With a silent gesture he offers me chips from his crotch.

Three months after our day of training together Joe still likes to give me feedback about my tee-boxes. I think he feels a sort of fatherly responsibility, or that of a mentor.

"You shanked number eight pretty bad," he'll scold. "An extra inch here, an inch there that you shanked, and pretty soon your box is as wide as Montana."

"You left the goddamned balls off the pro tee. The golfers were all confused."

"Remember, mowing a tight tee-box is one fluid motion. Come in straight, drop the blades at the fringe, run 'er straight and true, and then pick them up at the other side. Execute a smooth one-eighty, then do the same, always into the light. Jerky motions result in a jagged edge, which fucks up your lines and makes the golfers shoot off into the trees. Be fast, but be fluid and thorough. You must have been drunk on sixteen."

"You see that new beverage cart girl?"

And of course everyone has seen the new beverage cart girl. She wears a mini-skirt and visor with her highlighted hair pinned up. She waits at the greens for thirsty golfers. If anyone makes the golfers shoot off into the trees, it is her. She is reported (by Joe) to have a habit of driving the cart around with her knees spread to taunt the mowers, but no one has had the right angle or timing to witness this. And maybe none of us want to be reminded of the facts anyway. It is somehow understood that beverage cart girls and mowers will never be in the same class.

There is one man who used to date the snack bar woman. His name is Crocket and he has declared himself (inspired by my self-adopted job title) a "Games Coordinator." This means that Crocket is responsible for the placement

of the cup that the ball falls in. This gives him an enormous amount of control on the course. He feels that he's somewhat of a lower-grade God because of this control, this power he possesses to lead golfers to the ultimate goal, and he has a kind of dignity about him based on this.

Crocket, a native to northern Idaho, likes to stop you on your mower and tell a quick story or a joke. He shows up out of nowhere and doesn't bother with introductions.

"I'm from Sandpoint so I don't really know," he said one morning, "but when a man and woman get a divorce in Clark Fork, are they still bother and sister?"

And he'll ride off just as quick as he showed up.

He came upon me one morning as I was emptying grass from my baskets into the brush, nearly falling forward I was so tired and off-kilter. "Went over for coffee the other morning and there's Liz," he said, lighting up a hand-rolled cigarette.

"Yeah?"

"Oh hell yeah. Fat and dumpy as ever. I go up to the window and she tells me, 'Crocket, I'd give you the best blow job you ever had right here and right now.'" Crocket widens his eyes in a moment of abject seriousness. His mustache seems to flex around the cigarette like pinchers. "I told her, 'Liz honey, it ain't gonna take much to impress a man like me—I can assure you of that. But instead I think I'll settle for one a them huckleberry muffins.'"

This is the end of the story and so Crocket gets on his cart with all the flags in the trailer and takes off into the trees. I won't see him for a week.

The difference about being a mower, as opposed to other more stationary jobs, is that there's never much chance for socializing. Most people show up in the morning when it's still dark, and everyone is half-asleep and bitchy—everyone except for Tim. They get on their mowers or tractors, check the oil and warm the engines, then spread out down the fairways. We only see each other in passing, and we all seem to pass a lot on the cart paths and on fairways.

When you pass somebody for the eighth time in one morning, it's hard to know whether you should wave at them again or just drive on. If you don't wave, the passing can be a tense and long moment where you fiddle with your controls and look down at the grass or the road. The mowers are so slow that you end up trying to avoid looking at the person, thus establishing human contact and necessitating some sort of gesture of friendly acknowledgment, which you feel at this point would be redundant and false. But strangely, if you don't wave, you slowly get in the habit of not waving to that person—one time you pass silently, and then three or four times—and after a while there is a feeling as you pass that perhaps you are no longer friends, and this creates a sort of rift between mowers. This rift can make future passing even more tense and can amplify the inherent loneliness that exists within the individual mower.

To combat this tension and the loneliness of passing, people do different things. Joe flashes gang signs and pretends that he is racing toward you or alongside you in competition. Crocket stops and tells quick stories—probably the same one to everybody—and if he doesn't have time to stop and tell a new one,

he just raises his eyebrows in a serious way to remind you of the last one. Tim makes silent contact with your eyes just long enough to show that he notices you and doesn't entirely approve of your mowing, and then stares straight forward with the eyes of a drill-sergeant, always on a mission. When someone passes me, I raise one fist in the air as if in celebration of something great and true, then let it crash into my lap and let my posture slacken. This gets nods of empathy because in any work situation the complaint is the best and most dependable form of socializing.

Nancy, Tim's wife, does what Tim does when he passes you, but she raises a corner of her lip, which could either be a smile or a cue that she knows more about you than you think (possibly more than you know yourself) and she finds it mildly entertaining or extremely disturbing. The look is similar to that of a kind of backwoods freckled Mona Lisa, one that wears a forest green tank top and has cleavage that could hide a collie. I don't do the fist-crashing-into-the-lap thing with Nancy—and I don't look at the cleavage.

There is one mower—a greens mower, one of the elite—who rides his bike to work in the mornings. I believe this man feels about bikes the way Martin Luther King, Jr. felt about de-segregation. He owns four bicycles and lives with them in his van, sleeping on public lands amongst sprockets, chains and seat-posts, the van hidden somewhere down a dirt road. When he found out that I too owned a bike and enjoyed riding it, he developed a special greeting to celebrate our commonalities: when we pass on our mowers he raises his two fists in the air, leans back slightly and churns them in a pedaling motion in front of his nose. He accompanies this with a grin and a nod, as if to say, "I know what you're thinking about. And I'm thinking the exact same thing." In response I point my finger at him and kind of waggle it, meaning that he's a clever man with great powers of clairvoyance. He responds by tapping his finger to his temple lightly and, if the pass takes long enough, goes back to peddling his fists, revolving them faster and faster, huffing and puffing, because he is a man with a taste for steep grades. If he does this I waggle my finger again and maybe do the fist-crashing-into-the-lap thing, to illustrate that I am tired. Very tired.

There is yet another mower named Chad who is my age and who mows the fairways. When he passes me he often does a peculiar thing. He lifts his middle finger boldly and mouths a certain couple of words and he glares at me viciously, then smiles at the last second. Chad and I have actually spoken and even played a round of golf together. Chad likes drinking and he likes golfing and he hates mowing and cops. He's deeply in lust with the beverage cart girl yet he feels the limitations of his position—feels them deeply. All of this gives him a number of options for communication as we pass. Most times he flips me off or kicks the side of his mower in disgust, then either smiles to remind me he is only joking, or falls back against the seat in weary resignation. Sometimes, by a very effective set of hand movements (possibly adopted from the Navy Seals), he'll indicate to me where the beverage cart girl is stationed and what he would like to do to her, using the steering wheel as a prop. But if he is in a more communicative mood, he'll mime a golf swing and form a question mark on his face and slightly slow his mower. I'll likely reply by tapping on my watch face,

indicating a busy day ahead, or make a going-to-go-to-sleep-very-soon gesture, or by rubbing my fingers together, saying that I can't afford a round this week. He'll nod and tip his head back, pouring a slug of beer into the back of his throat, saying that he would rather get drunk anyhow. In return and in mock-jealousy I'll flip him off and we'll part ways.

Chad and I are friends. And the rest of us, we are just mowers. Like the great Chief Namache of some Brazilian tribe said when asked why his people hunted: "We hunt—because we are hunters."

Likewise, we at Hidden Lakes mow—and we mow because we are mowers. Is there any better reason to do anything?