The Lawn Boy

By Emily Adams

He works in horticultural grooming. He's a landscape professional, in maintenance. He's self-employed, a small business owner, a budding entrepreneur. But, the more ways I tried to put words into Ben Lehman's mouth, the more I realized he wasn't biting into them. *I mow people's lawns*, he said. That's all.

The lawn is an American phenomenon. It isn't unusual for the people of this country to spend $40 billion annually on lawn care products. "That's about the size of the 2003 domestic product of Vietnam," exclaims one outraged author on the subject (Brown). Competing for a slice of that $40 billion are lawn maintenance businesses, like BLT Services. Christina Milesi, of the Earth Observatory, reports on the findings of her research into this phenomenon, "'I estimate there are three times more acres of lawns in the U. S. than irrigated corn.' This means lawns—including residential and commercial lawns, golf courses, etc—could be considered the single largest irrigated crop in America in terms of surface area, covering about 128,000 square kilometers in all" (Lindsey).

In the summertime Ben is most often found wheeling back and forth, perfecting his portion of this crop. You know him by the "BLT Services" sign, standing for "Benjamin Lawn and Trimming" poking out of the current front yard or business. In the winter, he is a full time student majoring in business. *BLT pays my school bills, keeps me fed in the winter*, he explains. I chuckle at the pun. He doesn't get it.

Ben is a quiet guy, about 6'3", with bushy blonde hair and glasses. He puts on no airs, wears saddle shoes and corduroy, is genuinely nice, and we talk for half an hour over tea (his
idea) about how my spring break and life are going, with him asking questions like “And how
does that make you feel?” I fear I have made a big mistake in choosing a sentimental lawn boy as
my subject. I end my emotional soliloquy and try to re-enter the interview as Ben scribbles his
AIM handle on a napkin, in case I ever need someone to talk to. “How about you tell me how
you grew up, Ben,” I ask, as I take the scribbly napkin from him. And he does.

Ben was born 22 years ago with his umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. It seems like
an odd detail to report, but he says it like it should be obvious to me already. Because of this
misfortune, he suffered a series of strokes as an infant. I had some problems growing up, I guess
you could say. Learning problems . . . Ben struggled in school with reading and behavior. He
resented the way his mind worked. I would be in the retard class one hour and skipping a grade
the next, he mused. Like, I have a genius IQ, really, but school has just always been hell for me.

He had trouble all through high school. I had depression, and it was really bad. I had to do
a lot of testing because of my brain injuries as a baby. I hated teachers, they hated me. And my
dad is always doing community events, like he knows the mayor and all that, because of his
business, and I was just his screw-up kid. I asked him if there was anything about high school
that he liked. Music. I played in the jazz band and directed the pep band and pit. This singing
group I was in won some state awards and things. I was a drum major in the marching band.
And, I mean, I still do it, I’m in this acappella group in college now and I play like bass or piano
or whatever for the show choir when they need it. With some prodding I find out that he is in the
top 12-member acappella group. What part do you sing? Oh, you know, tenor, baritone, bass,
whatever. I have like a 4 octave range. He promises to send me a copy of their yearly CD, to be
released in May.

Ben even used to be a music major, I find. I changed it to business when I realized I didn’t
I want to teach or perform music for a living. Plus now, I mean, I have a business, so why not study business? It's lots harder than music though. Business is so hard for Ben that he considers dropping out all together. But I should finish, you know, if I can. Lots of people said I couldn't, and they might be right. But I hope they're wrong.

From April to October Ben can most often be found wheeling back and forth over acres of green grass, or making the rounds to check on his workers. It's difficult for him to keep up, especially when school and work overlap. He often doesn't have time for friends, especially while employing them. I need help in the summer now, lots in the fall. I got two guys, three in the fall. I was once one of his "guys," for about three days, until I was let go. I remind him of this.

(He laughs) Sorry, Em. I should know not to strap a hundred pounds of weed-whacker to a hundred pounds of girl.

But firing apparently happens often with Ben. You know, you get these guys from college showing up in Abercrombie and you know whatever and they don't pull their weight. Cut corners. Now I do more of like a trial week before promising them anything. We work hard and do a good job and I want my clients to be confident in that.

I still remember the day when Ben fired me. It was the ease of his conversation that intrigued me the most, as if he weren't my superior. He just sat down beside me and said spoke from his heart, no differently from how he was speaking right now, except that he wasn't sitting cross-legged and buttering a bagel then. I asked him about one of his employees, Carl. You met Carl . . . pfft! How could you forget Carl!? Crazy old Carl . . . I remind him that he's being interviewed so I need him to tell me the story again, for the recorder's sake. Oh, yeah . . . He flops his feet back to the ground.

Carl's a little different. He's like this old guy. Worked for some steel company or whatever
and lost his retirement when the company went bankrupt. And he just needs work, you know, so I give him work to do. He's more like an independent contractor or something, I don't take a cut from the billings. I just drop him off and pick him up and he keeps it. My dad knows him; he's got a wife who's sick and, you know, he needs the five bucks an hour or whatever I get from the other guys [who are working for me]. He shouldn't have to be working at all. So, you know. He's not really one of my guys. I smile at hearing about Carl again. I don't think Ben has any idea that I asked for the story to show his kindness.

We have long since finished our tea. Ben lays his head down on the table and stacks the little cartons of coffee creamer into a pyramid. So you like mowing? I ask stupidly. Yeah. Your parents like it? Yeah. They help you? Yeah, my dad owns a business. I use his machines to print business cards. You get along with your dad? We have breakfast together on Saturdays. Do you feel like he's proud of you? I dunno, He sits up. It just feels good to say to your dad that you can pay your own tuition bills, you know? So what are your long term plans? Ben thumps his head back down to rest on his arm, I dunno. I really like mowing, thinking about buying a house next year. And I've got this great girlfriend, really wanna marry her.

Did you always want to be the lawn guy? Nah, it just sorta happened. I mean, I'm stubborn and dominant—can't work for anyone. I like fixing on tractors and keepin' the books and doin' what I want when I want. It works. What did you want to be when you were little? Well, I was always making things, building things. I loved helping my grandpa out on his farm. Dream job would be working for Car & Driver Magazine and doing tests and stuff on cars for their like side-by-side comparison stories. Running statistics and all that. I love statistics.

Small business statistics show that only 39.5% of businesses survive into their sixth year (Entrepreneur). This will be BLT's sixth year in operation. I ask him about what he sees in his
future. What can you see yourself doing in five or ten years? *Hopefully having a few crews of guys workin' for me full-time, getting into total property maintenance, you know? Then I can keep the fun lawns for myself with the other guys doin' the little annoying ones, but those're where the money is. You do Wal-Mart or something for like thousands, but it takes a whole day to do it. See what I'm sayin'? That's not where the money is. The money's in the city and sometimes suburb lots, 30, 40 bucks a pop, and it takes you 10, 20 minutes to finish one. Especially if you have a whole street, it's a gold mine. But the guys can do those, I don't like doing those. Anything else you see in your future? Well I'm doing the college thing to fall back on. My girlfriend was talking to me, and she's like 'Yeah, you have this dream of building a business, but what if you break your legs?' and it was funny, but I got her point . . . she's really into foster kids and stuff too, I kinda have this idea that one day when I build my shop I'll put apartments in it, like upstairs, and teenage kids or immigrants or whoever I come across can work for me and live here with us and better themselves, you know? Like she and I both had our share of bad luck, and we could help some people with their lives, just help them to get it together. We'd both really like to do that . . . I guess I'd want that for us in 10 years: more crews of guys workin' for me, and a house full of Mexicans and like foster teenage kids . . .

Would you want your foster kids or children to follow in your footsteps? I dunno, I mean, I'm happy, that's all that's supposed to matter, right? But my girlfriend, she's real smart. I guess if I was smarter I could be doing something more, like, 'frou frou' you know. I guess if my kid was me, I'd want him to do what I did. Maybe if he was like his mom, I dunno, but like . . . there's so much more to life than being something for everyone to look at. Like, there are kids from my high school that are smart and were popular, and they've got problems too. My girl's like, I just think she's amazing, but she's got skeletons in her closet, who doesn't? Got something
they think makes them less of a person. What do you mean?

I mean people are off trying to look good and decide who they're better than and who they're worse than, usually just by measuring themselves against what everybody else is doing...

...but school's just school, you know? And careers, they're just something you do... Like, I can't read and comprehend it that well, but you'd never know I can do like any math, like, just in my head—just like that—or my IQ... Or play music? I ask. Yeah, or play music... It's like mowing. I tell people I mow, usually kids like me, and I see that look in them, that look like "Wow, you need to get a real job" look. But they're the ones working at the Gap for six bucks an hour. I'm putting myself through school, making more than my high school teachers do, and building a company... Yeah, I'd want my kids to do that too... not working for anyone, owning it, owning it and lovin' it. I glanced up at him from my notes. Not that I'm putting you down or anything for being a smart college student—I'm just sayin', just that there's lots of ways to go about things, and if you don't want to work nine to five for somebody else, don't do it. Make your own, like, way and don't say you can't cuz I'm not as smart as you and I can. It's like that poem or whatever.

Poem? I ask. Yeah, some poem about some roads in some woods or something... Robert Frost? I ask and giggle. Maybe... hmmm... anyways I should look it up... But gotta run.

Gimme a call sometime, we'll do it again.

I said good-bye, then watched him awkwardly bob out the door and to his truck. A busboy came to take away our tray of tea bags and crumbs. The room was starting to fill up with lunch customers of all kinds, clings, clangs, and conversation floating in the air. I picked up the digital recorder sitting in the middle of the table and thumbed it off, thumping it down on the top of my open notebook. What could I write about?
All around me sat the regal, lowly, rich, poor, bright, dumb, familiar, and strange: the “us,” and “the others.” I knew my label, it was written across my hoodie. My glances fell from person to person. But I didn’t feel right looking around and pinning letters onto everyone else because outside, driving away, was a man who didn’t fit into any of those categories the way I thought he should. He had felt the sting of being labeled stupid, the pride of attending college, the stigma of his job, and the knowledge of his income. He was a humanitarian, an entrepreneur, an independent, a musician, though he didn’t have the words to say it outright. He wasn’t an unhappy laborer like he was supposed to be. He was courageous. And he likes mowing lawns. It’s amazing the personalities, intentions, and dreams that hide behind the faces of those who do seemingly unimportant jobs.

Works Cited

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