

## Wheelie Pits

by Rick Marcou

### Prologue

I don't remember much about her. And that really saddens me. I was only 9 when she died. I do remember her teaching me addition and subtraction, and then the times tables, using Cheerios. Every morning she'd pour a bunch on the table while I was eating, showing me how to do it, and then I'd have to solve problems with the Cheerios. The reward was I'd get to throw all of them into my bowl.

She was a great teacher, as far as I remember, always smiling and patient, thrilled when I answered correctly, but also very positive when I didn't. I know she was good with numbers, she had been an accountant with a company before I was born. She went back part-time when I turned 7, since I was in school all day. But I think I inherited her ability for numbers.

She was only 42 when she died, of a heart attack. Her parents both died the same way, also early, though not that early. I think they reached their 60's. But it obviously ran in the family, and I have no idea if she ever did anything to prevent it. Change her diet, exercise more, all the things we take for granted now. It was the early 70's, times were different, knowledge about prevention was far less. My dad and I didn't talk about it much, I never bothered to ask him questions like that. I don't think he would've answered me anyway.

He changed the day she died. He was a pretty fun person before, always playing with me when he got home from work. I remember a game he used to play like it was yesterday, it's so clear in my mind. I think he called it Rodeo, or maybe Rodeo Cowboy. He'd get on the carpet, all fours, and pretend to be a bull, rearing up and snorting. I'd get on his back, and try to stay on while he started moving around. Slowly at first, almost slow motion, and then

building up. As I got older the movements became more random in timing and speed, trying to buck me off. My mom, meanwhile, was the official timer; I had to reach 8 seconds to win. He'd occasionally let me win, to keep me interested and competing. Other times he'd buck me off, and then pretend to go after my mom as if she was the rodeo clown. He had seen a couple rodeos somewhere along the way and it stayed with him, obviously. I might have been the only kid in the New Jersey suburbs with some working knowledge of rodeo.

After her death that happy person was no longer present in my Dad's body. I don't know if he was depressed, or angry, or just felt cheated. Cheated out of another 30-40 years with my Mom, cheated out of the primary caregiver to take care of me while he worked, cheated out of his former lifestyle. Whatever the cause, he was a somber person most of the time. I miss my former Dad.

1.

The Wheelie Pits was kind of a kids' dream. At least kids who ride bikes, and like riding them down steep hills and over jumps. It was a forgotten piece of land next to a soon-to-be forgotten strip center, where the earth was carved up leaving a sunken dirt pit about forty yards long with a raised perch on one end and five-foot high dirt mound towards the opposite end. So, you start up top, drop down the cliffside (only about 20 feet or so actually), and speed towards the mound, where in principle you do some sort of trick as you launch over it.

The Wheelie Pits was also kind of a parents' nightmare. It wasn't the sweet innocent kids hanging out there. It was the burnouts. That was the name for the kids who smoked, had long stringy hair, weren't too focused on school or work, seemed like current or future criminals, and in general just weren't the kids your parents wanted you hanging around. But it was the Wheelie Pits, kind of a rite of passage for kids and bikes. At least that's how we viewed it.

I was 12 the first time I went there. My Dad bought me a new bike for my birthday, which was a big deal. We didn't seem to have too much money, considering where and how we lived and the typically cheap type of presents I received. But with everything that happened, I think he wanted to overdo it this one time. So he bought me a really cool bike, but nothing ever came without conditions. *Now you take care of this bike Will, it's not a toy. You can't go treating this like you do your other things, I paid too much for you to just trash this.* Thanks Dad, appreciate the confidence. Happy birthday to me. But I had a new bike, that was the important part. I heard what he said, but I was more focused on the shiny silver frame of the dirt bike, the cool knobby tires, the black trim. It was like a badass Oakland Raiders bike.

My friends and I rode around the neighborhood nearly every day after that. If they weren't available I'd just take off on my own. I probably spent an hour on that bike every day the first few weeks. My legs got stronger quickly. I also got ten times better as a rider, to the point I could even do some tricks. I'd go off driveway jumps, where the concrete angled up to the curb, creating a small ramp, and see if I could get full air. Took a while til I was strong enough and willing to go fast enough to pull the back tire off the ground in addition to the front one. I also got to where I could do a wheelie and hold it for the length of a house. That's over 50 feet. Not bad for a 12-year old.

So I was ready for the Wheelie Pits. I wasn't gonna be afraid to go down the steep hill, and I could do something over the jump, though not anything like the older kids do. They'll get serious air and flip the front wheel, or let go of the handle bars and raise their arms, or some other cool stunt. One day I will.

I went with one of my friends, Mikey. He also had a dirt bike, but it was raggedy. The frame was about 3 or 4 different colors, having been repainted over the many years of its existence and then having layers strip away from getting beaten up. The tires were probably once knobby like mine but now were mostly bald. But that didn't faze Mikey, he rode like a crazy man, doing any trick you name. No fear, even of wiping out and getting bloody, which seemed to happen quite often. Mikey definitely had the potential to be one of the burnouts in the future, his parents were kind of hands-off with him. He had a much older brother and sister, he might have been a mistake, and he did as he pleased a lot. I liked that about him. You could count on him to be in on anything you wanted to do, no matter how dangerous or silly. But maybe it was a slippery slope to him being one of the kids I was now looking at as we rode into the Pits from the strip center parking lot side, crossing the clumpy grass and making our way through the torn fence. They were up on the perch, 3 of them sitting on their bikes smoking, the fourth sitting on the edge of the drop, in the right chute. There were two main dug-out chutes and the center

spine, you could go down any of the 3 lines and it was all kind of the same result – instant speed. The burnouts were staring at us, seemingly wondering what the hell we were doing coming into their house. Two straddled their bikes kind of spread-eagled, with the handle bars and front wheel twisted randomly to the side. The third was leaning forward resting his arms on the bars, facing directly toward us and with a particularly menacing look. These guys might have been 17, they might have been 25, you sometimes couldn't tell. They had long hair, two had mustaches, and all were unshaven and probably unshowered. But we still rode forward.

“You cool with this, Will?”

“Sure, why not? It's a free country, we can ride here.”

“Yeah, but they don't look happy about it.”

“Let's just see.”

We rode through the pits on the left side, past the jump, to where there were trails leading up the left embankment to an intermediate level, below the perch. We huffed up the first available trail, and rode along to the side of the perch. These small hills were tough, but not as tough as they would have been before my recent muscle build-up. We then scaled the side the perch, another quick and slightly steep climb, and stopped as soon as we were on the perch. The roughly 20 x 20 foot area now had the two of us on one side and four of them spread around. The one with his head down on the handlebars lifted it and turned to us. “What the hell are you little shits doing here?”

Mikey jumped in before I could respond. “Going down the pits, what else?”

“Not today you're not, it's closed.”

“Why's it closed?”

“Because I say it's closed.”

“Who are you?”

“I'm your worst nightmare, that's who. Get the hell out of here.”

“We're just gonna go down once. Then we'll leave.”

“You didn't hear me, it's closed. If I gotta say it again I'm gonna get pissed off.”

“C’mon, can’t we just go down once. We’ve never done it. We wanna try.”

“Not today. Maybe not ever. Now leave.”

Mikey turned and looked at me, making a gesture with his head and eyes. He wanted us to do it, really quickly. But that would mean going down the middle or left chute, since the right chute closest to us was still blocked by the guy sitting there. We’d have to ride right between all of them. I blinked and nodded slightly.

Mikey took off, and a second later was down the center spine and into the pits. I hesitated, waiting for him to get down it, and by the time I started the guy who’d been talking moved his bike to in front of the left and center areas. I wasn’t going anywhere. I looked down and saw Mikey going over the jump, getting about 3 inches of air below his back tire and landing easily. I then turned my head and looked into the eyes of head burnout. “He shouldn’t have done that, I told him it was closed. Now you’ve pissed me off, you’re gonna pay.”

He got off his bike, let it fall right there below him, and walked over and grabbed my handlebars. “Get off.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“No, it’s my bike.”

“Not anymore. Now it’s mine. I could use a new bike.”

“Get a job, get your own bike.” At that the two guys on bikes actually started laughing.

“Oh shit, he didn’t just say that,” said the one on the left.

Head burnout then reached into the back pocket of his denim shorts and pulled out a switchblade. Burnouts, typical. He flicked it open and pointed it at me. “Get the fuck off. Now.”

Now I’d like to think that I could have challenged him, that there was no way he was going to actually use it, he was just a bully who liked to threaten but would never carry through. But 12 year olds don’t know that. They just see a big older kid with a knife and they obey. I got off the bike and he grabbed it and in one quick motion had it turned around and straddled. It was too small where the seat was, but

he quickly adjusted it, and was now straddling a bike that was his size, and probably his for good.

I walked home that night, Mikey consoling me as he walked his bike alongside. “Those guys are jerks, I can’t believe they stole your bike. What are you gonna tell your Dad?”

“I don’t know. Nothing yet. I’ll just act like nothing’s wrong. I keep it in the garage, he probably won’t notice for a couple days. I need to think of something.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. I gotta think of something though. I don’t want to tell him it got stolen. He’ll be pissed. Especially getting it stolen here. He’ll be mad I went here.”

The next day my fortunes started to change. Possibly. My Dad took me with him to the grocery store, but first we had to go across town to a vacuum repair store to get a part for ours. We don’t get new, we fix old, that was usually the rule in our house. The store was in a kind of sketchy area, only about two miles away but over a bridge that separated the neighborhoods. The drab gray metal bridge was one lane each way, like the road, but had walkways on either side for people to walk, run, ride or just stare at the dingy dark water canal. Once on the other side the neighborhood was noticeably more depressing. Our neighborhood wasn’t anything to brag about, that’s for sure, but this was the dregs. The buildings were a little older and uncared for, several were empty with For Lease signs in the window. Graffiti marked the sides of the buildings, with an artfully drawn QTR seemingly the most popular tag. Not sure what QTR stood for, maybe it was someone’s initials. Maybe it was an abbreviation for quarter. More likely it was some gang affiliation I’d never know about. Hopefully Mikey would never know either. It was painted on buildings, the side of the mailbox, even on the sidewalk in front of an empty store two doors down from the vacuum shop. But what was most interesting to me was behind the vacuum store, just beyond the parking lot. Several small houses on trash-filled lots lined both sides

of the street. Behind the first was an old wooden shed, three-walled, with head burnout standing at the open side next to my bike, and his other one. As well as an old-fashioned reel lawn mower and other random and broken crap. My bike stood out, the only thing of value in there including head burnout. He walked away and into his house, leaving the shed open to the public. Most interesting.

I couldn't fall asleep that night, not that I wanted to. I lied in bed, fully clothed. After saying good night to my Dad, in my pajama bottoms and t-shirt, I went back to my room and put my jeans back on and got into bed. I set my alarm for 2am just in case I fell asleep, and put the alarm clock under my covers so only I would hear it. Adrenaline was coursing through my veins already, even just lying in bed, thinking through the plan. I needed to calm down.

At 1:58am I turned off my alarm and got out of bed. This would be the first tricky part. I had to get out of the house without my Dad hearing anything. I had two things going for me. My room was in the front of the house, whereas his was in the back. And we didn't have an alarm. Probably because we didn't have anything worth stealing. The only thing I had worth stealing I was going now to get back.

I went to the side of the house and grabbed the mini spray paint bottle I stashed there before dinner. Light blue. I don't think anyone will miss it, last time it was used was probably 3 or 4 years ago. My Mom used it to paint an old plastic planter box so it would look brighter than the drab green color it came in. But two weeks later she found others at Kmart in red and decided she liked those better. Amazing it still worked after this long.

I started walking down the street, on my way to the bridge and the other side of town. I knew those two miles would take me about 40 minutes if I walked, so I picked up my pace to try to get there faster. But I didn't want to draw attention to myself, twelve-year-olds are not expected to be walking around at 2am. Nobody is. So I avoided



the main street heading to the bridge and walked down a parallel street most of the way, one which mostly just had houses and some empty lots. And less traffic. But when I saw the headlights of a car turn onto it about 200 yards ahead, I veered into an overgrown lot and hid behind a bush until it passed. Soon enough I was onto the main street, a block from the bridge. Once on, I walked on the right side walkway and peered into the water below. Gunky, dark, smelly. Those are the three words that come to mind when you consider the canal. I don't know how deep it is, nobody really does, it's too dark to see down and nobody swims in it. But when you throw rocks in you don't sense they're hitting bottom for a while.

I reached the vacuum store, dark and closed like everything else at this hour. I didn't see anyone else on the street, kind of a surprise, I expected to see some bums or burnouts hanging around. Lucky so far. I walked to the rear of the building, turned in and walked to the far corner of it, away from the street and anyone who might be watching. I stood up against the side wall of the store and looked across at the burnout's house. No lights on. The only light around here was the streetlight on the avenue, without which the whole area would be pitch black. From here the shed was only about 40 feet, across about 30 feet of crumbling pavement of the lot, and then 10 more feet of weed-filled patchy grass and randomly strewn junk that marked the burnout's lot. I started across, quietly and as low to the ground as I could. I reached the shed, took a moment to look over at the house to see and hear any possible movement, and then grabbed my bike out and slowly walked back towards the store. Once there I got on and rode quickly to the bridge. I got off just before it, walked to the right of the walkway where there was a path down to the canal, and stashed the bike in the overgrown shrubs. I walked back to the store and repeated the process. Still no signs of movement. I walked over to the shed, but stopped on the side of it, the side facing the store. The blank wooden wall would be a great canvas. Probably eight feet high, about the same width. I pulled out my spray can, gave it a few hard shakes, and hoped it would work. I had tested it on a piece of newspaper

before stashing it earlier today, but I didn't know how much paint was left in there. I wanted to paint the message large but couldn't risk it. The risk of running out of paint, but also the sound it would make. So I made the letters about 3 feet high and 2 feet wide. QTR, in a cool light blue color. I then capped the can and put it back in my pocket. I grabbed his old crappy bike and walked it to the store. I looked back at the house to make sure all was still dark and quiet, and just at that moment a light came on. Shit. I wasn't going to wait this time to face head burnout. No hesitation. I jumped onto the bike, which was a little big for me. My feet just barely reached the pedals. I went as fast as I could out to the street, to the avenue, and towards the bridge. I quickly went to the path on the side and stopped. I looked back but thankfully didn't see anything, but that might change soon. I turned and followed the path down about 12 feet, about 4 feet from the water's edge, and then I let the bike go, giving it a little push to make sure it went in with some speed. It hit the water, and didn't stop, plunging straight in. It slowed a little but within a couple seconds it was submerged, and didn't come back up. So the water was indeed deep. Mission accomplished. I ran back up the slope and grabbed my bike. I peered out left and right, still clear. I started off, figuring I could be home in 10 minutes, maybe fifteen if I had to go more quietly or hide from cars. I took the same route I came, looking back every once in a while to check for cars. Once on the parallel rode I picked up the pace. Halfway there. And then headlights, behind me and coming fast. Shit, could this be head burnout? I was passing a bunch of houses, no obvious one with bushes or cars to hide behind. But I had to try. I turned sharp into a driveway and followed it to the side of the house, where a carport had a small white Pinto in it. I pulled my bike to the right of the car and hopped off. Waited. The car approached, going slower than it had been. I could see it coming, looking through the side window of the neighbor's house and through the front window. I crept lower down, to where I wouldn't be seen unless someone shined a light back here. As the car reached this driveway I looked out, and saw a large brown Oldsmobile pull up to the curb across the street. Shit, they must have seen me turn in here, to one of these

houses. A minute went by, then another. Finally the light in the car went on, they had opened the driver's side door, away from the street. There was only one person in the car, but I couldn't tell if it was head burnout. Another minute went by. Finally he started to move. My heart started pumping a little harder. Then it happened. He leaned out of the car and I heard a loud wretch, then another. He was throwing up. I think I'm ok. A few seconds later he managed to get up, and I saw it was a man probably in his forties, not fat but with a big belly which was now partially sticking out from under his button-down shirt. He was keeping one hand on the car to steady himself, and then started toward the front door, walking a serpentine route across the front yard. I needed to get home, but I wanted to see this. Now that I felt safer I could laugh at the scene unfolding in front of me. I felt like a spy, seeing something nobody else was seeing, and having something over on this drunk who thought he was out here alone. I watched as he fumbled in his pants for his keys, then dropping them on the doormat. The light in the front room then came on, and the front door opened with no help from the drunk. The woman stood there looking at him, watching as he struggled to stand up straight, then reaching a hand out to help him in. He stumbled across the threshold, she closed the door, I could see them walk across that lit room together. Once the light went off I got up, made sure nobody at this house was watching, and got back on my bike. Heart beating fast but now out of excitement, not fear. I reached my house about 4 minutes later, getting off my bike a couple doors down and walking it the rest of the way, to the side of my house where I stashed it out of view. I'd put it in the garage tomorrow. I slowly opened the front door, walked in, closed it and headed into my room. Jeans off, pajamas on, into bed. Despite the adrenaline I did manage to fall asleep pretty quickly. I was smiling when I fell asleep, I was smiling when I awoke 5 hours later. Wonder if I smiled the entire time.

I never did head back to the Wheelie Pits that summer, nor the next. I was so concerned about head burnout seeing me on my bike I steered clear. I did tell Mikey the whole story, swore him to secrecy. Not that

I had to, he would never tell anyone. Some people you don't have to worry about that kind of thing, you say don't tell anyone but feel silly doing it. He felt honored to know the story, all the juicy details, but moreso knowing that I managed to not just get back at head burnout for taking my bike, but taking his away permanently and managing to blame some random graffiti punk at the same time. Mikey said I was the gutsiest person he knew, and smartest too. That made me happy, since I always thought he had way more guts than me. Not brains though, that was always my department.

I did eventually go to the Wheelie Pits, about three years later. I was fifteen, and by this time I was pretty big, easily as big or bigger than those burnouts were. If they were there I wasn't going to be worried, but it was empty. I took two runs, the first just to test it out and do a basic kind of jump. On the second I pedaled hard down the drop and across to the jump, then I yanked the bike up off that jump and sailed high and far, turning the handlebars a full revolution in the air before landing cleanly. That closed the book on my Wheelie Pits adventure. By the following year I was driving and my bike didn't see much of my ass anymore. But the Pits holds a special place in my memory bank.

2.

By the time I was 15, I was handling more of the outside chores around the house. Mowing the lawn, shoveling the snow, taking out the garbage, clearing the gutters, and whatever else my Dad could think of. Not because he was lazy – far from it, he was old school, typically saying *get out of my way, you don't know what you're doing, I'll handle it*. But the urge to always want to do it himself was overpowered by the need to never allow his son to be a freeloader, to be lazy, or worse, incapable of doing any of those things and doing them well.

So I became very handy compared to the average 15 year old in my neighborhood. But I didn't become very rich. No money flowed to me for this, not even an allowance. Dad's words – go out and earn it, like he did. Figure out a way to make some money. MacDonald's was always a possibility, but everyone one of those kids had a face full of zits, all for just under \$3 an hour. No way. Plus as good as that food is, eating it constantly would give me the shits. No, I needed something better; better pay and better work.

The answer came pretty soon after. Friday afternoon, about 85 degrees outside, I was mowing the lawn, and sweating bullets. Our neighbor, Mrs. Tullis, came walking over. I didn't see her coming, I was pushing the mower the other way, but I heard something and turned around. She was about 8 feet behind me and walking towards me, across the fresh cut strip, saying "Will, Will". She was wearing a house coat and slippers, which were now covered in grass. She was probably in her early 60's, not sure, I never could tell that sort of thing when I was young. Not sure any kid can. I cut off the motor and turned back to her.

"Hi Mrs. Tullis."

"Hi Will, how are you? You look like you're working so hard. Such a strong boy. Remind me of my grandson Tommy. Do you remember Tommy, he's just a little older than you? He was here last year."

"Yes I do. He's like 18 now, right?"

"Yes he is. Graduated high school. Going into the Navy."

"Wow, that's great. He must like being on a boat. I'd probably get seasick all the time."

"He does. He's so excited, wants to be on a submarine."

"Cool."

"So Will, I see you out here mowing your lawn all the time. Do you think you'd ever be willing to mow mine too? I'd pay you."

"Oh, umm, sure, I guess. Yeah, that'd be great."

"How much do you charge?"

I knew she was going to ask that. The wheels had already started turning in my head, but not very fast, and not very far. How much

does one get paid for mowing a lawn? Minimum wage is like \$3 and hour, it takes about an hour, maybe less. \$3? That seems low.

“Honestly, I don’t know. My Dad doesn’t pay me for this. Says room and board is my pay.”

“Well, last summer I paid a man \$20 every time he mowed it, but that seemed like a lot. How about \$15?”

“Sure. I mean yes, that sounds very fair.”

“Ok, then \$15. Can you do it soon?”

“I can do it as soon as I’m done with mine. Probably in about 15 minutes I’ll be done here.”

“Thank you so much Will.”

Then a thought crossed my mind.

“Mrs. Tullis, are you going to want me to cut it in the future too?”

“Well that depends how good a job you do. We’ll have to see.”

“That’s fair. But I have an idea. How about I cut it every week, to keep it looking fresh, but only pay me \$10 each time.”

“That’s an interesting idea. Did you just come up with that, or have you been planning this kind of arrangement?”

“I just came up with it. Seems like a good idea, make sure the grass always looks freshly cut, and get a good deal on it.”

“Will, you’re going to be a helluva businessman one day.”

“I hope so.”

And so that’s how I figured out how I was going to make money that summer. Once I thought more about it, I liked the idea. When I said it to Mrs. Tullis, I was just looking to make it more than a one-time thing. A weekly gig. But the fact is, cutting the grass every week in the summer, it only grows so much each week. So even though you’re going over the whole yard, you’re not fighting tall grass, except maybe the first time, and you’re not cutting as much grass so there’s not as much to collect. So you can bang out the same yard in maybe half the time. And you have to see these lawns to see what I mean. Basic rectangles. You have a large section on the side of the driveway, and that’s it. The driveway separates one property from the next. So you bang out that big rectangle and move on to the next. We never discussed backyards, those could be different depending on if

they had a deck or play area, some even had above-ground pools. But the front yards – you’d think this was the most boring, redundant neighborhood ever. And given nobody really had any money in this neighborhood you didn’t have any extravagant landscaping adorning that rectangle. Mrs. Tullis’ yard was typical, nothing but a rectangle. \$10 for her yard today will be OK, it’s kind of tall, probably take 45 minutes, but next week it’ll take about 25 minutes. That’s like earning \$20 an hour. Fuck MacDonald’s.

I decided to try my hand at selling. Be the first in the family if I could. My Dad, a construction foreman, never could stop complaining about the guys in sales, who spent all their time drumming up business but never lifting a hammer or getting dirty. The sales guys earned more than my father and he never got over it. Why should a guy who does what the company actually does, building, make less than someone who just talks about it? Why should someone who wears loafers and sports coats make more in construction than someone who wears work boots and a flannel shirt? I agreed with him until I was old enough to understand. There are lots of guys who can wield a hammer, almost as many who can be a foreman, but only so many who can sell the business, bring in new clients. Supply and demand, so I later learned.

The next day was Saturday, perfect, lots of people are home. I decided to go door-to-door. Figured most people on the block knew me, or at least my family, so that might help. I made the same offer. I’ll mow your lawn every week this summer for \$10 a week. By the time I had knocked on every door, and spoke to all but two houses, I had 8 new customers. And the final one gave me another interesting idea. Mr. Templeton, who lived at the end of the street, in a bigger house than most and with a bigger corner yard, asked if he could just pay the whole thing today rather than having to worry about paying every week.

“I have the money right now, I’d be happy to give you the full amount. What is it, let’s see, today’s June 12, you’ll go until when, Labor Day, then school starts, right?”

“Yeah, I think it starts the Tuesday after Labor Day. I might be able to continue mowing after that, not sure yet.”

“So that’s about 12 weeks. \$120, right?”

“Right. \$120.” Wow, really? He’s gonna pay me \$120 right now?

“And you’re going to show up every week and mow, even though you’ll already have been paid all this money.”

“I will, I promise.”

“I can see you’re serious. I know your dad, so I know what kind of kid you are. I trust you.”

So I walked back to my house with 8 new customers, and \$120 in my pocket. But here’s the idea. I could offer that they pay me \$100 for the entire summer, a discount of \$20, if they paid right away. I’d still be making enough, it would be like \$8 each time. No wait, \$8.50. Still good for like 25 or 30 minutes of work. And that way, if any of them wanted to skip a week, which could definitely happen with the week-by-week arrangement, I wouldn’t be losing anything here. The other arrangement I could lose. The next day I went to the next block, armed with this additional sales pitch. It worked. I sold 6 more jobs, and 2 of them paid me upfront. I now had \$320 in my desk drawer, and hadn’t mowed a single lawn. Dad, you should’ve gone into sales.

I started mowing lawns the next day. Sunday, no day of rest for me. I was up at 7, and by 9am I’d mowed 2 lawns. By noon 4 more, including the big corner lot. Almost halfway there. By 7pm I was done, 14 lawns. Worked about 11 hours, so it took about 45 minutes for each lawn, just what I figured for these first-timers. Some weren’t bad, but a few were nasty high, I had to bag those every couple turns. But I hadn’t worked 11 hours in a long time. Actually I never worked 11 hours. I was tired as hell. But I had \$110 in my pocket. \$10 an hour. Every one of my customers was home, and everyone paid. Didn’t think that would happen. Thought I’d have to come back and collect tomorrow or the next day. This was going too easy.

I woke up Monday morning and realized I had nothing to do. At least no lawns to mow. I decided to lay in bed another hour, I deserved it.



I couldn't fall back asleep though. I was too jazzed up about the money. If I could get like 15 or 20 more customers, that's another \$150 or \$200 a week. On top of the \$150 or so I was getting right now. Wow. How much does Dad make?

I headed out that afternoon and walked around the block the opposite way from where I got customers the other day. This block would prove to be a little tougher, both because of people saying no and a bunch of people not home. But I picked up 3 more customers, and figured I'd come back and try again on those who didn't answer. I went to the next couple blocks, and had more success. By the end I had 12 new customers, including 4 who paid up front. I now had 27 customers. I could maybe bang out these 12 tomorrow. Especially with some help.

Mikey came by my house just after 5. Rode his bike directly from the Chevy dealership where he was working this summer. He was washing cars, usually the ones that came in for repairs but occasionally they let him wash the new ones that hadn't been sold yet. Sounded cool at first, but that was changing.

"How was work?"

"Sucked."

"Why?"

"I washed 7 cars today. Worked only 4 hours, that's all they needed me for. But it only takes about 15 minutes to wash the cars. So do the math, I worked less than 2 hours, and sat around for 2. They don't let me do anything else, not old enough. And so I got paid about \$12 for that crap."

"At least you got to be inside, in the AC. It was hot as shit today."

"Yeah, that's about the only benefit. I was washing crappy cars mostly. They won't let me touch the Vettes or Camaros. I washed a couple new Malibus the other day, a Nova today, but otherwise it was a bunch of crappy cars in for repairs. Three Cavaliers alone. A beat up Blazer. This job sucks."

"I have an idea. How about mowing lawns?"

“What, doing what you’re doing?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“Whaddaya mean kinda?”

“Well, I’ve got 27 customers. I can mow all of them each week, but what if you did some, and then I could go out and get even more customers. We’d both mow the lawns.”

“What would I get for it? How much would you pay?”

“I get paid either \$10 or \$8.50 for each lawn, depending on if they took a discount for paying for the whole season. I’d take \$2 off the top and you’d get the rest, so either \$8 or \$6.50. Actually make it \$8 or \$7. It’s easy work, mowing them every week keeps ‘em low, so the bagging is less often. You cruise right through it, takes like 25 minutes for most of these.”

“So 7 or 8 dollars for 25 minutes work. Shit, I’d do that anyday over washing crappy cars.”

“Cool. Let’s do it....Wait, does your lawn mower work? Didn’t it break down a couple weeks ago?”

“Yeah, but my older brother fixed it. The blade was stuck, he just had to take it off, twist it a little and oil it up. It works fine now.”

“OK, then come by tomorrow, and bring it. I have 12 new customers I got today, we have to mow those. But I did 14 by myself the other day, this will be cake. Can you be here at like 9?”

“Sure. Chevy told me not to come in til 1. If I’m late they probably won’t notice.”

So we split the 12 lawns. I made sure to be there for each of his when we knocked on the door to get paid, otherwise they’d wonder who the hell was mowing their lawn. I still made \$68, and I paid Mikey \$46. He was psyched, and I had the makings of growing my business. My business. That sounds cool. It may be mowing lawns, but it’s a business now.

Things went well the rest of that week. I spent the next day selling again, and picked up 10 more customers. Mikey worked his Chevy job, another \$12, 4-hour day. He said he’d quit next week. He wanted

to wash one Vette or Camaro before he left, so he was going to stick it out a little while longer.

Wednesday morning we started out again. 10 lawns to mow, 5 each. I was on my 2<sup>nd</sup> one when I saw Mikey pushing his mower down the sidewalk towards me. He looked pissed. Didn't think it was the mower, even though that mower was a piece of crap. If it was, he wouldn't be pushing it so regularly, like he was mowing a lawn. He'd be thrusting it ahead, like he was trying to make it fly, or he'd be smacking at the handle bar. No, this was something different, I could tell. I cut the engine and started walking towards him.

"What's up?"

"Fucking Lawn Docs. Their truck pulled up to the house I was mowing, the guy gets out and starts yelling at me. Says *What the hell do you think you're doing here?*"

"What was he talking about?"

"He says he has a contract with that house to mow their lawn. Said get the hell out. I didn't know what your deal was with that homeowner so I figured I'd come get you. But I didn't want to leave my mower there, I didn't trust him."

"Good thinking. Let's go. That lady never said anything about having any other deal. I'll ask her."

A few minutes later I was knocking at her door. Not without Lawn Doc asking who I was and why I was knocking at her door. I ignored him. Mrs. Courtenay answered; wow did she answer. No housecoat and slippers here. She was wearing a tight-fitting gray skirt and white shirt (or *blouse*, I later learned), with stockings and jewelry, and makeup and great hair. Wow, this was what a woman was supposed to look like. Or Farrah Fawcett in a bikini, of course. But this was different, this was like professional boss lady to the max. I kind of lost my train of thought standing there. I hope my mouth wasn't hanging open, but I sense it was. Even Mikey, who thought Daisy Duke was the perfect woman, was amazed. He told me afterward. He was a bit behind me, my gaze never veered away from her, so I didn't see it myself.

“Hi Will. What can I do for you?”

As she said it I saw her look past me to the lawn, probably seeing Lawn Doc and his truck.

“Oh, what is he doing here? Is that why you knocked?”

“Yes, Mrs. Courtenay. Mikey here was mowing your lawn for me, just as we agreed, and this Lawn Doc guy made him leave. Said he has a contract with you. Is that right?”

“No, it absolutely is not right. I did last year, but I didn’t renew it. They did a lousy job.”

With this she walked past us to the edge of the front walk, and called out to the guy. He was at his truck messing with his mower, initially pretending not to hear, but when she called out again he looked up and started walking over to her.

“Hi, what’s your name?”

“It’s Derek, ma’am. How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you. But why are you here? You don’t work for me anymore.”

I liked the way she said that. You don’t work for me anymore. She could have said something like We don’t have a contract anymore, or some other legal sounding language, but she made it sound like she fired him. Very boss lady-ish. She owned this guy right from that moment.

“Well, you renewed your contract, so we do still work for you.”

“When do you think I renewed my contract.”

“The contract automatically renews itself if you don’t cancel it by April 1<sup>st</sup>. Says it right on the contract.”

“Oh really, is that what you think? Do you have any recollection of last year? Don’t answer that, I know you don’t, you weren’t here, is was some other guy. But see he never came, my grass looked like shit all summer and fall, so I called your office and cancelled the contract. I told them don’t even think of sending me a final bill, consider it a gift because I should sue you for non-performance. So don’t talk to me about automatic renewals. Just get your crap back in your truck and don’t come back. I’ve hired some real professionals instead.”

He stood there speechless. I don't think he'd ever been spoken to like that by a woman before. Or he was just dumbstruck by her looks, like the two of us. But no, it has to be the words too, because once he came to, he looked at us and sneered. It was probably the ultimate insult, having a couple 15-year-old punks get one over on him.

Mikey went back and grabbed his mower, and continued where he left off. He told me later Mrs. Courtenay stayed on her front porch watching for a moment. He said he knew it was probably to make sure Lawn Docs didn't come back and give him any trouble, but he hoped it was because she wanted to watch him work, check out his bulging biceps (not really bulging) and cute ass (he might have had that, I couldn't say). I made a note to myself to personally mow Mrs. Courtenay's house next week.

By Labor Day, I had made over \$3700. Mikey was psyched because he had made almost \$2,300 from helping me. We did get many customers asking us to mow their backyards once they got comfortable with our work, which really added up because the backyards were usually bigger. And I kept picking up additional customers, sometimes for the rest of the summer, sometimes just for a quick mowing when they couldn't do it. I didn't care, I'd take any business that came my way. Mikey did quit Chevy, but went out in style. The week after he started part-time with me, the other guy who did car washing broke his left hand somehow, so he was out a while and when he came back he couldn't wash because his cast couldn't get wet. They had to reassign someone, but until then Mikey was senior car wash guy so he got the plum jobs. He washed 3 Vettes that week and 4 Camaros, including 2 Smokey & The Bandit black and gold eagle ones. That Friday he walked into his boss' office and told him he had to quit. Boss wasn't happy, but Mikey didn't really care, he knew he had a better job waiting for him.

My Dad asked me midway through the summer how the lawn mowing job was going. He had no idea how much money I was

making, that I had that many customers. He left every morning before I got started and got home usually around the same time I was finishing up. Construction workers usually knock off around 4, but then they go drinking so they don't get home til 5 or 6 like other dads. My Dad didn't usually do that, maybe once or twice a week at most, so unless I had a lot of lawns that that day I'd be home before him. So when I told him I had about 40 customers, and that I was making over \$300 a week, he was floored. His first reaction was mistrust, as if I was stealing money or something like that. The look on his face when I said the number 300 was a mix of shock, confusion and mistrust. Eyebrows lowered, eye went down and to the side, lips turned in and cheeks went out.

"Are you serious?" The shock response.

"Yes Dad. I have 40 customers who've hired me to mow their lawns every week."

"Why you, you're a kid." The confusion response.

"Because I'm good at it, and they trust me to show up every week and do a good job."

"This is on the up and up?" The mistrust response.

"Yes, of course. I'm a lot cheaper than those professional companies. I'm like less than half their price, and they don't do a good job. I hired Mikey to help me, we split the mowing."

"How much do you pay him?"

"I take like \$1.50-2 off each one of his, since it's my business and I found all the customers, but he still makes like 7 or 8 dollars for every lawn, and it only takes like 20 or 30 minutes to do them. It's good money. Honest money"

"Well, good job Will. Good for you. I'm glad you went out and found a way to make money. Had no idea you'd make this much. Geez."

When he brought it up again in late September, he seemed to have a different purpose in asking.

"So, how much did you end up making from the lawn mowing?"

"In total, about \$3500." I lowered the number a little in case he had some ulterior motive in asking. We're still moving a few people's lawns, as long as the weather stays hot and the grass grows."

His eyebrows were up again. “Three thousand five hundred!? Wow, that’s amazing. How much have you saved so far?”

“All of it, basically. I just pay for gas. And I had to replace the spark plugs on the mower. I have over \$3,300 saved.”

“Holy cow. What do you plan to do with all that money?”

“I’m not sure yet. Maybe save it for college. But I’d like to get a car.”

3.

Nearly two years later, approaching my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, and I was getting pretty psyched. I didn’t have a car yet, but I didn’t have a license yet either so it didn’t matter. I had a permit, and a couple more months til my birthday so I had some time to decide. But when I made that statement to my Dad 2 years earlier it started a never-ending argument. He went to college for about a week as far as I could tell. I think he got part of the way to something called an Associates Degree, which means about a year or two and some sort of half-assed certificate. Not a real degree, as far as I know. But I guess he went long enough to get a job in construction. That was sarcasm. Maybe it helped him get the foreman promotion, since he had taken more college courses than anyone else on the site. But no kid of his was going to make that same mistake. His words. So when he realized I was making so much money, I think he also realized that his belligerent insistence could actually become a reality. His pay wasn’t going to get me very far, I’d be dealing with college loans for the rest of my life. But this money could change that, in his eyes. When I said I’d be spending it on a car, he didn’t go ballistic, but he was pretty upset. He had the following year and a half to formulate and reiterate his argument, which changed here and there but had the same basic message: you’re not wasting all that money on some car that might not last a year when you could get a college education that will last a lifetime. Or, you’re not going to buy a car and then crash it when you could buy a college education instead. Same idea.

Truth is, I felt the same way. I saw that he couldn't go very far without a college degree, I didn't want that to happen to me. Plus, I was pretty good at school. I got A's and B's without working that hard. I really liked my math classes, and did well, it seemed to come easier to me than other subjects. Thanks Mom. And I really liked creating a business. So maybe study business or math in college, or both. So yeah, I did have to save some of that money for college.

But back to me being psyched. That first summer mowing lawns was great, but I had no idea then what that would turn into. When the weather got cold, sometime during October I think, I was talking to Mikey and he came up with the idea of shoveling driveways. Doing it legit. I asked what he meant by that. He said his older brother used to go out with his friends and shovel someone's driveway and then knock on their door and tell them it was all done. The people would of course be surprised, they never hired them to do it. But they'd give them a few dollars for the effort. These were some scraggly kids, not exactly burnouts but not the clean-cut types either. If they played it straight and knocked first, they knew they'd rarely get hired and make the money they made this way. So they went door-to-door, or should I say driveway-to-driveway, and made what they could. Of course they couldn't pull that scam too many times. Some people would be grateful for the effort, saving them having to do it, but most would tell them not to come back again. His brother wasn't the type to think big, or long term, like creating a business. Mikey already saw the benefit of playing it straight though. I wasn't really focused on the winter. Honestly I was thinking about trying out for the basketball team. I was pretty good, not great. Tall enough, somewhat athletic, I could shoot, dribble OK, rebound OK. So my mind was on that. And a little bit on what I would do differently next summer to drum up more business. Mikey and I mowed lawns about 3 times a week, that's all it took to bang out the 40 or so lawns. If I could start pitching business earlier, maybe in March or April, I could probably add another 20 or 30 customers. We could then be mowing every day, and making serious cash. So when Mikey brought up shoveling, I was a



little shocked I had overlooked it; frankly I was kind of pissed at myself. But I was impressed Mikey thought of it, and even moreso how he positioned it. He said we could just approach every one of our mowing customers and pitch shoveling. Same basic service, just different equipment. It can be a lot easier if it's a light snowstorm, or it could be a backbreaker if it's heavy and wet. And the snow is random, it's not a weekly growth thing. So we'd have to price it per shoveling. This was all him. He was learning. I don't want to sound patronizing, but given his background, this was big. I was truly happy for him. And we had a new business.

Like the lawns, the driveways were cookie-cutter rectangles. No big hills or curves, no gravel, just basic tar. We ended up getting about 30 of our 40 mowing customers to agree to the shoveling. The rest probably felt guilty about not doing it themselves. Not everyone owned a lawn mower or had the will to do it every week or two, but most people had some sort of shovel and the willingness to shovel the 6 or 7 times you had to most winters. Especially if they had kids, it became a family thing getting out there shoveling, making snowmen, snow angels, etc. With 30 customers, when it did snow we'd be shoveling 15 driveways each. A lot, but doable in a few hours if it wasn't too heavy. We charged just \$8 per shoveling, and we each kept what we made. Since this was Mikey's idea, I wasn't going to take the extra amount. Matter of fact, even though I hadn't told him this yet, I had the same plan for next summer. I was hoping he'd start to bring in some new customers, make it feel even more like a partnership.

Luckily, it snowed a lot that winter. We had 11 days of shoveling, which was unusual. So we made about \$2600 total. To me this was gravy. I did make the basketball team, but was basically the 12<sup>th</sup> man. I didn't see much action in games except when the score got out of hand, which was usually us losing. I scored a grand total of 12 points that season. 4 assists, 3 rebounds. In other words, a good half for our best player, and average for the rest of the starters. A couple times it

snowed during the school day, so Mikey got started shoveling while I was at practice or in a game, and I'd join him after. With the weekend snowstorms we split them evenly. So Mikey ended up making more money than me that winter, which he deserved.

By the time I was approaching my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, I had over \$9000 saved up. That's despite having to buy a new mower the previous summer, which my Dad was more than happy to have me pay for. *You need to learn to pay for your own equipment. You see those tools out there in the garage, I bought those my first year in construction. Foreman told me don't scrimp on your worktools, buy good quality they'll last you forever. And they have.* So needless to say I bought a good mower, way better than our previous one – I guess that wasn't considered one of his worktools when he bought it. And I started seeing a girl, so I spent some money on her too. But with \$9000 in the bank, I knew I could buy any used car out there. Question was, how much could I spend and still keep my Dad happy. Well, not happy, that wasn't happening. Let's say reasonably accepting my decision. I needed to do some research. Car costs, college costs. Fun, not so fun.

So I researched cars first. Of course. And it didn't take long. I was in the middle of mowing a lawn, typical hot summer day. From behind me I heard the explosive sound of a suped-up car engine, over the sound of my comparatively-whiny lawn mower engine. I turned my head and saw a black Ford Mustang coming up the street, slowly as if prancing for the audience. Actually prancing is an insult. Slowly as if making a statement about who now owns the street. That's better. It was beautiful. The curve of the roof line, the way the car angled up in the front, showing off the cool Mustang medallion on the grill. The guy behind the wheel was probably in his mid-thirties, driving with his left forearm over the top of the wheel like it was his girlfriend. He looked at me as he passed, gave a nod with his head and continued on. This was the car for me. But I'd probably drive faster, the car looked like it was meant to fly.

I later learned it was a 1968 Mustang Fastback, though the models from the couple years before and after were about the same. I also learned it was the car from Bullitt, the movie with Steve McQueen that had the amazing car chase. I had seen it when I was about 10 or 11, but somehow didn't remember the car. Too young to appreciate the car I guess, more focused on the chase. Anyway, I started looking through the classified ads to see if I could find a used one. The 1968 model would now be 11 years old, it shouldn't cost too much anymore, I hoped. Unless it was in mint condition. The only Mustangs I found were a couple junky older ones which were the basic hardtop sedan style, not the fastback. Also saw a newer one from 1973 but I didn't like the look of that one as much. The 1968 was the one I wanted. It would be a couple months until one appeared.

In the meantime I started looking at college costs. I could go to community college and live at home, that would cost about \$1500 a year. But there's no way I'm staying home after high school. My Dad wouldn't want me here anyway, especially if I have the money to go somewhere decent. The state university is about twice that much, but of course I still have a couple years so it'll probably increase. I went to the library and found a college guide, and looked up Harvard's cost. Tuition alone is \$6500. Probably \$9,000 for everything. Yeah, that's not happening. Course, I couldn't possibly get in, there's that too. State U looking good!

4.

As I look back on my childhood, I realize that the loss of my mother, though tragic, made me the man I am today. The impact her death had on my father caused me to become more self-sufficient, which was something he expected of me regardless. But I ended up getting a business degree, and ended up as a controller for a company. Numbers, thank you again Mom.

As for Mikey, he ended up taking over the lawn mowing and shoveling business. His customers loved him, he was just responsible enough to go along with his goofiness that they hired him back year after year. He had young guys working for him, which he needed given he had probably tripled the number of customers.

We're still good friends, though our bike riding days are behind us.