

Playground

1800 words

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I had an argument with someone on the phone. I found a movie on Netflix but I couldn't focus so I drove over to the tennis courts.

Nights like this I'd hit the ball against the backboard on the end court. It cleared my head.

It was around 11 and the courts technically closed at 10, but you could still play if you could see okay and didn't disturb anyone. I started close to the wall, half-swinging it, backed up as I got in a rhythm. It was peaceful out, and soon the other thing seemed less of a big deal.

Then came a crunching and slightly shattering noise, and it sure sounded like the direction of my Chevy pickup, which unfortunately was the only thing parked on the side block adjacent to the courts.

There were fences and windscreens in between but I got a reasonable look at the two guys--not wasting time getting out of there but not in panic mode either--and one of them had my laptop.

Like an idiot I'd left it on the seat. The plan was, if the tennis didn't work great--or even if it did--to head over to Starbucks after. There was a late-night one I liked.

Even so, you should be able to get away with leaving junk on the seat. It was the suburbs, tract houses, crime was low.

I wondered if the two guys were local. They seemed to be on foot, as opposed to patrolling around in a vehicle looking for opportunities.

So . . . where did they go?

It wasn't the value of the laptop or them getting into my information that was starting to piss me off beyond belief. It wasn't even the two pricks laughing about it, kind of a high-pitched giggle one guy let out and the other guy mirrored.

What was making me crazy was this was the third time in a month. The other two down in the city, one the Honda when I'd left my iPad for a minute and gone in to pick up takeout Thai, and one my friend's car when we went to the bluegrass festival. She had a new pair of running shoes from Big 5 on the back seat, in the bag, which we assumed was harmless.

So yeah, three, and I wasn't in the mood, and I could see myself maybe responding if the two mutants were right here in front of me, so good thing they weren't. Right?

Except again . . . how far could they have gone?

I got in the truck and the first thought was would I get a flat tire driving over all that glass, but forget that, and I threw it in gear and started cruising down the street.

You had houses on the left, and on the right the park extended past the tennis courts. There was a soccer field, a playground, a softball diamond, a picnic area and beyond all that some basketball courts.

The park was quiet, except for a guy throwing a ball to a dog on the soccer field in the dark, with one of those extension devices and giving it the 'attaboy' when the dog completed the job.

You had what looked like a couple teenagers making out in the softball stands, no big deal.

But then . . . a couple dudes at the basketball courts. There was no ball, they were messing around trashtalking each other, plenty of profanity, and you couldn't see them that well and you didn't want to get too close.

What sealed it was one of them letting out the high-pitched cackle again.

In a perfect world you angle the pickup that way and run them over . . . and of course you couldn't do that . . . but there *was* a curb-cut which let maintenance vehicles into the park from the street . . . so if someone was a psychopath, or this was the wild west, yeah, you probably could.

At the minimum connect with one of them as they scramble to get away, maybe pin him against a fence and see what happens.

I drove around the block to cool off, and repress these ridiculous thoughts.

Which almost worked, I was back by the tennis courts, except there was a grass-cutting machine sitting there next to the utility shed. One of those heavy-duty industrial jobs with the extension arms coming out both sides, that could mow a shitload of lawn in one pass.

I parked and got out and took a look.

There was a key dangling from what I assumed was the ignition. I'm thinking this is crazy, they not only leave it out, they don't take the keys with them?

So . . . I climbed up on the thing, and for the heck of it *turned* the key.

Nothing.

Which made sense, you're not gonna let some wild man start it up.

I pulled out my phone and considered letting the police know . . . but first, why not, I googled how to start the fucker.

There was a label on the front panel that gave you the basics:

Big Turf Speed King Model Z-12

And the company was **Weyerhausen**. Out of Pierre, South Dakota, it said.

Google's instructions unfortunately directed you to a keypad on the machine, which this one didn't have. So I figured I was out of luck, the maintenance guys removed it for security . . . Though I couldn't see where you *would* hook up one of those, and it was getting silly now but I added 'old model original model no keypad' to the google search and boom, a new set of results.

Just one important one--you take the key out of the ignition and use it to open the thing's version of a glove box, and you reach in back and flip a switch. Then you

restart it. Except that didn't work, so I tried putting my foot on the brake first and son of a gun . . . there you had it.

It was a bit awkward driving it down the street, but I figured out how to retract the extension arms and that was better.

The machine did have a hum to it and there'd be no way to hear if the a-holes were still milling around the basketball courts, but no point speculating, and I threw on the headlights, which I hadn't thought of, and drove through the curb-cut and powered toward the far hoop where they'd been hanging out.

The two mopes were lounging on the small set of bleachers behind the baseline, one of them noticing me and pointing, the other sort of laughing and then neither one smiling as I beared down on them.

I spotted the laptop laying on the court, near the foul line, and hopefully I wouldn't run it over, but that wasn't important right now.

The guys scrambled out of there, opposite directions--more like flew out of there--and I smashed into the bleachers, coming up empty . . . but have to say, it felt good.

I spun around. The machine did maneuver nicely, some sophisticated engineering going on for sure, and one guy was smart enough to get his ass through a little gate and onto the baseball field, meaning I'd have to go the long way. The other one though, he seemed confused.

Never good to debate it when an individual is pursuing you with a piece of industrial equipment . . . and I caught up to him and clipped the back of his leg with the machine and he fell forward and stayed there sprawled out.

I could have completed the job and flattened him good, instead of just nicking him, but a lightbulb must have come on that it's not worth it, and I angled just a bit at the end.

At any rate . . . didn't look like he was moving much or at all, so good enough, and I figured drive the thing back to where I found it, though I remembered the laptop and hopped off the machine for a second and scooped that up.

I decided forget the Starbucks and I called my friend Jane, who I had the argument with, and asked if she wanted a little company, maybe pick up some ice cream and catch the end of Jimmy Fallon.

She said that was a funny way to put it, it should have been does she *mind* a little company, but that's fine, if you need to.

Jane had a comfy couch and normally I'd doze off pretty quick, but I told her what happened.

She digested it and said, "I will say, there's been times when if *I* had a *bazooka* I would have shot it off on the person."

"Yeah, but hypothetically, obviously," I said.

"Not so sure."

"You're kinda swaying off track on me. My deal at the moment . . . do I call someone? The cops? A lawyer? . . . Board a Greyhound bus and disappear for a while?"

"Excuse my ignorance. Why on earth would you call the police?"

"Yeah good point. Only that I'm reporting my car window smashed and computer stolen?"

"Except did people notice you, like driving the contraption down the middle of the block?"

"No doubt someone did. Not sure about the chasing the guys around part though."

“Well let’s go take a look,” Jane said, and that’s one thing I liked about her, she didn’t mull things over too long.

We took her car and I kind of slunk down in the seat, and we circled past the spot a couple times where you could peer into the basketball courts, and there was no sign of either dude, and you’d have to think if EMS or the police--or the coroner or some shit--had shown up, there would be evidence of that.

Jane said, “Do you want to go to Burger King?”

There was a 24-hour one around the corner next to the gas station. “As in look for the idiots?” I said. “Or eat?”

“Eat. I saw in a commercial they’ve re-installed the rodeo cheeseburgers on the menu. I like that they give you onion rings on those.”

It actually sounded pretty good. I said, “If I *did* happen to get questioned though, you know, down the line . . .”

“You tell them you needed the thing-a-ma-jig to search for your laptop.”

I thought about that one. “I see. Because I assumed my pickup was un-driveable after they broke in . . . and time was of the essence.”

“Unh-huh.”

“That’s not bad. Except I did jump in and drive it, and eventually to your place.”

“Go ahead, overthink it,” she said.

I was getting hungry, admittedly, so yeah, okay fine.