

## Mowing the lawn can be a risky business

*Marsha Henry Goff*

I am grateful that husband Ray waited until the last mowing of the season to set the lawn mower on fire. Chances are I never would have known of the conflagration had the garage not smelled strongly of smoke.

“Something’s on fire,” I shouted to Ray who was digging gladiolus and tuberose bulbs in preparation for winter.

“Was,” he answered succinctly.

“What?” I asked equally succinctly.

“Lawn mower.”

It was a conversation with an economy of words previously unknown in our marriage. At least on my side. The story, when I dragged it out of him, was a simple one: He did not set the lawn mower on fire. Dry grass which had accumulated under and on top of the mower deck ignited when it came in contact with the hot muffler.

It happened as he mowed down by the county road almost a quarter-mile from our garage. Ray smelled smoke, saw fire. Then (I wouldn’t make this up) he drove the mower to the garage (later informing me I was silly to worry that the gas tank would explode because it was on the side of the mower that wasn’t on fire). He used a garden hose to put out the flames.

Isn’t that just what you’d expect from a man whose father and role-model used to burn brush on the family farm by setting a fire and then squirting gasoline on it? (Don’t try this, kids. Ray’s dad was a professional.)

As a teen, Ray, himself, almost burned down his family’s farmhouse. That incident also was a simple story. He had soiled his new Levis with tractor grease and used gasoline to soak out the stain (apparently Zout hadn’t been invented). Then he took his jeans into the brand new indoor bathroom to rinse them out in the tub. Only one problem. He forgot that the propane water heater was in the bathroom. “All I heard,” he said when reluctantly relating the incident, “was POOF!”

Later his mom told me that when she looked through the door, she was horrified to see her only son — surrounded by fire — using his new jeans to beat out the flames. Fortunately, the house was spared and so was Ray. Not a mark on his body if you don’t count the fact that he had to wait several weeks for his eyebrows to grow back.

As a young mother, I worried excessively about my two sons’ safety until Grams explained to me, “Honey, God looks after children. If only mothers did, no child would survive to adulthood.”

I’m thinking that must apply to men, too. Men take the darndest risks; at least mine does. However, I am glad that he is smart enough not to get under a car when it is elevated by a bumper jack. And he is very cautious about electricity. One night Dad

persuaded Ray to help him with a wiring problem in my parents' basement. Mom and I heard Ray ask, "Did you shut off power to the outlet?"

Dad assured him that he had. As Mom and I washed and dried dishes in the kitchen, we could hear muffled voices and bangs and clanks emanating from the basement. Suddenly, KA-POW! and all the lights went off. Before Mom and I had time to worry about our men's safety, we heard Ray loudly exclaim, "I thought you said you'd disconnected power to the outlet!"

Dad's sheepish reply was softer, "I thought I did."

I recently learned that my father was a bigger risk taker than I imagined when his sergeant during World War II told me that Dad, a Ranger lieutenant, had volunteered to go into Sicily via submarine before the allied invasion. Mom, who thought Dad was taking a huge risk every time he piloted his little Cessna, would have gone ballistic over that perilous wartime risk.

As for me, I've taken a few risks, but — except for one youthful indiscretion — they've always been carefully calculated. At the age of 17, in the belief I was immortal, I drove Dad's Buick (no seatbelts, no airbags) to Ray's family farm west of town. Driving on hilly, two-laned Highway 40, I decided to see how fast the car would go. I'm pretty sure the statute of limitations on my speeding and reckless driving has long since expired, so I'll admit that I pushed the speedometer to 100 mph. (Kids, don't try this stunt either ... not because I was a professional, but because I was an idiot.)

That may be the reason that Ray hasn't taught me to operate the lawn mower. Or, he may suspect that if the mower caught fire, I would not drive it to the garage to extinguish the flames. He's right. Burn, baby, burn!