



Of ties and lawn mowers

The grass was covered in frost, slivers of white delicately outlining each blade. He could hear the crunch of steps on the gravel drive and the murmur of voices from the bar. It was early, but nobody would care to play until the sun broke through. Better to remain snug and dry indoors with a stiff drink as medicine against the cold. That created problems.

He'd asked Johnson to step into his office this morning. He'd intended to try a little innuendo, see how the fellow reacted. But if he showed interest, today wouldn't be any good at all. The club would be full of members, all over the place, dammit. And what was he going to say to the man, after all? He could hardly pretend to give instructions about cutting the greens in this weather. The young groundsman would know quite well there was something up. Trouble was, he should never have taken him on. Should have realised at the interview that the man's robust physique and black curls would just prey on his mind. Maybe not his mind. Prey on him, anyway.

Should have employed that older applicant with the stooped back and wall eye. Nothing for it, he'd have to leave a message postponing their intended chat. Say he'd had to go out unexpectedly. But then he'd have to go. Look bad if he was seen lurking in the bar with a drink rather than in his office where he'd said he'd be. He sighed and picked up his car keys. Perhaps no message after all. Just leave, and pretend he'd forgotten, later. Such a lot of fuss and deception.

Why did it have to be so difficult? Why couldn't he just wink at the fellow and buy him a drink, put a hand on his shoulder, or even his thigh? He'd do that like a shot if he was a woman. If Johnson was a woman, rather. And he knew all about modern manners - no harassing the women staff, no harassing the staff altogether. But then how did a chap get to know if there was a possibility of anything? And he was old school, dammit, and wanted to make it all clear from the start. Straight. Well, not straight. Even the language was against him. Johnson crossed the car park in front of the windows and was heading towards the door that led to the offices. The manager fled, precipitately, muttering as he did, and passed the groundsman with his face averted.

Johnson watched Harris get into his car and roar off into the cold morning. Funny, he could have sworn he'd been due to see him in the office. Odd guy. Good-looking. As in really really good looking. But cold rather than hot. Not old, but so old-fashioned and stiff. And never even a word for him as they passed in the doorway. Oh well, there was nothing that could usefully be done outside today. Whatever the manager wanted could wait till he came back and deigned to tell him about it. Meanwhile, he'd been told he could use the bar as if he was a member. He'd have a look. You never knew, there might be some talent. Unlikely, but worth checking out. Most of the members were middle-aged and dull; probably straight as ramrods, too - like the manager. But it might be fun to drop a hint here and there, raise some of those middle-class eyebrows. Probably more than his job was worth though. So just a drink. Then he'd get on with stripping down, oiling and sharpening the mower. Dammit, he could have done with some entertainment today. He stripped off his heavy work gloves and headed further into the clubhouse.

When Harris got back, he still felt out of sorts. He had driven around aimlessly, stopped at a pub with an odd name he couldn't remember for a kind of ploughman's lunch that wasn't a patch on what they served at the club, and then decided he would have to return after all. There was a lot of office work to do. He sighed as he took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. Then he glanced out of the window and felt rewarded, excited even. Johnson was doing things to the mower. Esoteric things like taking it to pieces and putting it together again. Harris had no idea about mowers other than that they were expensive and were needed to cut grass. He did, however, have plenty of ideas about the groundsman.

Whatever he was doing, the task necessitated Johnson bending over the machine, his taut arse, splendid in its denim coating, directly visible to Harris, almost like an invitation. But it couldn't be. Could it? The man must know the direction of the manager's office window. But if he was concentrating on his work... Of course, he bloody well ought to be concentrating on his work. That's why he was employed in the first place.

Except that if that was all that had been required, the older man might have been a better choice.

Harris swallowed convulsively.

That was the moment Johnson straightened and looked over his shoulder. He usually dealt with the machine just here, hoping against hope. But not really hoping, just daydreaming. Building castles in the air populated by older guys who were good looking. And he shouldn't daydream. Not with the functionality of the club machinery at stake. He always wondered whether Harris ever saw him.

He'd obviously seen him today. Was staring at him, a kind of hunger on his face. Surely not? Surely the man was straight? He'd never heard any rumours to the contrary. Still, that meant very little. The man could be bi. Or he could be in denial, even to himself.

Johnson considered. There was every reason to ask to see the manager. The aborted meeting this morning – maybe there was something he should know before he went home. No need to allude to that strange moment when he'd caught Harris looking at him. No need at all. But if there was anything, well, perhaps this was the day to find out.

He finished dealing with the mower, then stood up, his back objecting to the straightening after so long bent over. His hands, cold even in the gloves, welcomed the idea of indoors.

Harris didn't have a secretary. Didn't see the need. Karen on reception fielded visitors and members who wanted to see him, answered phone calls and did the odd spot of typing. Pretty girl, if you were that way inclined, which he wasn't.

Staff mostly knew they could just knock on his door any time. He tried to be accessible. But when the knock came so closely after his glimpse of Johnson bending over the mower, he was almost panic stricken. He hastily adjusted himself and then sat down abruptly behind his desk. Wonderful what a lot a stretch of oak could hide.

'Come in.' Did his voice sound normal? He had no idea. And then he gulped as he realised who had just knocked and entered.

'I just wondered, sir, whether there was anything important. Since you had to cancel our meeting this morning.' Johnson's voice was a sexy growl that had Harris half hard again in a second.

Johnson wasn't sure exactly what to say. The manager was looking nervous, or possibly annoyed. But his question, he thought, was perfectly legitimate. He enjoyed his job, and wanted to make sure there was nothing outstanding to be seen to urgently.

Harris was staring at him, his mouth opening and closing, but without any sound coming out. He was blushing slightly, too, as if caught in some secret activity. As if staring out of the window had been in some way reprehensible. Johnson could soon disabuse him of that notion. But he couldn't risk open flirtation. He valued the job too much.

The silence continued.

'Is there anything I can do for you?' He used his most sultry voice, and hoped against hope that if he was wrong, Harris would just take the words at their straightforward value.

Harris looked helplessly out of the window, hoping for some kind of rescue. The light was fading. It was still early January and the evenings started early. He could barely see the mower now. There was a dull glow across the course, where the street lights were coming on.

Johnson's query couldn't be real, could it? Could he, dull-as-dishwater Phil Harris, golf club manager, be arousing interest in this glorious twenty-something who stood in his office?

He cleared his throat.

'I'm sorry about this morning,' he said. 'Something came up.'

Well, that was a bit of innuendo he hadn't intended. But the groundsman didn't seem concerned. There was a small smile on his face. A knowing look in his eye.

'I was just servicing the mower,' Johnson said now. 'I wondered if anything else needed servicing.' Then he muttered under his breath, 'or anyone.' It was so mumbled that if necessary he could say he'd said, 'or something,' and it would be hard for anyone to contradict him.

He waited. He didn't dare say anything else. It would be so easy if they could only say exactly what they thought without any repercussions. But to begin with, although there could be no overt homophobia in his employment, a golf club was not the most progressive of workplaces, and to add to that, although Harris wasn't his employer, he was his manager, so things could get awkward quickly.

Harris was moving towards him. That blush was deepening.

'I was watching you with the mower,' Harris said.

'I know.' Let him make the first move, for goodness' sake. And yet, maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he was too constrained by his managerial role.

'I was thinking,' Harris said, hoping his voice wasn't betraying his nerves, 'that I might have a drink in the bar. Would you like to join me?'

There. That couldn't be too threatening, could it? It wasn't his custom to drink with staff, but he could, if necessary, justify it as some relaxation while they discussed aspects of Johnson's work.

'I'd like that,' came the reply.

They were staring at each other, neither of them quite daring to speak. Dan Johnson, the young groundsman, and Phil Harris the manager. Who'd have thought it? Mark Leigh, the barman, smiled to himself. He'd have thought it, had thought it the moment Dan had reported for work that first day. They were made for each other in so many ways. Looks – both had them in spades. Shyness, too and old-fashioned manners. Neither of them had ever shown the slightest interest in women, members, members' wives, members' daughters, kitchen staff, or Karen on reception. And if a guy wasn't interested in Karen, then he wasn't interested in women.

He served them a pint of beer each, and handed out coasters. He'd already cleaned the tables and was enjoying the lull between the daytime crowd and the evening lot. So Mark could watch this pair from his position behind the bar without them realising they were being scrutinised. It would, he thought, be as entertaining as any of the soaps on the telly.

Harris loosened his tie. It was a few years since the club had abandoned its insistence on ties as the appropriate and mandatory wear in the bar. But Harris still felt somehow obliged to wear one. He knew it appealed to the older members, and he didn't care whether it appealed to the women or not.

Somehow, at the moment, the thing felt more like a noose.

'Nice tie,' he heard Johnson say. He'd chosen one of his favourites today, thinking of the appointment he'd made (and then broken) in the morning. It was dark grey with a tiny pattern of penguins wielding golf clubs and its fun element contradicted its formality, making him laugh inside.

'Thank you,' was all he managed.

Johnson was very slowly moving his hands, circling each wrist in turn. 'Of course, ties are such useful things,' he said. 'Not just decorative.'

Useful? Harris tried to think of a use for a tie. Well, he supposed he could make a makeshift tourniquet if someone had a small wound. Anything else? No, he was stumped. He looked enquiringly at his companion.

'For tying things up,' the groundsman said. 'They can be used to keep a wandering branch in place, or provide a quick mend on a machine. Though I'd never use one as good as yours, of course.'

There didn't really seem to be anything for either of them to say. Both men sipped their beer in silence.

'I just wanted...' Harris began, and Johnson waited for some kind of guillotine to fall. He had no idea whether the manager had wanted to praise or scold him or merely give instructions. It seemed he was about to find out.

'...to tell you how pleased we are with your work,' said Harris. The royal we? Hardly. The marital we? But Harris wasn't married. The managerial we, then. But Johnson would take it, anyway.

He smiled, tentatively. And Harris smiled back.

He thought he'd said some kind of thank you. Then they made some desultory small talk about the grounds, the machines, the weather. If cross examined, Johnson would not have been able to remember what they had talked about. He was drowning in that smile. It lit up the manager's face and brightened the dull grey evening.

Harris fidgeted with his tie again, and Johnson couldn't help fidgeting with his fingers as he imagined tying it round the other man's wrists.

Another smile. Why was it all so difficult? There was supposed to be equality nowadays. And he didn't imagine teenagers had any problem making suggestions, proffering invitations, and so on. But adult men in the workplace were at a distinct disadvantage. Of course, so were women, and for that matter the men who wanted those same women, but acknowledging that didn't make his own situation any easier.

'Your day off's a Monday, isn't it?' Harris knew perfectly well that it was. He made out the rotas for staff time off, and had probably checked in any case.

'Yes?' Johnson turned it into a query. Did Harris want to change something, or ask him to work overtime?

'I wondered.' Harris stopped.

Time to bite the bullet and offer some encouragement. 'What did you wonder?' Johnson spoke softly.

'Whether you might like to go out for a meal some time. I checked which restaurants around here were open on a Monday.'

Harris was blushing again and looking extremely nervous.

'I'd love to.' That had to be clear enough.

'Next Monday, then?'

'It's a date. That is, I'm assuming it's a date. Is it a date?' Johnson thought he might be blushing too.

'Definitely a date.' The tone was suddenly all efficient manager, confidence returning now that the invitation had been accepted.

'And you'll wear that tie?'

'If you like it so much.'

'It gives me ideas.'

'About penguins? Or golf clubs?'

'About the uses of strips of silk.' There. That was definite, too.

'By the way, my name's Phil. Not at work, of course, but when we go out.'

'And mine's Dan.' Stupid thing to say. Harris, Phil, was his manager; of course he knew his full name.

'Till Monday then, Dan,' said Phil.

They looked straight at each other, promise in both sets of eyes. Then Phil retreated to his office, pleading work to be done, things to sign, people to phone.

And Dan got up with a thought about working but knew it was so dark and so cold that all he could reasonably be expected to do would be to put the mower away.

'Leaving?' The barman grinned.

'Just need to tidy up.' Dan knew his voice was gruffer than usual and that he had a stupid smile plastered all over his face.

'Doing anything special tonight? You look as if you're looking forward to something.'

'Not tonight, but it's Friday already. And I do have a date, but for Monday.'

'Ah. Well, enjoy your evening anyway. See you tomorrow.'

'See you.' Saturdays and Sundays were their busiest days. Too busy to hope for any more unscheduled meetings with the manager. Monday, however...

He put the mower away in the outbuildings in a kind of dream, glanced at the manager's window and saw Phil putting on his coat, presumably getting ready to go home. Though he'd probably be back later to oversee a Friday night in the club. Monday had to be his day off, too. Very few people played golf on Mondays and Karen could cope with them.

But the tiny penguins with their golf clubs would, he hoped, get the perfect round on Monday. Meanwhile, he could just enjoy the anticipation. He was soon astride his motorbike, bombing down the road to his future.

Phil went home and fed his cat, Mogg, then went back to socialise and supervise in the bar. He had changed his tie for a light blue one with dark blue diagonal stripes. The penguins were now too precious to risk in the booze laden atmosphere of Friday night at the club.

He was smiling broadly. Let people wonder. It was almost Monday.