

EVAN POPPER'S LAWN

by Paul Heinz

Evan Popper's neat and trim haircut was surpassed only by his neat and trim lawn, a lush Garden of Eden whose precise angles and edges often invited admiring praises from passersby. Beginning with the cold, damp days of March when increasing daylight hours produced sprouting daffodils, until the cold, damp days of October when the waning rays of sunlight signaled life's hibernation, Evan doted on his lawn and bordering flower beds the way a mother dotes on her newborn.

On a cool May morning, Evan awoke early and tended to his yard. Contentedly pruning select branches from a flourishing azalea, he listened to the giggles of children on their way to school and kept an eye out for the pretty brunette who'd sometimes say hello to him as she accompanied her daughter. He hummed happily to himself, when along the edges of his periphery, he perceived an impressive presence on his lawn.

It was crapping.

He halted his work and yelled out, "Get out of there! Go on!"

The beast, a lumbering golden retriever, didn't budge, and Evan's glaring eyes followed its black nylon leash to a woman's hand.

"No worries," the woman said, opening a wrinkled plastic bag. "I'll pick it up."

"What's the matter with you? You can't take him two feet further to the parkway to do his business?"

"Excuse me?" she said.

“You people don’t show any respect,” he said, seething. “I work hard on this lawn. I pay taxes.”

The woman, wrapped in a hooded sweatshirt, peered at Evan as if he’d just recited the alphabet backwards. “What?”

“I said, I pay my taxes.”

“And you think I don’t?”

He dropped his pruner and hurried toward her, but she pulled forcefully on the dog’s leash and quickened along the sidewalk.

“Pick your dog’s shit up!”

She glanced behind her but continued to walk away with the dog. “Pick it up yourself.”

“Get back here, you stupid woman!”

By now she was a driveway away, the retriever’s tongue dangling happily as it galloped beside her. Evan turned to face the mound of fresh feces still steaming in the cool morning air.

“Excuse me.” On the bordering sidewalk stood the brunette, a beauty whose glance was sometimes all Evan needed to brush away his loneliness and approach the rest of his day with a sense of gratitude. “I thought you should know,” she said, “that isn’t even her dog. The woman you yelled at? Her neighbor had a heart attack and she’s just trying to help out. You should give her a break.”

Evan mellowed his tone abruptly. “Oh, well, that’s too bad,” he said, and decided to stop right there, but the uncomfortable silence that followed led him to add, “Still, she shouldn’t just let the dog do its business on my lawn.”

“Then maybe you could have asked her nicely,” she said.

Evan stood speechless, his mind suddenly blank. The pretty brunette strutted away, and as lovely as she was to watch, he hated that she'd had the last word and hated even more that he'd found it so difficult to offer a rebuttal. Flustered, he returned his gaze to the mound of shit and spent the next half an hour eliminating evidence of the animal, first with a plastic bag, then with a hose, and then with a rake.

Throughout the day, he couldn't get his mind off of the brunette. Mornings would be awkward now, he thought. Unpleasant. He'd no longer be able to go out in the yard and hope for a welcoming smile from her, or for a "good morning." That was over now.

The following morning he watched for her from the large picture window of his living room, and both desired and dreaded the thought of seeing her again. He didn't deserve to be regarded as a menace to society, a crazy man waiting to pounce on unsuspecting dog walkers. That wasn't who he was. He was a retired plumber who had raised three good kids of his own with Emma before she passed away. He'd served on the PTA. He'd raised money for his church. He'd coached softball.

Through the window he noticed the offending golden retriever rushing from tree to tree across the street, aiming for its next target, and this time Evan took a long look at the woman holding the leash. She appeared to be a bit older, not one of the moms from school. Her graying blond hair draped across a striking summer blouse, and her slender arms flexed against the pull of the dog's leash. She didn't cross the street toward his lawn today. Instead, she continued west away from school.

Without thought, Evan glanced down at his t-shirt and boxers, then hastily retreated to his bedroom to slide on a pair of kakis and a polo shirt before splashing cold water on his face in the bathroom. He sprinted through the front door and searched down the walkway with hopeful

eyes. He could still make out the silhouettes of the woman and her neighbor's dog, three blocks away.

He began to follow her, slowly as first, and then picked up his pace, decelerating only when he came to within a block of her. The dog stopped to sniff regularly, and the woman slowed to allow the beast time, almost seeming to relish these stops as she glanced at the landscape around her – the azaleas, the lilacs, the pansies.

She finally turned to her right, and by the time Evan reached the same street corner she was unlocking the door to an impressive colonial two houses away. The dog trotted in, and the woman offered a few animated words before returning down the porch steps and across the street, where she opened the door to a cape cod that looked lost among the more imposing structures that surrounded it.

Once she was safely inside, Evan nonchalantly strolled by and noticed the name on the mailbox: Murphy. Later, after a quick search on the Internet, he learned that the woman's name was Ann. No other person was listed.

For reasons he wouldn't have been able to articulate if asked, Evan continued this pattern in the weeks that followed. Each morning he waited for Ann from his front window, and once spotting her, delayed his departure by a few minutes before shadowing her along the tree-lined streets. Over time, he felt like he'd grown to know her. She looked lonely and kind, the same way he perceived himself.

On the Thursday of the third week, after dropping off the dog, Ann deviated from her routine, and rather than returning home, continued south toward the center of town. Evan followed, first to the busy intersection that required a walk sign to cross safely, then to the café where through the storefront window Evan watched her order a coffee, make a quick call with

her cell phone, and settle on an easy chair beside a rack of newspapers. He entered the shop, purchased a coffee and ambled toward the rack, feigning interest in the front page before finally overcoming his pulse's rapid-fire beat.

"How is your neighbor doing?" he asked.

The woman lowered the paper and peered over its edges. Her eyes were olive green, lovely, like Emma's.

"My neighbor?"

"The one with the heart attack."

"Oh. Better. He'd hoped to be home by now, but there were complications. He should be back next week."

"That's good," he said. And then, hesitantly, he extended his hand. "I'm Evan Popper."

"Ann," she said, and folded her paper before offering her hand. "Would you like to sit down?"

Not expecting this invitation, Evan remained standing for a moment, fumbling with his fingers before finally pulling up a wooden chair from a neighboring table. In doing so, he noticed her shapely legs up close for the first time.

Except for some small talk with the cashier at the grocery store, Evan hadn't spoken to a woman spontaneously in months. He had no idea what to say, yet somehow Ann set him at ease, and their conversation proceeded comfortably. Ann's voice had a pleasing lilt to it, similar to the way Emma used to speak with him when he was feeling stressed. A voice of comfort.

Evan discussed his plumbing career, made a brief reference to his deceased wife and mentioned how much he loved big band music and dancing. She in turn listened and offered a

few innocent quips that made him laugh, perhaps the only time he'd laughed in weeks, and his mood lightened.

Then, without warning, Anne said, "You're the man with the nice lawn," stating it as a fact, as if she'd known this all along.

He looked down. "Yes. And I owe you a sincere apology for the way I talked with you that day. I can't explain it."

"I cried all the way home."

His face asked for her to confirm her statement.

"Yeah. Kind of silly, I know. But I was like, 'Here I am trying to help a neighbor who I hardly know' – you know that right? It's my neighbor's dog – 'So here I am just doing a good deed, and this is the thanks I get.' Silly to think that way, I know."

"But understandable."

"I guess. Maybe I was just overcharged with emotion, you know? Caught me on a bad day."

"More like you caught *me* on a bad day."

She nodded and offered a hint of a smile.

"I feel awful for what happened," Evan said. "And I'd sure like to make it up to you." He steadied his nerves before requesting his first date in thirty-five years. "Would you allow me to take you to dinner? Or just a drink somewhere? I'd really like to try to make amends."

She placed the newspaper back on the rack before taking a sip of coffee. Then, looking into his hopeful eyes, she said, "Mr. Popper, I wouldn't allow you clean my toilet."

Her statement seemed so incongruous with her tone, that he sat dumbfounded for a moment before finally uttering a pathetic "Sorry?"

“Don’t be. You are who you are, and I’m not interested. Having a coffee while you pretend not to know who I am is one thing, but you’re mistaken if you think I’d ever date a man who has a mean streak like you.”

“Now, now...wait. Just a minute here.” He straightened in his chair. “You have every right to turn me down. But to judge me based on my worst moment...no one on the planet looks good by that standard. Even you...” he stopped himself, recognizing that he was getting worked up again, just like that day with the dog.

She looked at him with reproachful eyes. “But it wasn’t an isolated incident.” She paused for a moment. “Was it?”

He felt the temperature rise in his cheeks and wished to God he could make it stop. “There’ve been a few occasions, sure, but...” A boy who once trounced over his annuals. An owner of a Labrador.

With raised eyebrows, she said, “I think a lot more than a few. I’ve told people about your little outburst, and almost all of them could recall similar stories.”

“Yes, but surely you don’t suggest...listen, I was married for over thirty years. I raised three kids. Good kids. Getting angry a couple of times hardly makes me a tyrant.”

“Fine, you’re not a tyrant. I never said you were. You wanted to apologize, and you have. Good for you. That doesn’t mean I want to date you, or even see you again. And let me tell you something else.” She leaned forward, allowing her thought to dangle in midair for a few unbearable seconds. “I know what you’ve been doing.”

His stomach coiled. “What...what do you mean?”

“Following me. For three weeks. Isn’t that right?”

“I...I...”

“Don’t ever come near me again, Mr. Popper. Leave now.”

He pushed himself up from the chair, barely able to keep his knees from buckling. His cheeks boiled.

“And Mr. Popper?”

“Yes,” he said, barely audible now.

“Remember to treat people better than grass. I think it’s a good rule.”

He fled the café and marched briskly toward home, as if he were being followed, as if each window he passed reflected the prying eyes of those in judgment, but he couldn’t outpace their gazing eyes. What would Emma say if she could see him now? Oh, how he had dishonored her memory, following a woman, practically stalking her. And his outburst! Emma had always been able to calm him, to soften his acidic instincts. She’d speak in a voice not unlike Ann’s, soothing, and fix him something to eat, and his troubles would lessen like a fading apparition.

He hung his head low and focused on the pair of brown leather shoes he’d taken out of the closet three weeks ago, the first time he’d worn them since a funeral last fall.

When at last he noticed the recognizable unkempt brush of a yard two doors down from his own, he lifted his head, and the thought of his lawn welcoming him offered him some relief. He would tend to his plants, dirty his hands in the moist soil, and the very act of working with the earth would provide a sense of redemption. It would see him through this humiliating episode. That’s all this was, after all.

It wasn’t until he was half a yard away that he recognized something awry on his front lawn. A brown splotch. Had an animal dug a hole? A sick stirring bubbled in his stomach as he discovered a second mound. Then another. And another. He nearly broke out into a sprint to

the edges of his front walkway, fearing the worst, only to find that reality far exceeded his most dire thoughts. He stopped and surveyed what had been the lawn of envy, a garden to be appreciated, admired, coveted.

Twenty-one, twenty-two...he stopped counting the number of holes of various shapes and sizes scattered throughout his yard at thirty-seven. He dashed to the nearest mound and lowered himself to his knees. His hands worked feverishly to fill in the hole, sweeping the chunks of sod to their rightful place, but his efforts only underscored how much work would be required to get his lawn back to what it once was. It would take years.

The next morning, trapped behind his living room window, Evan spied the pretty brunette and her daughter. The girl, clearly noticing the results of the vandalism, slowed to examine the ruins, but her mother coaxed her along until a voice called out from across the street. It was Ann. She jogged across the pavement with the dog and met the brunette in front of Evan's yard. Together they walked with the girl toward school, chatting like old friends, and taking not even a sideways glance at their destruction.