

The Eve Afore

Take a look through this magazine about urban living. You'll notice every third page or so the same family popping up throughout this (let me check) sixty-page issue. Who are they? Who is the dad with his hair as wavy as the birches facing a cruel woodland bluster? And the mama, who is she? What is the name of the woman in that holly red sweater striped with snowflakes and verdant pines? Who is the teenaged son? Who is the preteen? And who is the toddler, no doubt bawling between snapshots?

Look at the back of the credits. There they are, known forevermore by their monikers instead of their original names. That's Meatloaf, the teenage brother. You can see oozing out of his every pore the commercial ambience imbued into him by his parents. It doesn't take a magnifying glass to see that next planned order he's about to deliver to the camera man. "Get a shot of me organizing my action figures. Snap me combing my rug. Look, I lined my books up in order of size! Photo that while you're in here."

Because all of those pictures show up in American Jackpot and Cozy Urban Residence. This isn't really about Meatloaf. All five Evanroods are part of the modeling circuit, whether they want to be or not. Dainty Tinsel Evanrood certainly does. I wonder what her original name used to be. Anyway, she's thought about contacting an acting agency so that a stand-in daughter with draped auburn hair could come over and create the illusion of having a fourth family member. Failing that, Little Baby Nibbles has to wear pink bonnets and Valentine's socks. What does he care? He's eight months old.

Hawkeye, on the other hand, is forty. He cares enough about noble authenticity to veto both the stand-in idea and dressing up Nibbles in girly stockings and ribbons. Meatloaf, after weighing the rewards either parent might grant him, takes his father's side. Visions of driver's seat privileges and pulled strings at choice career paths dance in his head while Hawkeye brainstorms variations on the proverb, "honoring father's leadership is its own reward."

Dainty Tinsel already has Baby Nibbles on her side. Securing Middle Cozy's vote ought to even things up.

"What can I do to get your support?"

"Let me out of the magazine business."

I'm sure that's what he wants to say. You can glean all the background drama through subtle hints in every picture they appear in.

Their whole lives are on display for everyone to see; there they are raking leaves, sitting around the dinner table, catching the school bus, making business calls, doing their homework, and even taking pictures of one another. Just about the only thing that doesn't show up are the stacks of magazines they appear in; that is to say, magazines issued out by rival syndicates. The stacks themselves are placed wherever they'd be most photogenic. The crew of Spittin' Image is sure to set their own publication on top so as not to give Gadzooks! What a Joint free publicity.

But they appear in all of those magazines, and they have for years. They are credited by their magazine monikers. Who even remembers their original names, except for Cody? His parents won't let him use it. Every publication has to refer to him as "Cozy" to maintain their reputation in the modeling community.

Astonishing, isn't it, the gossip you can get just from looking at magazine pictures? Here we are in the waiting room of the dentist's office, or maybe we're in some up-and-coming socialite's living room. We could be in the teacher's lounge, waiting for a haircut, browsing the local library, or even digging around in a back alley dumpster in Chicago. There they are, the Evanroods. Photos of them, anyway. They're all standing around, or seated, passing around paper plates with fresh strawberry salads and lamb carrot dumplings. Sometimes guests appear on the pages, toasting wineglasses. Hawkeye and Dainty Tinsel pose beneath the mistletoe in that one. Do the berries look glittered, as though to resemble snow? Possibly. It's Domestic Blast-off's December issue. The crew has broken their backs to make the foliage look real, and not the plastic I think it really is.

Hawkeye, Dainty Tinsel, and Meatloaf might as well have broken their jaws with the amount of orders they'd given, to the camera crew, to the stylists, the assistants, the texperts, the caterers, or to one another. Nibbles' wardrobe was still a point of contention, and his parents resorted to subterfuge and auctioning bribes to the wardrobe director in between shots.

Oh, here's a picture of Cozy holding a present. He doesn't look posed; the disappointment in his eyes is too stark. He's probably picked up the package only to find out it's empty. It's a prop, not a present. It's an especial shame since they've had the living room all done up since the middle of November - tree, lights, tinsel, nativity, everything but the weather. Nibbles isn't old enough to disappoint yet; this Christmas would be his first, and he hasn't experienced any presents to set his expectations on, unlike Cozy.

"It feels like there's nothing in it," he says.

"Put that back," says Meatloaf. "Oh, you needed a picture of him?" The photographer yanks his head in a direction to indicate Meatloaf needs to move. "Well, make sure he puts it back where he found it. It looked really good where it was."

What a waste of paper. There's no reason they can't have actual presents inside of them. Did they think Cozy couldn't help himself? Did they think he'd open it up right there during the photoshoot? He'd done everything they'd told him to, even putting it back where he found it.

"Those aren't the real presents, are they?" He asks Tinsel. She has just succeeded in pulling Nibbles out of overalls so he can wear a onesie with pastel blue and pink bears all over it. Now she has to humor him so that the next picture he appears in won't sport a sour face. She's rattling her necklace. It works insofar as he doesn't reach for them so he can put them in his mouth, then the antic is wasted, and she'll have to move on to the caramels. Cozy won't be getting any answers out of his mom.

"Dad, if all those presents are empty, when are the real presents coming?"

Hawkeye, who'd been debating with the producer the proper position of a candy cane, notices his middle son standing in an imperfect location. He readjusts his attention accordingly.

"Right away. Reality presents, a man, his wife, and their three sons, son, son, son. Get my boy Nibbles out of that onesie. Who put him in there in the first place? That's what he's crying out loud for. Meatloaf, go get his red overalls, the one with Rudolph on them. See? You can't spell presentable without present."

Maybe they aren't all empty. Maybe the real stuff just happens to be buried beneath those useful props. Sure, most of the Evanroods are sucked up that black hole known as "magazine fame," but surely there'd be some money left over to buy some good stuff you'd find in interesting magazines. So Cozy rummages through the

boxes and shakes them. The first three seemed to be flashy emptiness. That's as far as he gets anyway before some adult says, "Hey kid, that's only for display."

Cozy looks up into the prop stylist's face. He's got his arms full of stockings, but he's waiting for Cozy to put everything back the way he found it before he goes on with his business. Cozy already knows those stockings are full of nothing but packing paper. He'd dug around in them earlier.

"Sure it is," He tosses the empty boxes under the tree. "Everything is."

The prop man gawks at him as he brushes past out of the living room. Don't look at me like that. It's a small house. Not a lot of room to move around here with all that fake Christmas junk you keep piling up.

In the kitchen, Tinsel is removing fake food from the real oven, real off. You can see here it looks like a cherry pie. Who has time to create the stuff that's supposed to go in your mouth when we're so busy perfecting the stuff that goes in your eyes? This must be a set up by Hawkeye. Sure enough, he's in the bedroom. He's got his wife distracted so he can get the screaming Nibbles out of that girly get-up with no interference. Nibbles is already mad that he didn't get to taste Dainty's milky neck morsels, so Meatloaf is right there with him, ready to hand over the next article of clothing. Look at all the other pictures where you can see his face. Look at all that smug luminescence. He's confident he's stored up more favor points than the house has hoarded copies of the magazines featuring the Evanroods.

Meanwhile, Tinsel barely veils her disappointment and distrust. We'll likely see in the January issue of Humana Humana Home Sweet Home Nibbles wearing frilly pink dresses, and it will be her turn to radiate facial triumph while Hawkeye sulks. She withholds what a man really wants until Nibbles is conclusively wearing dresses. He doesn't care. He's been given a choking hazard free facsimile of Tinsel's necklace. He'd wear a ballet tutu just for the chance to put such a thing in his mouth.

But that's a month away. It's December now, the season of benevolence. Cozy hasn't sucked up like Meatloaf has, but he's still entitled to something a little more than stale air this year. The days roll by, and the packages remain as empty as the day they appeared. There's no Santa; Cozy knows better. He doesn't waste hopes writing a letter to some fictional old galoot. He's also careful to be careless what he wishes for, as genies don't exist.

He does write an email, but not to Santa. It's to the editor of Jaw-Drop Neighborhood. Again, this won't appear until the middle of January, but his plea, so heartbreaking that the editors couldn't help but publish it, says, "I know there isn't any Santa or genies, or any magic being who will give you whatever you want, but I'm a child model, and all these magazines my parents and older brother make me pose for aren't paying off. The prop man brought in empty boxes that were wrapped instead of presents. Please, tell my parents to knock it off with this magazine business. If there really were a genie or even a great pumpkin, I'd wish my parents got fired or all their magazines got canceled so they'd finally see life outside of the modeling business."

He clicks "send" before he realizes he's basically told the editor to go out of business. He doesn't have the suck-up experience of his older brother.

It is the night before they take down the decorations. They may rearrange them for another photoshoot, but by the time noon rolls over into evening, the camera crew will take everything back to the warehouse. Cozy lies awake in bed, observing the miniature glow of a ceramic elven music box that would play "Mommy Kissing Santa Clause" if it were on. He's made up his own version, "I watched Meatloaf kissing dad's rear end." Even

during sleepy-bye, his brother's unearned glee over Hawkeye's good graces croak out through smug triumphant snores. When will that bozo learn Dad only ever pays us in exposure?

Not this year. Cody will help himself to a worthwhile salary. There is no genie. There is no Santa Clause. Even if there were, the fumbling old galoot probably bad-listed kids based on any technicality he could find to lighten his workload, the way insurance companies do. He'd deserve his own place on a greater cosmic naughty list. Stale cookies and curdled milk. That's what would show up in Santa's present.

Well, there wasn't a Santa anywhere, so everyone could just forget about the wasted groceries. No, but tonight, Cody Evanrood serves a higher mission, one that bursts through the mazy hedge walls his parents put him in and that his brother polishes. So far, nobody has noticed the steady ribbon of dental floss he tied to the door just before he crawled into bed. The other end leads right up under his pillow. He tugs along it to open the door without getting out of bed, letting a steady stream of celestial yellow light spill into the room. It's already dazzled with scant red and white glitter, shimmered by the nightlight. It shouldn't make that much different to the sleeping Meatloaf. Of course not. He's as snorey as ever. It would mask any noise made by the the next step: the removal of the skateboard from under the bed. It doesn't make noise; their bedroom is carpeted. However, the bunk bed creaks beneath every scoot. It's got its own burden to bear with arthritis. There's no instructing it to pipe down so it doesn't wake the baby.

Nevertheless, Cozy slips out of bed and onto the skateboard without alerting anyone. He tugs himself towards the open door, rows himself outside, and gently closes the door behind him. It's more than a little odd they've left the lights on up in the hallway when there's no one around to take a picture of it. Crystal white and golden yellow intertwine with garlands and holly. The tiny Gabriels limned in the light have horns to their lips, yet they sound no alarm. They are as silent as the night of Jesus's birth.

Cozy wouldn't have been able to pull this off in a two-story house. Nothing sounds a louder alarm than a staircase. Hallways know how to close their mouths. He rolls beneath arched garlands and hing reefs, the kind with simple child-like faces carved into them, mouths stretched wide in uncontainable amazement. A red and silver banner hangs across the end of the hall where it opens up into the kitchen and living room area; snowflakes dangle beneath it as sparkling waves slide up and down as their turn.

The kitchen area has fewer lights; ceramic displays similar to the ones in their bedroom, shed some illumination into the area, but all his attention wanders to the tree. Nutcrackers surround and guard it, dressed for the most formal battlefield Mother Nature can plant, garden, and watch as mankind bullets it to death. The little bayonets they wield was Cozy's saving grace; after all, he owned a pop gun. Dainty Tinsel wanted it tucked handsomely out of sight until Hawkeye reminded her of the arms the nutcrackers bore. Then she had Cozy paint snowmen, and sleds and jello and junk all over it to camouflage its bellicose leanings.

Cozy got embarrassed, so he hid the thing beneath the sofa mattresses. Now it would come in handy. Think fast, wood man! Too late. Good. The cork bursts out and topples the guards, one after another. They aren't in the way anymore. Soon, neither will be the wrapping paper. Tonight, he is executing the granddaddy of naughty-list crimes. After all, he reasons, they aren't presents, they are props. Neatly wrapped props with nothing but air in them. Sorry to ruin your wrap-work, Mrs. Leary, but I have a time trap to escape.

The battle didn't awaken anyone, and neither should the slow but diligent paper tears. Just as expected, the first gift is barren. Cozy tosses it over his shoulder then moves on to the next one. Empty. So begins a pile of

empty wasted boxes of nothing as he rummages through the eight featherweight props and confirms that all the glamor and presentability was on the surface. He turns around to survey the wreckage he'd caused. *There. Put that in Don't You Wish Your Front Room Were Posh Like Mine?*

But the excitement is all over. He's done the deed. Now that he's liberated from the modeling mold, he faces a vast empty void. There's no direction ahead, no signposts, no clear cut road. It frowns him. He doesn't like seeing the rubbish pile. It's all rubbish, everything in the house. He wants to pile the magazines atop it, but that would take too long. Instead he unplugs the tree. There's still the Rudolphian glow from the kitchen. It doesn't reach the pile, though. He takes a blanket, props his chin upon the sofa, and stares straight ahead into the kitchen.

Cozy would prefer as little light as there is sound. All the displays depict people in happier situations than his: children dashing through snow banks before a church, an elderly farm couple celebrating a modest evening around the tree, an office party full of glamor and merry-making, and cheeky snow hares peering out of stockings. Bull. All of it. No real warmth stirred anywhere in those glowing dioramas. That was just what their manufacturers would think warmth looked like. If he weren't so drowsy he'd look for a marker and draw frowns all over everyone. Any real feelings would be misery at being stuck as an inanimate object with your face carved into a permanent grin.

He lets his gaze rest on the table's surface and notices a few silhouettes - a shape and a lump. No, glasses. A pair of glasses. Dad Manly Hawkeye liked to take off his glasses during photoshoots. He thought they undermined his authority. He didn't want any barriers between his hard authoritative stare and a subordinate. Why had he left them on the table, though? Painting frowns on them might be just what he needs to knock sense into him. He can hear it now. "Why is everyone frowning? We're about to take a picture, and I want them to know we cherish our lifestyle."

The other shape, the lump, is what gives him second thoughts. He can't identify it. Its form is not as rigidly defined against the incoming red blossomy glow. It is still, it is taciturn, and it is facing the glasses.

Is it a mouse? He's never seen one this close before. He's never seen one in person. No neighborhood cats were around to show off their trophies, let alone leave them on the Evanrood family table. Pets? The parents wouldn't hear of it. Can you imagine the sheddings they'd have to vacuum five minutes? That was the answer to Meatloaf's first lesson in sucking up after he asked for a dog. Bargaining town to a hamster got him nowhere. Not even the plea, "You can't smell his cage through the magazine," won him the argument. All it got him was more work - work that left the photographers as frustrated as he was, considering Tinsel had him shoot five extra pictures per scene she had her eldest son pose for.

No. The lump isn't in any way associated with a pet. If it really were a mouse, it would be feral. Perhaps here to spread much illness with vast germs. Cozy can't theorize about its preoccupation with Hawkeye's glasses, though. Maybe it has the same idea about inscribing frowns thereupon. Getting up for a closer inspection might startle it and ruin the picture. Now here is something that belongs in a magazine, not this artificially dressed lunchmeat Hawkeye and Tinsel put them through every day.

Cozy recalls the years he used to get presents. Real presents. Not just empty boxes. He got a camera one year. Meatloaf reminded him that it was a clue he was supposed to get; a reminder of his fated career path as a magazine model. Cozy didn't care. He took pictures of whatever made him happy, like the sky, neighbors, toy

store action figures he couldn't yet afford. None of his pictures would show up in *The Home is the Castle*, but they should have. A mouse and eyeglasses silhouetted before a red yule steeple glow; now that was something that deserves to be preserved in a snapshot.

His return down the hall is just as cautious; he doesn't know how fragile a mouse's slumber might be, and if it were already awake, it asks even more silence. The camera lays buried in a drawer amongst other junk; who cares about the organization behind closed drawers when it won't be showing up in *Stately Rich Abodes*? His rummaging, even as slow as he takes it, calls out in a few clicks and clatters.

The noise startles him, and he looks up at Meatloaf. He's stirring, but he doesn't truly wake up until the bed itself groans. Then he sits up. In his haste to assume his nocturnal position, Cozy creates more noise unnatural to that of a boy who has remained in bed all evening. The scampering does not escape Meatloaf's notice. He bends over the bed, much of the brain parts that power his complexion still back in the dream world.

"What," he groans out, "are you up to?"

"Nothing. I'm in bed. Go back to bed, Marty."

He uses his brother's natural name as a way of feigning fatigue. It doesn't work. Even in his barely awakened stupor, the older brother detects far too much crispness to believe Cozy was anything but awake for the past few hours.

Cozy encourages Meatloaf's head to go back to bed where it belongs. He does this by pushing it away with his foot towards the ceiling. For the first few pressure pounds, Meatloaf concedes, but then he remembers his ranking in the family hierarchy as first-born suck-up.

"Get your foot out of my face. Hey, you were awake this whole time, weren't you?"

"What do you care? It won't ruin any of your dumb pictures in *Hoity Toity Homestead*. Leave me alone."

There's some grunting from the cradle. And now Nibbles is in on the heist. "See what you just did? This never would have happened if you'd just stay in bed."

The baby is full on crying now, mourning the eight straight hours of sleep that won't be glued together again.

Everyone hears it. Meatloaf, Dainty Tinsel (the first adult on the scene), shortly followed by Manly Hawkeye, all surround the crib to observe the crying at closer quarters. Cozy doesn't get any closer. What's to see? It's not the first time Nibbles has heralded budding inner turmoil. If anything, this noise give him the perfect cover to dig through that junk drawer. His camera has got to be in there somewhere.

"Tinsel, what are you doing? Trying to smuggle him into that pink pony tot-gown again, are you?"

"I'm doing no such thing!" She has Nibbles out of the crib and over her shoulder. She hasn't struck the bargain yet, but it's only a matter of time before she gets the idea.

"Cozy called me Marty," tattles Meatloaf. He slides in between the two of them for maximal attention, only for Hawkeye to usher his head out of the argument. "What are you pushing out me for? He's the one rebelling, see?"

Hawkeye squeezes all the authority he can into his gaze at his son. "I don't remember letting you out of bed either."

"But Dad-" The cows charge the fields before that barn door can swing closed. The parents drop their quarrel with one another to gawk at Meatloaf. Had he forgotten their stations? He could be sure that more than a few favor points would be swirling down the drain after that.

By this time, the mouse, the original purpose of the camera, was sure to have scampered to sound secret safety in earshot of all the commotion. There protests Marty, attempting to cancel out his slip-up by dropping every fake name he could. "It was Cozy who woke up Nibbles, he wasn't even in bed when I woke up!" There strives Dainty Tinsel, alternating between whispering promises into Nibbles' ear (the kind to dry his waterworks but wouldn't do so, as he didn't speak English yet), debating the allotment of blame Meatloaf tried to evade, and decreeing "stiff itchy monotonous man-clothes" as Nibbles' true distress root to her husband. And there struggles Hawkeye, imbuing as much patriarchal power into controlling one family member as his reserves allowed, only for another Evanrood to step up and strike where he drops his guard.

Finally, there flashes the camera, putting a pause to all vocalizations young and grown. Cozy stands there, admiring the result, a snapshot of something real, something that no wise family would dare submit to any magazine. The Evanroods all look at one another in disillusionment. It was the side to them that they ushered off stage when the cameras were on.

"Well..." reasons Tinsel. "It wasn't like we were hiding anything."

"No..." agrees Hawkeye. "It's not as though our address were on display."

"No. It's not as though our life is once façade frome issue to issue." Nicholas lies dry-eyed against her shoulder. Marty watches. Is he waiting for the reward he submitted? Cody holds his camera. He isn't looking at the picture anymore. Why are they talking like this, Hank and Theresa? Who talks like this? Those with personalities designed for photographs, and photographs alone.

"Why were you all awake anyway?"

Martin had already answered that. It was Cody's turn. He doesn't.

"Well... it's not like..." Hank almost says, "the anticipation of Christmas morning has ever been its own sleeping pill." But he doesn't. What is there to anticipate? Empty boxes? He knows they are empty. Theresa knows. Cody knows, he already held the featherweight props for the pictures.

All that work.

Six minutes later, the Evanroods are lying together in Mom and Dad's bed, stiring up at the ceiling. Angels bearing lanterns watch over them in their vigilance, and the light trickles off the silvery snowflakes that hang around the corners, much like they do in the hallway. They like to pretend they are sugar crystals. The taste of snow is not as sweet, but the sight of it is.

"Perhaps we will join a parade," muses Theresa. "Perhaps we will fling sugar and sprinkles into open mouths, and they'll say, 'my, what a snow we have this year!' Do we know any parades this year?"

"Perhaps we will march up and down the neighborhood with our neighbors," suggests Hank. "Perhaps we will sing out of Caroling hymnals until someone either meets our demands of prune pudding and ham or throws useless footwear at us."

The bed shakes with laughter, and bed sheets lift off then hover down like they are their own snowfall.

"Maybe the presents shouldn't be empty this year," reminds Cody. "They weren't last year, and they weren't empty nany years at all."

"Yes, they shouldn't be empty." Hank runs his fingers through Cody's hair. "They should have action figures and roller skates, race tracks and plastic dinosaurs and electronic trinkets and novelties that make rackets, and make us wonder what we ever bought them for in the first place."

"They should have plastic poptarts," says Theresa. "They should have big cars with no gas but you can fit in and run like the Flintstones, and they should have plastic parents-assembly playgrounds you could get hurt on, and real working toy ovens that we shouldn't let you play with on your own because they get too hot."

Marty pokes Cody. "And glow in the dark crayons, and the kind you can smell, not to mention barking beagles and zombies, trading cards of whatever the hot new show is, and music CDs from bands you might have mentioned once, and movies, and books about wars and battleships or grown-ups who get arrested in the end."

Nobody knew what he was talking about, and yet they all seemed to understand the spirit. "Don't forget the stockings. What do we put in the stockings? There's always candy, but what else should be there?"

Nice little things ought to show up in everyone's stockings this year. Or the moment in bed is nice enough, a refreshing respite from the pose-and-picture circumstances they'd gotten themselves into all year long. We won't know what the result of it all will be. Maybe the January issue of *Every American Family* will give us clues, or maybe it won't. It really doesn't need to. It's the Evanrood life. It doesn't need to be everyone's business.