

LAWns...

By Christopher Johnson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *'Lawns' is just plain old franks and coleslaw fiction but the hot dogs are cooked to perfection and the salad is delicious. Everything that is needed to make this story work is done with aplomb. It is so matter of fact in fact, so gosh darn Main Street we almost don't see the picnic table of literary abundance. Killer lines like...*

'The more they drank, the more they talked with exclamation points.'

'A scream that pierced the air and split it into pieces.'

And our personal favourite...

The toilet sounded like a dragon devouring little children. *(Heh, heh)*

The 'voice' of the 14 year old narrator is as good as it gets—a pitch perfect blend of coltish swagger and adolescent naiveté that never once veers off the rails. But gaga as all this is, we feel the Oscar for Best Supporting Character really must go to (the envelope, please) Trixie!

There, in the middle of the floor, was a pile of dog poop. Not just one or two little droppings, but an untidy ragged pile. It was the richest brown I'd ever seen. A little mountain of manure. A fountain of feces. A cupola of crap. A wallow of waste. A stanchion of stool. An excess of excretion. A bowlful of BM. It was unbelievable that a little dog like Trixie could produce such a big pile.

A friendly, feisty, deceptively well written backyard mud sling that delivers and then some. Pass the Tabasco, please.

Five stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for love of the language):

Dad had black hair with slices of gray. He parted it on the right and then greased it up so much that even an earthquake couldn't muss a single hair on his head. He had a dimple to the left of his mouth. Mom told me once after she had a drink or two that she married Dad because of the dimple. There must have been more to it than that. But that's what she told me. So I guess I was the result of a dimple.

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The lawn--it was Dad's pride and joy. Every Saturday, he'd be out there, mowing it, slaving over it. And what a piece of art the finished product was! As manicured as a crewcut. Straight, flat, perfectly rectangular. And those edges! Dad used the edger to cut a straight line—an even, narrow gap between the lawn and the sidewalk. It was as if each blade of grass had been planted separately. You could put a bedcover over the lawn, and it would be spectacularly flat. You could play pool on it.

Every Saturday all summer long, Dad and the other fathers on our block would be out there, mowing their lawns. They'd stop their work and compare fertilizers, mulches, whether to aerate, when to aerate, whether to pick up the clippings or leave them down as mulch for the grass. These were very important matters.

On that particular Saturday, Dad made sure to mow the lawn because Mr. and Mrs. Robards, who lived halfway down the block, were coming to dinner. I helped him. I did the edging and then swept the clippings that had flown onto the sidewalk back onto the lawn. After we were done, I happened to step out on our front porch and look at the lawn. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I started wondering what the heck was going on beneath that beautiful flat green surface. I imagined this chaos of worms and insects and roots and soil. The insects were grinding through the soil and fighting one another. They were

fighting for space. It was brutal. It was cruel. But somehow it all ended up in this real beautiful lawn. How the heck did that happen, I wondered.

Mom was making a dinner of roast beef and potatoes and corn on the cob and rolls and cherry pie. It was surprising that they were having the Robards over. After all, they didn't entertain all that much. They were kind of all wrapped up in themselves.

Sometimes I would walk down our block and look at the houses. They were mostly colonials, but there were some Chicago bungalows and ranches mixed in. As I walked down the block, I wondered what was going on inside those houses. It was like my imagination ran away with me. Were the people who lived in the houses using drugs? Did they drink too much? Did husbands beat up their wives? Were the husbands or wives having affairs? Were they having parties where everyone put house keys in a jar to see who would go home with who?

I know—pretty weird stuff for a fourteen-year-old kid to be wondering about. But I couldn't help myself. That was the stuff I found interesting.

The Robardses were about as different from Dad and Mom as could be. Mom wore dresses around the house when she cleaned. The dresses flounced out as she vacuumed. Then she sat down and had a Pall Mall and took a break from all the cleaning.

Dad had black hair with slices of gray. He parted it on the right and then greased it up so much that even an earthquake couldn't muss a single hair on his head. He had a dimple to the left of his mouth. Mom told me once after she had a drink or two that she married Dad because of the dimple. There must have been more to it than that. But that's what she told me. So I guess I was the result of a dimple.

Like I said, the Robardses were different. First of all, they were jocks. Both of them had grown up in Iowa. Mr. Robards, whose name was Rip, had been the star halfback on his high school football team. He bragged to us kids all the time how he'd scored fifty-something touchdowns his senior year. He had arms like sausages and a thick belly and a bald head bordered by frizzy hair. When he worked in the front yard, he sometimes took off his shirt, and hair traveled down his back like a beaver pelt.

Mrs. Robards, whose name was Terri, had been a volleyball player. She had muscular arms and a strong, sturdy face. In the summer, she put on a good tan from lying in the back yard in the chaise lounge. She soaked in the sun while she read *McCall's* and smoked Chesterfields and slowly drank gin and tonics.

I'd see her in the back yard when I'd go to call on Charlie or Kip. She'd be wearing a bikini. She wasn't half-bad looking. She'd offer me a lemonade. Then, with a wink, she'd ask me if I wanted her to add something extra to the lemonade, and then she'd pour a little gin in there and then we'd chit-chat about baseball. "That Santo," she'd say, "he's got a nice ass." She'd giggle and clink her glass against mine and say, "Ricky, here's to you. May you have many children!" Whatever that meant.

Mr. Robards worked for the city of Elm Park, which was just outside Chicago. He was a water engineer. He'd go around and fix the pipes and sewers in the town. Mrs. Robards worked as a part-time secretary for a small company in town. Meanwhile, Dad had his job as the operations manager for Avalon Office Supplies, which was headquartered in downtown Chicago. Mom had her hands full being mother to me and my sister Maureen, who was eight.

As the time approached for Mr. and Mrs. Robards to arrive, Mom and Dad just about went crazy with nervous energy. They told me to vacuum the downstairs. I did it, but then Dad said, “You missed some dust balls in the corners when you vacuumed in the family room.”

“Well,” I said, “they ain’t going to go in there, Dad. They’re gonna be in the living room and the dining room.”

“Don’t talk back to me,” he snapped. I could see his teakettle start to boil.

Meanwhile, Mom was in the kitchen. She started to make a salad. While she was peeling the cucumbers, she skinned her finger and started to bleed. “Damn it!” she muttered. “Oh, Christ! Ricky! Go get me a Band-Aid!” Like it was the worst crisis ever in Western civilization. She sat down and put the Band-Aid on. I thought she was going to start crying.

Finally the doorbell rang. Mom was wearing a pretty pink bouncy dress and smelled like flowers. Dad wore black pants and a striped shirt that he’d just bought at Brooks Brothers. The Robardses strolled in. Mr. Robards was wearing blue jeans and a flowery tropical shirt that he must have bought in Hawaii. Mrs. Robards was wearing tight jeans and a halter top, and a Chesterfield dangled from her lips like she was Humphrey Bogart.

Mrs. Robards was hanging onto a leash. At the end of the leash was their dog, Trixie. Dad and Mom looked at each other. Mrs. Robards said, “You don’t mind that we brought Trixie, do you? She gets *so* lonely when we leave her alone.” Trixie was a cocker spaniel. She jumped up and down and barked as if she recognized us. Dad and Mom looked at each other again.

Mom and Dad introduced Mr. Robards and Mrs. Robards to us kids. The Robardses knew us already, so I didn't know why they did that. Just one of those things adults do. Meanwhile, Trixie kept leaping up and down like a pogo stick, and she kept barking. Mrs. Robards said, "Don't mind her. She'll settle down."

Mom and Dad looked at each other again. Dad shook his head. Then he turned to us and barked, "Don't you children want to watch TV?" So we skedaddled out of the way. Except I hid out in the dining room so I could listen to what was going on and learn something about the mysterious world of adults.

They all got drinks. Mr. Robards had a beer. Mrs. Robards had a Scotch on the rocks. Ma had a vodka tonic. Dad had a gin and tonic. Dad handed them their drinks. Trixie barked at him and bounded up and down like *she* was expecting a drink. Dad smiled in this lame kind of way at Mr. Robards and Mrs. Robards. "Shall we take Trixie out into the back yard?" he said.

Mrs. Robards said, "Oh, she'll be fine here. She likes being with people."

Mr. Robards looked at her and then turned to Dad. He said, "Artie, that's a great idea! Let's let her play in the back yard."

Dad hollered my name. I came running from my hiding spot in the dining room. Dad walked across the living room, yanking Trixie along on her leash like he was going to strangle her. "Take her out to the backyard, will you?" I took the end of the leash and walked Trixie into the kitchen and toward the back door. Dad walked with me. When we got into the kitchen, he turned to me and said, "The goddam dog is gonna trample all the flowers in the back yard! I just know it. Goddam dogs!" I looked at him. I took Trixie out

to the back yard, took off her leash, and let her run around. I came back to my hiding spot in the dining room.

I peaked around the corner of the wall separating the dining room from the living room. Mrs. Robards leaned back in the sofa and drank her Scotch and lit a Chesterfield. Ma lit a Pall Mall. “Don’t you wish you could quit, Terri?” Mom asked,

“Listen, hon,” Mrs. Robards said, “I like smoking and I ain’t gonna quit, no matter how many quacks tell me it’s no good for me.” She took a deep drag and then did a French inhale, which I had to admit was sexy even to my fourteen-year-old eyes. She looked at Dad. “You’re looking very fit, Artie,” she said. “Do you work out?”

“Oh, no,” he said, with kind of a nervous smile. “Oh, no. I don’t do anything but mow the lawn and clean out the gutters.”

“Well, you are *very* fit,” Mrs. Robards said.

Mr. Robards looked at Mrs. Robards. “You never say that about me,” he said.

“Well, I don’t have to say it to you, honey.” She rubbed him on his right arm, right where “Semper Fi” was tattooed.

Mr. Robards looked at Mrs. Robards and shook his head and took a swig of his beer. He turned to Dad. “Artie,” he said, “your lawn is looking great.”

“Thanks a lot, Rip,” Dad said.

“I can’t get mine to do a goddam thing,” Mr. Robards said. “All it is is crabgrass. I put down fertilizer and everything, but it doesn’t do a thing.”

“Well,” Dad said, “when we moved in here, we had crabgrass. I hired landscapers to come in and tear it all out and put down band-new sod. Since then it’s been practically perfect.”

Mrs. Robards said, "Artie, you are very enterprising." She smiled at him.

"Honey," Ma said, "can you please get me another drink?"

"Why, certainly, Marge," Dad said. "Can I get another libation for anyone else?"

"You can fill me up," Mrs. Robards said. Dad went over and took the glass from her hand, and she gave him a great big grin.

"Well," he stuttered, "g-glad to oblige." He started to go out to the kitchen.

"Hey, how about me, Artie?" Mr. Robards said. "I'm practically dying of thirst over here!"

"Oh, of course," Dad said, even more flustered now.

When he came back with the drinks, Mr. Robards said, "How the hell much did it cost to re-sod the entire lawn, if you don't mind my asking?"

Dad thought for a moment. "Oh, a couple thousand, I guess."

Rip whistled. "Hmm, must be nice."

Ma started another Pall Mall and said, "Don't you men ever get tired of talking about your lawns?"

"No. Never," Dad said, "There is so much to talk about. Fertilizers and worms and all that." They all laughed.

There was a silence. It was a silence like I imagined in Antarctica, where the ice and the glaciers and the penguins were the only things that existed. Mom and Dad and Mr. Robards and Mrs. Robards shifted in their seats. They all took long belts from their glasses.

Maureen came into the room. She had on a pink dress that shone like a neon sign. Her head was topped out like an ice cream cone by a pink ribbon that was wrapped

vertically around her hair to keep it in place. She wore this sly look that I knew very well. She asked, “Can I bring Trixie indoors to see what kinds of tricks she can do?”

Mrs. Robards said, “Oh, Trixie does all kinds of tricks! That’s why we named her Trixie!” Everyone laughed. “No, really. That really is why we named her Trixie. She’s been able to do tricks ever since the day we brought her home from the kennel. She’s the smartest dog anyone’s ever seen!” Like no one had ever said that about their dog before.

“I can tell!” Maureen said. “I can tell that Trixie is very smart! Can I bring her in, Dad? Can I please?”

Dad looked at Mom, who nodded. “OK,” he said to Maureen. “You can bring her in, but watch her carefully.”

Mrs. Robards said, “Oh, you don’t have to worry about Trixie. She’s very well behaved.”

“Yippee!” Maureen screamed, and she jumped up and down. She ran into the dining room, where I was hiding. She looked at me. “What are you? . . .” she started to say.

“Shut up!” I whispered. “I’m just keeping an eye on things.”

Maureen kept on going through the dining room and into the kitchen and out into the back yard. In a moment, she led Trixie through the kitchen and into the dining room. I’d never seen a dog more excited. She leaped up and down against Maureen’s dress and barked--“Arf! Arf! Arf!”--and the barks rattled through the house. “Oh, I wish I could get a dog!” Maureen cried. She ran with Trixie into the family room. “Sit, Trixie!” she screamed. “Good dog! Roll over, Trixie! Good dog!”

I turned my attention back to events in the living room. Mr. Robards was saying, “Terri and me—we played 18 today. Over at Tam O’Shanter. That’s a beautiful course, especially for a public course. Talk about grass! They do a beautiful job on the grass. I wish I could get my grass to look like that. All that damn crabgrass.”

“Oh, is that right?” Dad said. “How was it? The golfing, I mean.”

Mr. Robards shrugged his shoulders. “It was all right.”

Mrs. Robards took a long drink of her Scotch. She said, “It was more than all right. It was great! I beat ol’ Rip! I beat him, 88 strokes to 90 strokes. I beat Mr. Star Football Player who scored a hundred touchdowns in a season.” She laughed and rubbed Mr. Robards’s right arm, right on that Semper fi tattoo. I swear, she was pretty darn interesting.

Mr. Robards pulled his arm away from her. “You got lucky,” he said.

Mom said, “What does 88 to 90 mean?”

Dad shook his head and turned to Mom and explained, “In golf, the whole point is to put the ball into the cup in as few shots as possible. The lowest scores wins.”

“What’s a cup?” Mom asked.

“I’ll explain the whole thing later,” Dad said.

Mr. and Mrs. Robards just stared at Mom. Mrs. Robards said, “You mean, hon, that you’ve never played golf before? It’s really good exercise, and you’re out in the fresh air and everything. And then once in a while you beat your hubby and take a step forward for the ladies!”

Mom said, “I don’t have time to play golf, what with the children under foot and all.”

Mr. Robards looked at Dad. "Say, Artie," he asked. "Do you play?"

Dad took a long drink of his gin and tonic. "No," he said. "I don't play any more. I used to play, but not any more. I was pretty good. I usually shot in the eighties."

"Well," Mr. Robards said, "We should play some time."

Mom said, "He doesn't have time to play."

That brought back the Antarctic silence, like everyone had suddenly traveled to the ends of the earth. They all took long sips of their drinks. Mom rocked back and forth in her chair. Everyone could hear the sounds of Trixie yipping and yapping in the family room and Maureen's screams of delight. "Arf! Arf!" Trixie yapped.

Finally, after what seemed like forever in that frozen silence, Dad piped up. "Does anyone need another drink?"

Mr. Robards said, "You bet! We're practically dying of thirst here!"

Dad got up to go out into the kitchen. Mom got up from her chair. "Excuse me," she said. "I've got to go check on the roast."

I tiptoed from one spying spot to another, where I could do surveillance on Mom and Dad in the kitchen. Mom yanked the roast out of the oven and started making gravy. She clattered the pots and pans while she muttered to Dad, who shook his head and patted her on the arm. She checked the green beans and the potatoes on the top of the stove. The potatoes were ready. She emptied the water, took out the mixer, and started mashing the potatoes like she was mad at them.

Dad finished making the drinks and traipsed back into the living room. He handed the beer to Mr. Robards, whose hand wrapped itself around the beer glass like a bear's paw. Dad handed the Scotch to Mrs. Robards. As she took the drink from Dad, she

appeared to accidentally touch Dad's wrist. "Thank you so very much, Artie," she said. "I really appreciate it."

Mr. Robards looked at Mrs. Robards and said, "Knock it off, Terri."

"Oh, don't be so touchy," she said and puffed on her Chesterfield.

Dad ran for cover back to his easy chair. We could all hear Mom clattering in the kitchen as she mixed the potatoes for what seemed like an hour. "R-r-r-r!" the mixer whined, sounding like a jet landing in the kitchen. Meanwhile, the sounds from the family room traveled through the air. "Arf! Arf! Arf!"

"Oh what a smart dog you are!" Maureen screamed. "Good Trixie! Good Trixie!"

I turned my attention back to the living room. Mom had finished with the potatoes and came back into the living room and sat back down in her rocking chair. She had her vodka tonic with her. She was back to being happy—maybe from killing the potatoes. "Well, gang!" she said. "We're almost ready! Another ten minutes for the rolls."

"Sounds fabulous!" Mrs. Robards said. The more they drank, they more they talked with exclamation marks.

Mrs. Robards leaned forward on the sofa. "Boy, have I got some great gossip," she said. Mr. Robards, Mom, and Dad all leaned toward her. "You know the Costellos, who live over on Westmont?"

"Well," Dad said, "I think we know who you mean. We don't really know them. I mean, how can you know everyone?" He turned to Mom. "Do you know who she means, Marge?"

Mom nodded. "Yes, I know who they mean." You could tell she didn't like the Costellos very much.

“*Well,*” Mrs. Robards said, “They’re getting *divorced!*”

“Really!” Dad said.

“Oh,” Mom said.

Mr. Robards took another swig of beer and shook his head and grinned. “Yeah,” he said. “I guess she caught him fucking someone he shouldn’t have been fucking!”

Mom and Dad—they didn’t say a thing. They just stared at Mr. Robards. I thought their eyeballs were going to pop out of their heads. Mr. Robards took another swig of beer and shook his head. “Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time!”

“For Christ’s sake, Rip!” Mrs. Robards practically screeched. “Don’t use language like that in mixed company!”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Terri!” he said. “We’re all adults here. What the hell are you going to say? I just said what the guy was doing. It’s too bad and all, but it happened just the way I said.” He looked at Mom and Dad. “You’re not offended are you?”

Mom and Dad just stared at him.

Mrs. Robards bawled, “For God’s sake, honey, I think you’ve had enough! You don’t go into people’s houses and use that language!” She yanked her eyes toward Mom and Dad. “I think maybe he’s had one too many. I’m terribly sorry. Time to turn off the spigot. No more beer for Mr. Football Hero Who Scored Eighty Touchdowns in a Single Game!”

“Oh, well,” Dad said. “It’s not like we’ve never heard it before.”

Mom just stared at the Robardses. Finally she said in that voice from Antarctica, “I think the rolls are ready.” She got up to go into the kitchen. I could hear her heels clatter against the linoleum floor.

Just at that moment, we heard a scream like a demon from the family room. From Maureen. A scream that pierced the air and split it into pieces. “Mommy!!!” she screeched. “Daddy!!!”

We all rushed into the family room—Mom, Dad, Mr. Robards, Mrs. Robards, me. She pointed toward the floor. We all looked down.

There, in the middle of the floor, was a pile of dog poop. Not just one or two little droppings, but an untidy ragged pile. It was the richest brown I’d ever seen. A little mountain of manure. A fountain of feces. A cupola of crap. A wallow of waste. A stanchion of stool. An excess of excretion. A bowlful of BM. It was unbelievable that a little dog like Trixie could produce such a big pile.

Mom, Dad, Mr. Robards, Mrs. Robards, me—we all stared in stunned silence at the gift that Trixie had given us on the family room floor. We all stared at the pile as if it had the power to freeze us. Trixie was in the corner, sniffing at the wall-to-wall carpet, which Sears had recently installed. The four adults stared, as if staring could make the pile of poop disappear. For once, Trixie was quiet. She knew what she had done, that’s for sure.

Dad’s eyes squinted, and his face rumbled black and his jaws clenched like a steel trap. He glowered at Mr. and Mrs. Robards. “Look at what your goddam dog did!” he shrieked. “Look at what your lowlife bitch of a dog did! Why the hell did you bring her

over here in the first place? Who the hell brings a dog to a dinner party? I mean, for God's sake!"

Mr. Robards turned his massive upper body toward Dad, and I grew frightened. Scared for my old man. Mr. Robards wore a demon-bear look in his eyes. He said, "Now wait just a goddam minute here, Anderson! It's just a little pile of dog shit. We can clean it up in seconds!"

Mom was paralyzed. She stared at the pile in the middle of the family room. "We just got this carpet from Sears!" she cried in anguish, as if one of us kids had just been run over by a car. "We just had it installed! Now your dog has pooped all over it! Like it was the great outdoors! Now the carpet—our beautiful new carpet that we just got from Sears and that we paid good money for—now the carpet is ruined!" She brushed away a tear from the corner of her eye like it was a dead fly. Maureen was standing next to me. She looked up at me, and she was starting to cry. She grasped my hand in hers.

Mrs. Robards shook her head and walked over to the corner where Trixie was. She picked up Trixie and gave her a little paddling on her butt. "Bad Trixie!" she said in a baby voice. "Trixie, you did a very very bad thing, pooping on the Andersons' beautiful new carpet!" Trixie looked up at Mrs. Robards with her saucer-like brown eyes and whimpered, as if she were truly sorry for what she had done. She even looked at Mom and Dad as if she were begging forgiveness.

Mom looked at me. In a voice just above a whisper, she said, "Ricky, take your sister out of here! Take her upstairs!"

We left the family room. But instead of going upstairs, we ducked into the corner of the dining room and peaked into the family room, where we could witness the strange adult things going on. Maureen kept holding my hand real tight-like.

Mr. Robards said, “For God’s sake, it’s only a little pile of crap, after all! It’s not like it’s the end of the world!”

Dad looked at Mr. Robards with electric eyes. “Only a pile of crap!” he bellowed. “Look at it! It’s spreading!” The little pile looked as if it were advancing, like it was alive, like in that movie *The Blob*. Dad howled, “It’s more than a little pile of poop! It’s shit, right in the middle of our family room! It’s defacing our home! I knew this would happen when you brought that goddam dog to our house! I mean, what kind of an idiot brings a goddam dog to a dinner party!?”

Mom and Mrs. Robards stared at Dad and shrank back from him. “Wait just a minute, Anderson!” Mr. Robards shrieked. “Just settle down, buddy! It was an accident, pure and simple. It’ll be easy to clean up. Terri, go get a paper towel!”

Dad glowered at Mr. Robards. “Why did you bring that goddam dog here anyway!? I just *knew* it was going to shit all over the place!”

“Honey,” Mom squeaked.

Mr. Robards faced Dad square-on and moved closer to him. “Because it’s my goddam right,” he said. “I have a right to take my goddam dog anywhere I want to. It’s my right as an American!”

Dad’s jaw screwed up even tighter. He stared at Mr. Robards with the meanest, angriest look I’d ever seen. He clenched both his hands into fists. I thought Dad’s entire body was going to explode. The two of them moved closer to each other. Mr. Robards

tightened his hands into fists like they were coiled with steel. I tightened my grasp of Maureen's hand. Even Trixie was staring at Dad and Mr. Robards. The short, frizzled hair around Mr. Robards's bald spot stood on end. Dad's and Mr. Robards's faces were two inches apart. Their faces were red. They stared at each other with animal hatred. They looked like apes.

Dad started to raise his fist. Mom stepped toward him. She put her hand on his shoulder. "Honey," she said, "we can clean it up."

Dad looked at Mom, and he suddenly remembered who he was. He pulled his face away from Mr. Robards's by an inch, two inches. He looked away from Mr. Robards. "Sure," he said to Mom. "You're right. It's just a pile of shit. We can clean it up."

But Mr. Robards—he kept staring at Dad—staring at him with hatred blazing his eyes. He was like a block of granite. His fists were clenched, and his face burned like the inside of a volcano. Mrs. Robards and Mom went into the kitchen. They didn't even notice Maureen and me standing in the corner of the dining room. They came back with a newspaper, a dustpan, and a bucket of water with some Mr. Clean in it. Mom bent down and used the dustpan to shove the poop onto the newspaper. She took the poop-laden newspaper to the downstairs bathroom and plopped the poop into the toilet. We heard the toilet flush like a monster swallowing a tiny animal.

Mr. Robards hadn't budged. He was frozen, his jaws caught in a vise. Dad bent down and used the water with the Mr. Clean and a sponge to clean the spot where Trixie had left her gift. He scrubbed and scrubbed until only a faint mark was left. Mom took the bucket with the dirty water in it into the bathroom and emptied it into the toilet. The toilet sounded like a dragon eating little children.

Mom, Dad, and Mrs. Robards all looked down where the poop had been. There was still a faint dark spot where Trixie had left her treasure. “I can still see it—the remains of the crap!” Dad moaned.

“We’ll keep cleaning it until it goes away completely,” Mom said.

Meanwhile, Trixie was back to her rambunctious self. She bounced up and down. “Arf! Arf! Arf!” Up and down, up and down, like an overheated molecule. “Arf! Arf!”

Mrs. Robards turned to Mom and Dad. Her face was tough and leathery and sunburned, but something had softened in her. “I’m so so sorry this happened,” she cried. “I’m really really sorry.” Tiny tears crept like insects from the corners of her eyes. All Mom and Dad did was look at her. They didn’t say a thing.

They turned to Mr. Robards. He hadn’t said a word. He was still standing there, his fists clenched, his jaw set in a vise, his eyes dark and mysterious. He was frozen. “Rip!” Mrs. Robards pleaded. “Let’s go home. Let’s go home, for God’s sake! Let’s get the hell out of here!” She put the leash on Trixie and grabbed hold of Mr. Robards and turned him toward the front door. He was like a granite statue, completely set in stone. He moved in slow steps toward our front door as Mrs. Robards guided him. Anger still flamed his eyes. He shuffled toward the door like a robot.

They walked out the front door. Mrs. Robards waved to Mom and Dad, but they didn’t wave back. Mrs. Robards guided Mr. Robards down the front walk, by our beautiful green lawn, the lawn that Dad took such fabulous care of. The green of the lawn shimmered and shone like a palace built of emeralds. Every blade of grass gleamed. Mr. and Mrs. Robards reached the end of the front walk and turned left. Trixie yanked on the leash, pulling them forward. Mrs. Robards guided Mr. Robards—the big granite statue.

His fists were clenched in anger, his eyes pitiless, his jaw in a vise. She led him, and he shambled along.

Suddenly Mom screamed, “The rolls!” She raced into the kitchen. She yanked open the oven door. Smoke poured out of the oven—smoke like a three-alarm fire. She put on her oven mitts and pulled out the baking sheet. The rolls were like charcoal. They were black and smoky and totally burned.

Dad came in. They both looked at the rolls and then at each other. I thought they were going to start crying or yelling or fainting or cursing. But they didn’t. They didn’t! They just stared at each other. And then, totally out the blue, they did something that I hadn’t expected at all. They started laughing. Not just chuckles, but out-and-out guffawing, howling, roaring, sniggering, and then exploding with more laughter. They looked at each other and howled some more. I’d never seen them like this. Never! It was like they were losing their minds. “Well!” Mom finally howled, “I guess we won’t be having rolls tonight!” Dad looked at her and burst into more laughter. They laughed until their faces turned red and their eyes exploded.

I smiled, too, but I couldn’t quite see what was so funny. I left and walked back to the front-door entrance. I stepped out onto the porch. I stood there for a while, looking at the lawn, studying it, wondering about it. Then I watched as Mrs. Robards slowly guided Mr. Robards back to their house—to their house that sat halfway down the block from ours. Trixie was leaping up and down, going “Arf! Arf!” as if she had no conscience, no memory of the horrible thing she had done to our house. By now, Mr. and Mrs. Robards were little more than small dot-people in the distance. Mrs. Robards opened the front

door and gently guided Mr. Robards into their house with all the crabgrass in the front yard. They disappeared into the house. They were gone—vanished—dissolved.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *“Lawns” was based on an actual incident that occurred when I was growing up, but with a great deal of exaggeration. As I was writing, the most important thing was to capture events from the perspective of a kid. I’m interested in young people, and I write about them a lot and especially their perspectives toward the adult world. The stories usually grow out of my own experiences or those of people I know. When you’re young, things affect you. It’s all happening for the first time, so things dig into you and stay there. That’s what I like to explore. Influences? Probably Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway--the way in which they transmuted everyday experience into compelling fiction. I reread Winesburg, Ohio every other year or so.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: I’m a writer based in the Chicago area. I’ve done a lot of different stuff in my life. I’ve been a merchant seaman, a high school English teacher, a corporate communications writer, a textbook editor, an educational consultant, and a free-lance writer. I’ve published short stories, articles, and essays in *The Progressive*, *Snowy Egret*, *Earth Island Journal*, *Chicago Wilderness*, *American Forests*, *Chicago Life*, *Across the Margin*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *The Literary Yard*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Spillwords Press*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Sweet Tree Review*, and other journals and magazines. In 2006, the University of New Hampshire Press published my first book, *This Grand and Magnificent Place: The Wilderness Heritage of the White Mountains*. My second book, which I co-authored with a prominent New Hampshire forester named David Govatski, was *Forests for the People: The Story of America’s Eastern National Forests*, published by Island Press in 2013. His story **Downtown Cool** appeared in Issue 7.