

# Green Lawns

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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1.

One thing about being up here is that I can see how green the lawns really are. Waxman's. Evans's. Taylor's. All clipped and manicured. All a rich, kelly green.

When I hear the sprinklers running, that's when it's hardest on me. What I wouldn't do, what I wouldn't change, if only they'd give me a chance, if only they'd let me down and give me a taste of that water. That's the hardest thing, or course, the lack of water. You stop feeling the hunger pretty soon, because the thirst is so much bigger.

My throat feels like it's made of paper.

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2.

The first time Waxman mentioned the lawn to me, it seemed innocent enough. We were standing at his back yard barbecue, watching the burgers grill while his wife made a salad and Waxman's kids played on the jungle gym and swings. Waxman had a huge yard-- two standard lots, he told me-- and the biggest house on the block. The backyard play area was equipped like a small park.

"Well, Dick," he said, "I guess you're just about settled in enough to start giving some attention to that lawn of yours. It sure could use some water and a trim."

I had introduced myself deliberately as Richard. I hated any shortened version of my name. For the sake of amiability, though, I didn't bother to correct him, especially since, given the lush state of his lawn, he wasn't going to like what I had to say about my own lawn.

"To tell the truth," I told him, "I'm planning on just letting the lawn go."

"Let it go?" Waxman looked up from flipping the burgers. He smiled an uncertain smile like he knew I was joking, but he didn't get the joke. "What do you mean, let it go?"

"I mean just that. Not cut it. Let it grow as tall and ragged as it wants to in the spring, and then when the summer heat comes, cut it once and let it turn brown."

"Brown?" Waxman forced a laugh. I had to be kidding. "Let your lawn turn brown? On purpose?"

"Lawns don't make any sense in this part of the country," I told him. "There's not enough water to go around with the west growing like it is, so I thought I'd do my share for conservation. They need water on the plains for farming more than we need it for watering lawns."

Waxman kept the smile, but it was starting to look pasted on. His face was sweaty. I noticed he was wearing a white t-shirt under his short-sleeve dress shirt. That had to be hot. My grandfather was the only person I knew who still wore an undershirt all the time, no matter how hot the season. "But surely," Waxman said, "the covenants..."

"This is an old neighborhood," I told him. "The covenants expired ten years ago. I checked. No offense, John, but I wouldn't move into a neighborhood where I was required to have a perfectly green lawn."

From the other side of the house came the faint jingling of bells, and Waxman's kids, two boys and a girl, jumped out of their swings and sprinted toward him.

"Father," said the eldest boy, "may we have money for ice cream?" *Father?* I thought. *May we?* What planet did these kids come from?

Waxman smiled a different smile, now. A paternal smile. "Very well," he said, taking some change from his pocket. "If you put it in the Frigidaire for *after* dinner."

The boys, I noticed, both wore undershirts like their father.

"An ice cream truck with bells," I said. "That's a lot nicer than those things they have now that belt out recorded music."

Waxman nodded absently. He gave his son a two quarters. The kids ran toward the front of the house.

"They aren't going to get much for fifty cents!" I said.

"Bill Taylor-- have you met the Taylors? No? Bill Taylor does the ice cream as sort of a hobby. He keeps the prices down. It's a neighborhood tradition." Waxman started to move the hamburgers from the grill to a plate.

"Green lawns are a neighborhood tradition, too, Dick." I didn't want to turn this into an argument. After all, I had just moved in, and I had only met Waxman two days ago. So I said, "Well, *your* lawn is certainly lush."

"Yes, it is. Thank you. Keeping it up means a lot to me."

"And I like your landscaping, too. Those are beautiful trees along the back fence." I squinted at them. "Is that a tree house for the kids I see in one of them?"

"No," Waxman said. "That's not for the kids. Say, let's get these burgers on the table before they get cold!"

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3.

Over the next several days, the neighborhood wives kept coming over to meet my wife. Each one brought a cake or a casserole. They were surprised to learn I was single. "This has always been such a family neighborhood," said more than one.

The lawn was looking a little drought-shocked, and each one of those women commented on it.

"It's so important," one of them said, "to keep things in this neighborhood looking just so."

The other thing they commented on was their surprise at finding me home during the day. I had to explain over and over that I was a painter, that I had set up a studio in the house.

They all wore dresses. Ordinarily, I wouldn't have noticed a thing like that, but Waxman and his undershirts had made me start noticing how people dressed. All the women, and even the little girls, wore dresses. No slacks. No jeans.

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4.

One afternoon I was staring at a blank canvas, trying to see where the paint wanted to go, when I heard the bells of the ice cream truck. Only, when I looked out the window, it wasn't a truck at all. It was tricycle contraption with a white icebox attached to the front of it, and a man in a white suit-- Bill Taylor, I supposed-- was pedaling the thing down the street.

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5.

There were spots where the soil was still moist, and the grass grew green and ever taller in those places. But most of the lawn had turned to fine straw. The grass was only dormant, I knew. It would come back with the early autumn snow, and with the following spring. And that was fine. I didn't mind its being green, just so long as I didn't waste water to make it that way.

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6.

Bob Evans, the guy next door, had hardly introduced himself before he started to tell me how important it was for me to water my lawn. Letting the lawn go wasn't something I could choose to do, he told me. What I did affected my neighbors.

"Property values?" I said, prepared to smirk.

But it went beyond that, according to Evans. It was something very important about the character of the neighborhood. Certain things had to be just so.

Evans had just come from work. Under his dress shirt, I could see the outline of his white sleeveless undershirt.

"Look," I said. "Next year, if I have a little money, I'll tear out the lawn and landscape with rocks and gravel and drought resistant plants. It'll look great."

"It won't fit in," Evans said. "Don't you want to fit in?" He was smiling as he said that, but there was something artificial about his smile. Or about his face. He was balding, and I could see the shape of his skull. Somehow, his face looked like a mask painted over it.

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7.

The cars. I don't know why I hadn't noticed it earlier, but everyone in the neighborhood drove a vintage car. But they were all about the same vintage. Bob Evans drove a maroon Rambler sedan, and his wife had a baby blue Rambler station wagon. The Waxmans had a T-bird and a station wagon-- a Chevy with wood panels. Larry and Theresa Smith, across the street from me, an older couple, had an old-style Buick Roadmaster.

In fact, my car was the only one on the street made after 1963.

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8.

I'd walk around the neighborhood after lunch, thinking about my current project, and I'd catch snatches of what the kids were shouting in their back yards. Things like, Gee Whiz. Neat-o. Boogerface. Shazam. Gosh.

Never: Far out. Rad. Kowabunga. Shithead. Asshole. None of what I was used to hearing from children.

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9.

One evening, I heard this sound of tinny, canned music. And voices. Angry voices. I looked out my window to see an ice cream truck, the kind I was used to, stopped on the corner.

My neighbors were all around the truck. Some were shaking their fists. Some were yelling at the bewildered driver.

"Get out of here!" I heard Bill Taylor yell. "We don't want your kind around here!" But there was more to this than a matter of competition. The other people out there were yelling the same sort of things.

And they all kept looking, as they shouted, from the ice cream truck to my house. To my lawn.

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10.

Waxman came to my house one evening, agitated, impatient. "You want to see what comes of not keeping your lawn up? You want to see it?" he said.

I had brushes to clean before they dried, but he was so close to panic that I agreed to follow him to his house. He took me into his living room and turned the television on. It was an old set, and it took a long time to warm up. While we waited, I looked at the green candy dish that sat on top of the TV's wooden cabinet. The candies inside were barrel-shaped and dark brown, almost black. Horehound, I guessed.

"There!" Waxman said. The screen crackled as it came to life. "I went to turn on Ozzie and Harriet and I got *this*!"

Men and women in tight-fitting clothes gyrated across the screen. The camera zoomed in on body parts, froze, zoomed back again.

"What is that?" Waxman demanded.

I shrugged. "Looks like MTV to me."

"It's in *color*," Waxman said. "On my screen! Color! Do you see what you're doing? Do you see?" He pointed to his hands. "And look at this, just look!"

Waxman seemed to be about my age. Or he had until now, anyway. The skin on his hands looked papery, and his had liver spots. "Don't you see? You're throwing everything out of kilter! You water that lawn, or there's no telling what might happen!"

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11.

When I got home, I walked around on the fine straw that was my front lawn. All right, why the hell not water it a little? It bothered me to waste the water, it seemed irresponsible, but there was something a lot bigger than water conservation at stake here. That's how it was beginning to seem.

Yeah, all right. I'd water the lawn in the morning.

But that night, I dreamed that I was watching Father Knows Best on a wood-cabinet television. It was hot in my living room. I was sweating. I had an undershirt on beneath my dress shirt, and the dress shirt collar was starched and scratched my neck. A woman with her hair done up in a beehive came into the room-- my wife, I realized, and a boy with a crew cut followed her. "Father," said the boy, "may I have fifteen cents to buy an ice cream?"

I dug into my pocket and said, "Here you go, sport."

The sheets were damp when I woke up.

"No," I told myself. "I'm sticking to my guns. The lawn is on its own."

\* \* \*

12.

They tried to do it themselves, the neighbor men with young faces and liver spots on their hands. They'd turn on my garden hose while I was working in my studio. I'd hear the water running and go outside to find them soaking down the ground.

"Get the hell off my property!" I said.

"But we'll do it," said Bob Evans. "*We'll* water the lawn! *We'll* fertilize it and keep it mowed!"

"No," I said. "No lawn! Damn it, I don't want to live that way!"

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13. They came in the night. Things like that always get done in the night. But there was no meanness in them. Only desperation. Their faces were getting old, now. Waxman's face in particular had shriveled and gone as papery as his hands. That's what I saw when he turned on the light in my bedroom and they came for me.

They chloroformed me. Doesn't that seem like an old-fashioned sort of thing to do? They held a wad

of cotton against my face until I couldn't help but breathe. And I woke up here.

It's the cage in Waxman's back yard, the thing I had thought was a tree house. It's a cube of steel mesh, six feet by six feet and twenty feet off the ground.

On the afternoon of my first day, Waxman came out to see me. He told me they had watered my lawn through the night, really soaked it, and it was already looking better.

Waxman looked better, too.

Then he told me that he was sorry about this. They all were. But it sometimes happened that somebody tried to move into the neighborhood and just couldn't fit in. And that was a problem.

I said, "Let me out of here, John."

He said, "Dick, I'm real sorry, but I just can't do that."

And he went inside to watch Ozzie and Harriet. That was the last I've seen of him, except sometimes when I glimpse him through the leaves, watering his lawn.

It's been four days. Four hot days. I never knew thirst could hurt like this. Even my eyes feel pasty and dry.

Somewhere on the other side of the houses, I hear voices. I hear the jangling of the ice cream bell.

And all around, I hear the hiss of lawn sprinklers. I can smell the water.

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