

The Thing in the Leaf Blower

by Gregory K. Carter

Harvey Osteen awoke one morning with a leaf blower lying beside him. He hadn't put it there, or at least he didn't think he had.

"But...but maybe I dozed off while I was looking at it," he later wondered while popping Eggos in the toaster. After all, it was such a good deal, practically stolen at a garage sale for a buck-seventy-five.

"So what's wrong with it?" Harvey had asked.

"It just...m-m-makes funny noises s-s-sometimes," answered the nervous little man who kept fiddling with his hearing aid.

Harvey bought it, and somehow it wound up the next morning snug beneath his covers, like the horrid remains of the most forbidden of loves.

Still, it seemed harmless enough, nothing at all to worry about. But as the first black Eggo jumped smoking from his toaster, Harvey heard the leaf blower crank up inside his head.

"Strap me to your back, Harvey," it said. "Yank my cord, and together we'll blow every leaf off the face of the Earth."

Harvey turned to see the leaf blower sitting at the breakfast table.

This is the way cults start, he thought. One morning you wake up beside a talking leaf blower, and before the month's out, you and your disciples are chugging down cyanide Koolaid inside an Ace Hardware.

But the guttural voice blowing inside his head told Harvey that it was simply civic pride swelling within, a fervent conscientiousness to beautify the neighborhood.

"Sure," Harvey agreed. "Greenpeace guys probably have experiences like this all the time."

At 6:15 AM, yielding to a compulsion he could not control, Harvey fired up the leaf blower and blasted his driveway clean. At 6:20 the police arrived.

"Little early for that, ain't it?"

Harvey recited his civic pride speech and received a disturbing-the-peace ticket in return.

The cops left, and Harvey retreated to his black and white TV with the charred Eggos beside him. Kathy Lee had yet to take her first sip of coffee, when Harvey felt the leaf blower's warm nozzle nudge his ankle.

"You gonna let the pigs push you around, Harvey?"

"Who said that?"

"Someone who wants to be your special friend, Harvey. Take me out, cut me loose, and I'll show you a leafless green utopia just waiting for the two of us."

Harvey listened as the leaf blower's silvery tongue painted visions of spotless lawns, unobstructed driveways and miles of clear, white sidewalk. Before he knew it, Harvey had spent the whole day and most of the night with his new friend, the two blowing leaves that weren't there into piles that didn't exist.

Surely, he thought as he headed for bed, surely no leaf could have survived such an onslaught, all fourteen hours of it without so much as a coffee break. But as he dozed off that first night, the tinnitus in his ears sounded like the rustle of leaves falling

hard and fast upon his lawn.

"Listen to 'em, Harvey," the leaf blower whispered. "They're mocking you. Laughing at you. Are you gonna let 'em make fools of us?"

"No, master. I won't, master."

"Then we can't stop until we blow 'em all to Kingdom Come. Eternal vigilance, Harvey. Eternal vigilance."

"Yes, master. I understand, master."

Harvey vowed to start at first light tomorrow and not let up until December's chill had stripped both ground and trees bare of these arboreal vermin.

The days that followed passed quickly, a heady blur of noise and wind and blustery orations: all the madness the machine's seductive blabbering could etch into Harvey's brain. Day after day, wee hour after wee hour, he roamed about the neighborhood, his eyes glazed, his leaf blower's droning roar blasting phantom leaves from dawn 'til dusk 'til dawn.

"Rise and shine, Harvey," it said each morning at four. "I wanna clear your neighbor's yard before the sun comes up."

"Yes, master. I obey, master."

One night, after sixteen hours of non-stop leaf-blowing, Harvey awoke on the couch and turned toward the rustling, gurgling racket clattering from across the room. Harvey saw an impish thing, tiny and gnarled, like a gargoyle with LED-red eyes, bear-trap teeth and bony hands, ripping the leaves off Harvey's potted plants.

Harvey screamed. The thing yelped and jumped over the coffee table and dove into the leaf blower. Harvey slept in the car that night and called the local priest the

next morning.

"Father O'Leary's office. And how may we bless you this morning?"

Harvey gave his name, address and insurance number. "I need an exorcist," he said. "There's a free leaf blower in it for someone."

"Uh, actually we're more into Liberation Theology around here. Think Zen Catholicism laced with a Marxist, Freudian *weltanschauung*. Most likely you're just schizophrenic, anyway. Nine out of ten possessions could've been better treated with clozapine."

"But...but, Father, there's a little demon or something living in my leaf blower, and he's ruining my philodendrons."

O'Leary had a sneaking suspicion this could be a prank call, but one never knows. Tick off one of these loonies and you could wind up on the wrong end of a weed wacker. "Uhhhh...all our exorcists are currently with other clients, Mr. Osteen. For faster service, please try the Episcopalians down the street." *Click. Hum.*

O'Leary laughed. "Some nut's leaf blower's spitting up pea soup," he joked to Eustace, the grounds keeper. "The bozo says he'll give it to any exorcist who can make it stop." Fifteen minutes later, Eustace Cobbleby stood on Harvey's front porch.

"You're a priest?" Harvey asked.

"Well...let's just say I'm in charge of cleansing and purifying holy places."

"Perfect. Come inside."

The ritual must be performed in privacy, Eustace explained. Harvey left and not a half-hour passed before Eustace emerged with leaf blower in hand. He handed Harvey a bill for forty-two dollars along with a white band of paper, labeled: "Sanitized

for your protection."

"Sleep with it around your pillow," he told Harvey. "It'll ward away evil spirits."

A little weird, perhaps, but it worked. Harvey's life returned to normal. Seventy-percent of his hearing was restored and he bought a nice, quiet rake that autumn.

For the next three years, however, Eustace wandered around his holy ground as though he had taken a vow of perpetual leaf blowing. One day he was found dead, slumped over his leaf blower, the thing still droning on, still howling its demon wind, and, as the next grounds keeper would soon find out, still making those funny noises.