

The 1954 Man
By Alex Linton

Evelyn ensured that every flower had a meaning behind it. Bouquets of butter yellow carnations for loss on every table, every group of three accented with a blood red dahlia for strength in times of sorrow.

Miss Samantha Vine was the only one to help her set up for the memorial. In fact, she had beaten Evelyn to the church that morning: standing at the top of the stairs in an ash grey dress that moved like water below her knees, fixated on the Rolex fastened around her delicate white glove. Strawberry red curls bounced at her shoulders; a few locks tied back under a broad-brimmed hat.

Guests began arriving at the stroke of noon. The southern summer sun drove the black-clad mourners into the chilled haven of the church. Samantha manned the lunch buffet, helping serve the onslaught of guests before they shuffled to their seats amongst the tables and began chatting about how much the deceased would have loved to be in their company.

Evelyn didn't need to be reminded that her husband would have loved this. She was a good wife. Maybe if she told herself that enough, she'd believe it.

"Mrs. Green," Pastor Dodge approached her, adjusting his clerical collar.

Evelyn was reluctant to embrace him, but the eyes of her guests were wandering and sharp. She pulled apart her red lips in a weak smile. "Afternoon, Pastor. Thought I'd be seeing you hours ago."

"Ah well, you know the rooster crows later and later by the day," he said, rubbing remnants of sleep from the corner of his eye from under his glasses.

Evelyn opted to paint a pleasant face, just sad enough to seem real.

She couldn't put a pin on why she felt so empty, like the air had been wrung out of her lungs. Upon her last visit to the therapist her husband had once insisted she speak to, the therapist had informed her that she suffered from a lack of feminine responsibilities to keep her mind bright and cheerful.

"If you put as much care into your husband's happiness as you do your career, you might not be here," he had muttered through a cloud of cigar smoke.

Evelyn pretended that she hadn't known what the therapist meant by that. After all, she had not wanted a career as a florist. But she had wanted to marry Mr. Green.

She gazed at the intricate wreath encompassing her late husband's portrait: ferns and foliage from the forest he used to hunt in, sunflowers that grew outside his childhood home. In the wreath's center, Mr. Green's handsome hazel stare and coal black crew cut looked on to the crowd that had come to celebrate his life.

Evelyn unfolded the paper from her purse, scanning over her speech for the eight hundredth time. Something was missing, a puzzle piece absent. Yet at that same thought, she was still sure that her speech was nothing less than perfect.

Mr. Green's fragile mother and father had cornered a good portion of the church to praise the life of their son. The Mr. Green who worked at the soup kitchen every Saturday, who provided for his wife and would have made an excellent father. A city man with roots in the country, and an exemplary hard worker. Each person took turns to express their grief, bursting into tears to prove they had truly loved Mr. Green.

Evelyn had been doing her best to avoid this scene.

"Eve-e," a nails-on-chalkboard voice screeched.

Her heart leaped a small bit, and she turned to face her neighbor, Melanie Robertson.

The twig of a woman waltzed towards her with an exaggerated frown, reaching for a hug like a tree with oversized branches drooping on either side of it. Her four children, two with fair hair and two whose hair was as black as night, held hands in a line behind her, trudging along until they each clutched onto their mother's cardigan.

"How are you holding up dearie?" Melanie said, rubbing Evelyn's shoulders. "This lil' setup looks lovely."

"Thanks, Mel," Evelyn said, "It's nothing for my Ed. It's what he would have wanted."

"Oh, don't put yourself down," she said, pulling her upper lip back to reveal her large prominent teeth, "this is a lot of effort, especially for you." She waved her hand at the flower bouquets lining the walls. "However, not sure about the color scheme you got there."

"Aw hush Mel," Mr. Robertson had sauntered over, setting a platter of deviled eggs and rolled ham on the table where Sam was serving Evelyn's home-cooked buffet.

"Well," Mel sighed, shrugging off her husband. "You ready for your little speech?"

Evelyn tapped the folded paper with her manicured finger. "Have it right here."

"It'll be so nice to remember him in that way. I sure hope someone takes photos," Melanie cocked her head, "since you got no children to carry on his legacy."

Mel's children cast puppy-dog eyes up to Evelyn.

"Are you offering to photograph my speech, Mel?"

"Oh, don't be silly, we don't have the kind of money for a camera," Melanie said. "Every bit of Charlie's salary goes towards supporting our family."

Evelyn popped the champagne that she'd hidden in the church's back office. It was Mr. Green's favorite, Dom Perignon. But that morning, she had deemed it inappropriate to have a drink like champagne served at a memorial. She took a swig straight from the bottle.

She was a good wife. The best wife.

There was a soft knock at the door. "Are you alright?"

Evelyn wiped her mouth, her subconscious fixing the smudge of ruby lipstick gone astray. "Never better, glad you asked."

Sam approached, placing her gloved hand in Evelyn's clammy one. "Are you sure?"

"We can talk later, please," Evelyn said, straightening her back. "Has anyone else arrived?"

Sam released her hand. "Yes. But I don't know who they are."

Evelyn dabbed a tear from her cheek. "It must be some of Ed's employees. If you wouldn't mind seeing that they find some lunch and their seats."

Mr. Green, as warehouse manager of a canning company, had been directly in charge of well over twenty employees. Evelyn had sent out an invitation to the whole of his warehouse, as without a list to find them all in the phone book, it was the only way she could get in contact with them.

Refreshed from the champagne and new powder on her face, Evelyn stepped back out into the nave of the church. Sure enough, a group of about fifteen men and their wives had arrived. Their wives had ensured that their men left the house with pressed blouses, a mild wave of Macy's on-sale cologne wafting in. They clung to each other in pairs, scanning the food from an angle of suspicion.

Evelyn went down the line thanking each pair for coming. However, at the fourth couple to avert their eyes from her, she gave them space. Grief-stricken, she told herself. But their silence and hunger were the only two emotions on display.

That's when Mr. Hoven arrived.

Harold Hoven, the COO of the canning company, had come over for dinner once. He had left without thanking them, and Evelyn was convinced that he stole her grandfather's pocket watch. Mr. Green had almost hit Evelyn for accusing his boss of such a deed.

Now, Mr. Hoven's cane tapped on the church's hardwood floor, his gold-plated cufflinks glinting in the light. His grin was smug, and though he was a man that Mr. Green considered to be a perfect enigma, Evelyn knew from instinct that he shared more in common with the devil himself than any human.

"Lovely day, Evelyn," he purred. His gaze scanned up and down her figure.

Evelyn choked on her words. She clenched her fist and stretched it to release tension while she watched him stroll straight to Pastor Dodge and shake his hand.

Melanie marched up to Evelyn, taking her aside in a corner. "You didn't tell me you were inviting these ruffians," she bore through her teeth, waving towards the group of canning employees.

"Melanie?" Evelyn said, yanking her arm away, "you're welcome to leave at any time."

Evelyn walked up the steps to the landing where a podium stood, gazing into her late husband's portrait. She pressed her temple, attempting to rub away the knot pounding her brain.

"Did you know the bastard?" a gruff voice said.

Evelyn turned around to see that one of her husband's employees had stepped out from behind the memorial display. He wore a dark suit with sleeves that went past his palms, and it appeared as if he couldn't afford a shave.

"I did," Evelyn said. "I am, or was, his wife."

"Oh," he furrowed his thick brow. "You are?"

"Must I repeat it?"

The man shook his head, coughing up a laugh while he kicked at the rug. "Well, Mrs. Green," he said as if he were accusing her of the title, "I've got two things to say to you. First, I'd like to thank you."

He hobbled closer cradling his right arm, a potent waft of alcohol and cigarettes staining the air.

“Thank me?”

“Yes, thank you,” he reiterated, “for inviting us here today. Real special. Sent those though our business address, huh?”

The hair on Evelyn’s arms prickled. “How else was I supposed to send you all mail.”

“You honestly thought any of us wanted to be here?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Hoven made it mandatory we show up the minute he saw those invitations.” He made brief eye contact with his superior on the far end of the room, smiling and waving. Without breaking his forced cheer, he said: “Frankly we hope your husband rots in hell, that is if he isn’t running it by now.”

Evelyn scrunched her face, hot with fury. She grabbed him by the suit lapel and yanked him across the stage, throwing him into the Pastor’s back office.

“Just who do you think you are?” she said, her voice breaking as she slammed the door.

“Jackson, last I checked,” he said, brushing himself off.

“Well, Jackson,” Evelyn spat, “I’m going to ask you to leave.”

“No can do,” he said. He lit a cigarette. “Can’t afford to lose my job again.”

“You can’t say things like that about Ed,” Evelyn said folding her arms, “especially here, now.”

“Oh, c’mon lady,” Jackson chuckled, “you of all people should know the guy was a psycho.”

Evelyn’s mouth glued shut.

Jackson stared at her a moment before nodding slowly. “Thought as much.” He blew a cloud of smoke into her face and swung an office chair around, scraping the linoleum floor and straddling it backward. Jackson wormed out of his suit coat and unbuttoned four buttons on his blouse to reveal an injury unlike any Evelyn had ever seen. His collar bone was indented into his body like a crater, an enormous veined bruise encompassing it and crawling up his neck.

Jackson’s rough angular face softened, stern jaw loosening into a subtle smile. “You don’t even know the half of it.”

Evelyn’s anger vaporized as a draining wave of fear washed over her. She reached out her hand, her trembling fingers just brushing the sour yellow, purple, and blue oozing injury.

“The paperwork will say it was from falling off a ladder,” Jackson said. “But the devil nearly took my life with a crowbar for being late on a Wednesday.”

“He couldn’t have done this.”

Jackson buttoned up his shirt, not losing eye contact with Evelyn as his face re-hardened into stone. The pressure in Evelyn's head was growing and pounding on her skull to the point that it almost blurred her vision. She glanced towards the champagne in the cooler in the far corner.

"What was the other thing you wanted to tell me," she said.

Jackson held his breath, flicking ashes onto the Pastor's desk. "Well, it's a few more things, now that you mention it. Do you know a Mr. and Mrs. Auburn?"

Evelyn shook her head.

"Vince Auburn's a coworker of mine. He and his wife Gertrude have had Mr. and Mrs. Green over for dinner almost every Saturday for the last six years."

Evelyn blinked. "Pardon?"

"Yeah," Jackson said with a smirk, "Gertrude hated them both, but Vince wasn't really given a choice. Green and his lady needed somewhere free to go for dinner before they hit the town. Or a hotel."

Evelyn's knees turned to jello. She grabbed the desk for balance, her head swirling and heart thumping out of her chest. Each time she gasped for air, it was harder to breathe, and before she could stop herself, she was hyperventilating. Sweat beaded on her forehead as the room temperature plummeted like an icebox.

"She even came by the warehouse every once in a while, spent hours in his office," Jackson said, his cigarette hanging on his lips as he watched Evelyn collapse to the floor. "Most annoying creature I'd ever seen or heard. As shrill as a damn fire alarm."

Evelyn blinked, her blood running cold.

"Every man in that room has a scar," Jackson said, leaning forward and pointing to the door, "every man has suffered a pay decrease to boost your husband's ego and inflate his reputation with Mr. Hoven. Every man has had his life and position threatened, which is practically the same thing nowadays. The extreme lengths Green would go, the number of hours he would lecture about being more like Mr. Hoven," Jackson paused to smoke, his hand trembling, "it was more than obsessive. It was frightening."

Evelyn's sobs subsided. "Why are you telling me this."

Jackson took a final drag of his cigarette, dropped it on the floor and squished it under his dusty dress shoe. "My life isn't getting any better from here," he said, "But I can finally live free from him."

It was then Evelyn noticed that the man had no belongings with him, other than his cigarettes. No wallet, no keys, not even a photo of a family. It also appeared that he arrived alone.

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Evelyn hadn't noticed when Jackson left the room.

"Eve?" Sam said, poking her head through the office door, "I think the Pastor's ready to begin."

Evelyn had been staring at her reflection in her pocket mirror. She poked her cheek, over and over, until a little red crease had stayed from her nail. She couldn't feel it. Why couldn't she feel it?

She smoothed her dress, her hand hovered over the door handle.

When she re-entered the nave of the church, she held her chin high. Her guests cast glares, whispers floating amongst them. Sam guided her onto the step below to her husband's wreathed portrait.

The Pastor waddled to the podium. "I would like to begin our service today, by asking that we may try to recall Edward Green's patience, enduring kindness for his family and community, and his boundless faith while we mourn his loss."

"And might I add, his affinity for business," Mr. Hoven interjected, raising his glass higher than the rest with a Cheshire smile, "that little man ran our warehouse better than ever, and it never was more profitable. Cheers to his success."

"Indeed," Pastor Dodge said, clearing his throat. "He was the man that exemplified this year of our Lord, nineteen fifty-four. He was, and forever will be, remembered as such. Now, Mrs. Green," the Pastor said, "I believed you have prepared a few words?"

Evelyn watched the golden sunlight dance through the stained glass, intense rays of heat disguised as a kaleidoscope of color casting down on the memorial. The carnations and dahlias on the tables had long wilted, petals falling to the black tablecloth beneath. She found Samantha seated the crowd, just as poised and collected as she had been that morning, save a strand of hair that had fallen from her hat. Jackson was near Sam, his head tipped down, holding his right arm to take the pressure

off his collarbone. His gaze met hers. Then one by one, Jackson's coworkers looked to her as well, many with scars of their own, their glassy expressions kept awake by the wives on their arms.

Evelyn, at last, knew what was wrong in her speech: the puzzle piece that was missing.

Then she saw Melanie.

She refused to meet Evelyn's eyes. In her arms was one of her children: one of her two children with distinct coal black hair, and bright hazel eyes.

"Mrs. Green?" The Pastor said.

Evelyn inhaled, letting the sun warm her face. For the first time in an age, a real, genuine laugh rolled from her throat. "In my wildest dreams," she said, "I never imagined that I'd be a florist."