

PHILIP ZIGMAN

ON CLOSE INSPECTION

EVEN BEFORE HIS EIGHTH BIRTHDAY, Evan Zin appeared to possess an unbounded capacity for being a nuisance. The principal of Beech Lane Elementary had once made this very point to the boy's mother.

Mr. Buddinger hadn't told Eliza Zin in person what he thought about her son. The message had been passed along from him to her by what had become the usual channels: having been transcribed by the telephone operator at Edgars, Francks, and Sons Fine Men's Shoes.

In this particular instance, the telephone operator had asked Mr. Buddinger to repeat himself, wanting to be sure to get it exactly right. Once satisfied, she tore the little green paper off its pad and walked to the women's changing room and placed the note on Eliza's locker.

Eliza was accustomed to finding little green notes stuck onto her locker, waiting for her after a long day of staring at her darkened reflection in the immaculate leather of the shoes whose shine she was charged with inspecting. There had been the note telling her that her son had filled his teacher's briefcase with thumbtacks. The note hadn't specified where the boy had found enough thumbtacks to fill a briefcase, but she didn't inquire further. There had been the note informing her that her little Evan had made a classmate cry by convincing the girl that her recently deceased grandmother had not gone up to heaven but had in fact been transported into Evan's own kaleidoscope and would dance every time he brought the toy to his eye. There was the note that reconstructed the manner in which Evan had turned the water in the gym's water fountains green by using food colouring. And, finally, there was the note ending with Principal Buddinger's musings about Evan's ability to be a nuisance. This particular note started by telling Eliza that her son had climbed on top of the school bus at the end of the day, delaying it for over an hour. The note then informed the poor woman that, regardless of the unfortunate fate of the boy's father, this was the last straw.

But however much of a nuisance Evan Zin had been within the confines of his elementary school, it hardly hinted at the sort of nuisance he would

shortly become. And a nuisance not only for Mr. Buddinger, or Eliza, or Evan's teachers and classmates, but for much of mankind.

Because on his eighth birthday, as he sat in the kitchen with his mother while she baked him a cake (vanilla, his favourite), Evan Zin managed to turn a routine task into an investigation that had previously been undertaken by no one—a fact which, after the investigation had been taken over by the proper authorities and come to an end, everyone would lament had been a good thing.

“Ew.”

That was what Eliza Zin said when her eyes wandered away from the bowl of batter she was holding and she spotted the little bug crawling across the kitchen floor.

“Evan?”

“Yes, mother.”

“Do you see that bug?”

“On the floor?”

“Yes, on the floor.”

“Yes.”

“Do your mother a favour and kill it, please.”

A simple request. A common request.

Evan put down his kaleidoscope and walked to the centre of the room. He watched the bug slowly crawling and lifted his foot over the place he calculated the bug would soon find itself. It was while tracking the bug's slow progress across the blue linoleum floor, with his raised leg beginning to tire, that Evan thought he noticed something curious.

So Evan crouched down while his mother poured the vanilla batter into a circular baking pan. He lowered his head to the floor until his cheek was squished against the cool linoleum, and he looked closely at the bug.

“Evan?”

“Yes, mother.”

“What are you doing?” she asked as she placed the pan in the oven.

“What kind of bug is this?”

“What kind of bug?’ I don't know, Evan. It's a bug. What are you doing on the floor?”

“I'm looking at the bug.”

“I can see that. And why are you on the floor looking at the bug?”

“I think this bug is a really tiny dog.”

“Rubbish.”

The doorbell rang and Eliza left the kitchen with her son lying on his stomach, his face only a few inches from the bug.

At the door was the Zins' neighbour, Robert Chartwell. Born to beekeepers and fascinated by science from an early age, Mr. Chartwell had fulfilled his destiny rather nicely by becoming a chemist. And as a chemist he could explain, in language that seemed crudely inappropriate, the series of minor physical changes his body underwent while he stood on the Zins' doorstep. He found it usefully distracting to think about these explanations over and over when in Eliza's presence.

"So where is the birthday boy?" asked Mr. Chartwell, with a smile. Under his arm was a box a bit smaller than a breadbasket.

"Oh, he's in the kitchen. On the floor, I believe. He seems to be quite interested in a particular bug."

"You should put the bug in a jar, Evan. You could keep looking at it without lying on the floor," shouted Mr. Chartwell.

"How is Maureen?"

"Oh, she's well. She simply loves this time of year, as you know, with the gardening work there is to be done. And, of course, the windows and doors are wide open, the fresh air running through the house. I think she feels a true rebirth every year when the weather begins to turn for the better."

Eliza wasn't listening too closely to Mr. Chartwell while he talked about his wife. For the past six weeks she found herself often distracted by the issue of which school her son would be attending in the fall. She had, to date, been unable to find one that would take her Evan.

Evan was still staring at the bug when his mother and Mr. Chartwell walked into the kitchen. He had caught the bug in his hands and dropped it into a glass jar, then placed the jar on the table and covered it.

"You may want to poke some holes in the top, there," said Mr. Chartwell. "Or you could take the top off, Evan. I'm not sure your bug is ready to climb out of that big jar."

Mr. Chartwell walked over to the table and casually looked at the bug.

"Look what Mr. Chartwell brought for you!"

Evan looked from the bug to Mr. Chartwell, to the wrapped box under his arm, and back to the bug.

"Thanks for the present, Robert."

"My pleasure, Evan. Happy birthday! You enjoy it, now."

Mr. Chartwell put the present down on the table next to Evan's jar, but the boy continued watching the bug walk around in the jar.

"Looks like you've got yourself a future entomologist," said Mr. Chart-

well.

He turned back to Evan. “Find that thing interesting, do you?”

“I’m trying to count its tiny, little legs, but it keeps moving.”

Mr. Chartwell smiled kindly and started towards the door.

“You know,” he said, “we have some microscopes at the lab that you could put that bug under, then you’d have no trouble counting its legs, no matter how tiny they are.”

“Oh Robert, you don’t have to,” said Eliza.

“It’s no problem. I have a few things to do there tomorrow, anyway.”

Evan looked up at his mother expectantly. When she nodded and walked Mr. Chartwell out, Evan took the jar into his room, leaving the present on the table.

If only the Zins had lived next door to a milkman. Or a roofer. Or a spider.

Evan couldn’t quite see onto the countertops when Mr. Chartwell showed him around the laboratory. He could see the tops of glass tubes and the metal framing of certain apparatuses, but these floated mysteriously someplace between the ceiling and the counters.

After showing Evan the station where he did most of his work, the notebook where he took scrupulous notes, and a 3-D model of a hydrofluorocarbon molecule, Mr. Chartwell set the boy up on a stool in front of a fairly weak microscope. He retrieved a small glass dish, and Evan gently tipped his jar over until the bug fell onto the dish.

“Now, if you just put the dish there, under the lens—no, over there, Evan. Do you see the little ledge? No, not quite there, just—well, allow me.”

And Mr. Chartwell placed the dish under the lens and showed Evan which knob to adjust to focus the image. Then he wandered off to a series of floating glass tubes in a corner of the laboratory.

At first, all Evan could see was a blurry brown smudge moving around his viewing area, sometimes disappearing for a bit before darting back into sight and seeming to run in circles. But as he learned to focus the microscope’s lens and the bug tired of running around the glass dish, he could see the little bug more clearly, walking around with its head down, sniffing the floor of the dish with its snout. The bug stopped moving and looked ahead, past the short wall of the dish, and Evan was able to count its legs: there were certainly four of them.

“So can you see the bug clearly under that microscope?”

“I certainly can, Robert,” was Evan’s reply.

“Great! And what does it look like?”

“It looks just like a dog.”

Mr. Chartwell wondered to himself what sort of insect it could be. Maybe a short caterpillar? What else could look like a dog?

“Mind if I have a look at what you have there?”

Evan slid off the stool and stood to Mr. Chartwell’s side while the chemist peered into the microscope.

And Mr. Chartwell saw just what the boy had: a four-legged brown thing with fur and a snout that, magnified as it was, looked just like a somewhat small dog of perfect proportions. He lifted his head from the eyepiece and looked curiously at Evan. Then he craned his head down and looked at the bug directly in the dish.

“Where exactly did you find this little thing?”

“It was on the kitchen floor yesterday. Mother was baking my birthday cake and she saw it running across the floor. She asked me to kill it.”

“Well, from afar it looks like any other tiny bug.”

“But it’s not, right?”

“I’m not quite sure,” said Mr. Chartwell, as he looked into the eyepiece once again.

He watched the tiny dog walk around and sniff itself. He shook his head rapidly and looked away.

“Do you mind if I keep this here, with me, in the laboratory? Just for a few days?”

“You mean keep Christopher?”

“Christopher?”

“The dog.”

“You named him?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Just before, when I was looking at him under the microscope.”

“Oh. Well yes, if I could keep him. But just for a day or two, so I can look at him more closely.”

Evan hesitated, looked at the top of the empty jar floating above the counter.

“Maybe I can find one for you in here and you can keep that one.”

“In the lab?”

“Yeah, in the lab. If I found Christopher at home, I’m sure I can find one in here. Do you see little bugs crawling around here sometimes?”

“On occasion.”

So Evan and Mr. Chartwell got down on all fours and crawled around the laboratory looking for bugs. Mr. Chartwell found a few ants and a centipede, then after about an hour Evan exclaimed that he'd found a really tiny dog.

Under the microscope, this one's fur was a bit lighter and quite a bit shorter than Christopher's, but it looked unmistakably like a tiny dog. Evan carefully placed Christopher back into the jar, and Mr. Chartwell packed up the microscope to bring home, along with his own jar with his own tiny dog in it. Before they left, Mr. Chartwell searched the supply closet, coming out with a small container. He told Evan to try giving Christopher just a few tiny pellets in the morning, at noon, and again in the evening. He hoped, he said, they would be to Christopher's liking.

Two days later there was a reporter standing next to Mr. Chartwell when he rang the Zins' doorbell.

"This is the man I spoke to you about," he said to Eliza while he recited biochemistry to himself.

"Please, come in. Can I get you gentlemen anything to drink?"

"Oh, no thank you," said Mr. Chartwell. "We don't want to be a trouble."

The reporter silently followed into the kitchen.

Eliza stood in the corner opposite the small table. She ventured a smile. It wasn't all-too-successful. "Evan should be down in a minute."

"This really shouldn't take long," said Mr. Chartwell.

"Do you mind if I take a picture of the room?" asked the reporter. He took a small camera out of his jacket. "Just a shot of the floor, if you don't mind."

"Sure," said Eliza.

She could hear her son walking around upstairs, in his room. In just two days he had found five more little bugs to place in jars: four that looked like dogs, and one that he was sure was a tiny cat. He was busy feeding them. She listened to his soft steps while the reporter took a picture of her kitchen's plain blue linoleum floor. Then Evan came into the kitchen and stood next to his mother.

The next day—above a colour picture of the Zins' kitchen floor inset with Evan's school photo of the previous year—was the headline: "Boy Finds Really Tiny Dogs, and Cats Too!"

Mrs. Chartwell's gardening was not nearly as pleasant as usual that summer. Her husband was hardly ever around to lend a helping hand, too

busy making what he gleefully called discoveries and confirming those of others, including the discouraging finding that the tiny cats and dogs were not at all merely a local matter but existed all over.

Then, of course, there was the matter of the tiny animals themselves. One had to be a lot more careful now, and that included out in the yard or garden. Like traditional pets, the little buggers could be expected to wander out of the house, so gardening was no escape from the positively frightful idea of accidentally trampling an adorable, albeit minuscule, Barbet or Schnauzer or Siberian. Indeed, a great number of them could be running around at any moment, hidden in the grass around one's feet. And one tried to be conscientious without looking back; tried to forget all that.

Last, and very much the worst of it for Mrs. Chartwell, was that the boy she could very easily blame for all of it was so often there, in plain sight, playing on the next lawn. She couldn't step into her garden, it seemed, unless the boy was in the neighbouring yard, kicking his ball or running around or scouring the grass for bugs. She watched him from her window, too, while he played in the yard or walked down the street towards the park with some friends.

Eliza noticed the extra attention that Evan was receiving from Mrs. Chartwell. She caught the woman staring hatefully at her son on a number of occasions, peeking out from behind the brown drape at her living room window while Evan played. The old woman didn't even try to hide it, didn't offer Eliza a smile once she was spotted. She simply gave the boy one last glare, then let go of the drape and disappeared into her shaded living room.

Near the end of the summer, Mr. Chartwell stopped by to see Evan.

Eliza opened the door.

"Is Evan in?"

"I'm afraid not. He's out playing at a friend's."

"Oh," said Mr. Chartwell. In his mind, he was repeating a series of facts about human physiology.

"How is Maureen?"

"Who?"

"Your wife."

"Oh yes."

"She hasn't looked well, at times, these past few weeks."

"She has certainly had a tough time of late."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Eliza.

"It's the guilt, I think, that has made this all quite a bit harder for her.

She is still struggling with that. I feel she has taken much of this harder than most.”

“It has been hard on everyone, I think.”

“It has, it has. She always considered herself such an animal lover—or, she is such an animal lover, I should say. But now she finds the thought of what she might have done, unknowingly, in the past—well, anyway, it hasn’t been easy.”

“Please pass along my best wishes,” said Eliza.

“Of course. And I have some news to pass along to your Evan,” said Mr. Chartwell. “First, I want to wish him the best of luck at his new school.”

Eliza smiled. “Sure,” she said.

“But, I also came to tell him that his discovery has been named in his honour, officially now. *Canis lupis familiarizin* is the name that has been given to the entire subspecies of tiny dogs. It’s a small twist on the more familiar nomenclature.”

“I will let him know,” she said. “And hopefully Maureen will soon feel better.”

On a Saturday morning in late October, Eliza Zin stood in her kitchen baking herself a birthday cake (vanilla, her favourite). Evan sat at the table, still in his pajamas, playing with his kaleidoscope.

The kitchen walls were covered with the variously coloured memoranda that Evan had been bringing home from school on an almost weekly basis. All children in all schools were given the notices to bring home—first blue, then yellow and red and green, then pink and orange and, the last, a light blue. The memos were government-issued documents; they were also available in supermarkets, pharmacies, post offices, and libraries. It was recommended that they serve as a sort of wallpaper in either the kitchen or family room. They had titles like: *Memorandum on Insects, Bugs, and Other Household Critters, What to Do When Confronted with a Bug in the Home: A New Approach, Six Things to Look for When Identifying Really Tiny Cats and Dogs, and So You’ve Found Yourself a Really Tiny Pet, Now What?*

The excitement of seeing Evan’s name on the school-written notices accompanying the official memoranda had worn off by the time Evan brought home the seventh memo. The cover letter never failed to mention the boy responsible for the discovery, nor which elementary school he attended. Eliza had even begun to wonder if her son had been offered a place at his new school due to his celebrity.

These letters, though, were not the only way that the principal of Evan's new school communicated—as it were—with Eliza regarding her son. The principal quickly began to utilize the more traditional channels of communication, and Eliza was once again greeted by small green notes on her locker at work with nearly the same frequency that all parents were greeted with the memoranda.

The most recent note from Evan's new principal came the day before; it was waiting on Eliza's locker to greet her after a long day of her darkened reflection staring back at her. The note informed her that throughout the morning Evan had insisted that his hands were stuck together, preventing him from writing or otherwise using them properly.

The afternoon of that same Friday, Evan brought home the light blue memorandum describing the new collection service for tiny cats and dogs that delivered them safely to local care centres. The tiny things were to be placed in a shoe box, fitted, of course, with holes in the top, and left on the curb the morning after the recycling had been collected. The letter accompanying the memo mentioned Evan at length.

Fortunately, Evan's hands seemed to have come nicely unstuck, and he held his kaleidoscope without any trouble while his mother poured the cake batter into a circular baking pan. A newspaper was open on the table in front of him. He was supposed to be choosing a movie for he and his mother to see that afternoon.

As Eliza carried the circular pan to the open oven, she noticed, out of the corner of her eye, a tiny bug moving across the blue linoleum floor. The tiny thing was crawling towards the table.

“Evan?”

“Yes.”

“Do you see that thing on the floor, moving towards you?”

Evan put down his kaleidoscope.

“The bug?”

“Yes.”

“Yup.”

“Can you just have a look at it, please?”

And Evan stood up and walked over to the little bug that was on the floor. He lifted his socked foot into the air, then brought it swiftly down, crushing the thing.