



## The tragedy of the commons

**There's a dog killer on the loose. As suspicion mounts and dark speculation swirls, a battle is emerging over the soul of High Park – or perhaps its many souls**

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Bathed in early-morning sunlight, Cindy Carroll stands next to what used to be a compost pile just outside the allotment gardens in High Park, where dead raccoons have been found with something approaching regularity over the years.



LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR  
Peter Ji plays fetch with his dog Indy on Spring Road in High Park on June 26, 2008.

From there, a little path runs eastward along the garden fence, almost completely shrouded by Himalayan Balsam, where a fox had scampered not an hour earlier.

"It was on Saturday when she went down there," says Carroll, `she' being Henna Rose, the 2-year-old golden retriever who died this week.

"She took off suddenly, disappeared, then came back," recalls Carroll, who was walking Henna for a friend along with her own dog, Max, an Australian shepherd.

What Henna found – and police were later shown – was a brown loaf of flax bread laced with poison not far from the fence, about 25 metres down the little path. The flax later showed up in Henna's vomit.

"I was with her when she passed," says Carroll, still teary as she and a dozen volunteers and a parks department crew begin combing the area, searching – fortunately, in vain – for anything else suspicious.

"This is a wake-up call for everyone," says Bernard Sanders, his voice filled with emotion. "We know we have to be more

### ODE TO A DOG

On a corner fencepost of the allotment gardens, someone has tacked up a poem addressed to "The poisoner." It reads:

*You who would kill a dog*

*Companion of the elderly*

*Protector of a strollered child*

*Guardian of an urban household*

*Defender should an intruder dare*

vigilant and work together as a group. For someone to do this ..."

For days, the park community has been convulsed by tears, anger and dark suspicions, fuelled by grief, self-interest and no small amount of misinformation. About who the dog killer might be. About just how the deed was done. And why.

But it has also laid bare what may become a fight for the soul of the park, or perhaps its many souls. Who really owns High Park, whom should it serve and where, and how will it venture into the future?

It didn't help that police initially insisted that Henna's death was likely connected to a dispute about the size of the off-leash area, which had recently erupted at the community-based High Park Community Advisory Council. That the poison, police said, was probably ethylene glycol – antifreeze – dumped into the communal water bowls at Dog Hill. Or that police would be making inquiries about people known to be militant about restricting canines.

For many dog owners, this was still hard to credit. Dozens of dogs had been drinking water at Dog Hill, but only a handful got sick, two of them dying.

Nor was confusion allayed when police later suggested a possible link between Henna's death and those of raccoons carefully placed in several locations amid beds of hand-picked wildflowers.

Those bizarre funeral displays had happened last year, not recently. And why would a crazed naturalist risk poisoning animals other than dogs?

No, the dog owners soon harboured other suspicions, which the location of the flax bread has done little to quell. Henna likely wasn't the intended target.

Was someone in the allotment gardens trying to kill raccoons lest they devour crops? "Anything is possible," says Lyn Green, who hopes to start representing her fellow gardeners at park meetings. "I'd like to think not. It could be someone migrating from park to park. It could be someone who's just afraid of dogs and hates them."

There's a name for what's happening in High Park these days. Economists call it the "tragedy of the commons" – the tendency of any shared resource to become overexploited, the scene of increasingly bitter turf wars.

High Park may be 162 hectares, but it's host to a dizzying array of uses, from playing fields, tennis courts and a swimming pool in the north, to a huge playground, zoo and rose gardens further south.

Dog Hill itself sits check-by-jowl with the amphitheatre, where the Canadian Stage Company puts on summer Shakespeare – dogs and thespians towering over the allotment gardens at the bottom of the hill.

By one count whose origin seems lost in the mists of time, and generally adjudged

*Champion of a single woman*

*And solace of a single man*

*Running pal of autumn mornings*

*Warm comfort on a winter night*

*Playful dancer in spring sunrise*

*Happy swimmer cooling summer heat*

*Accepting eyes in troubled times*

*Most guile-less and truest of friends*

*You who would kill*

*A dog*

*You who would kill*

*Love*

*Perhaps you, more than anyone,*

*Need a dog.*

conservative by park activists, more than a million people visit High Park each year, whether to cycle, picnic, or fish in Grenadier Pond.

That they happen to be doing all this in a rare ecosystem, surrounded by an urban region of 6 million people, is why Karen Yukich, chair of the advisory council's Natural Environment Committee, is so keen to talk about soil, where it all begins.

Having once been covered by Lake Iroquois, Lake Ontario's predecessor, the whole High Park area is essentially sand and silt, low in nutrients and easily drained of water. Yet a diverse plant community evolved here over thousands of years, centred on black oaks and prairie grasses like Big Bluestem. Provincial authorities have deemed large swaths of the park to be areas of natural and scientific interest, the environmental equivalent of a heritage designation.

Nearly 20 years ago, as an experiment, park crews stopped mowing a section of the grassy tablelands. No small miracle ensued. The seedbed of native plants, thwarted by decades of mowing, slowly started to reassert itself. Wild lupines, which the Group of Seven's J.E.H. MacDonald had once painted, suddenly reappeared.

Ever since, volunteers have been collecting native seeds, propagating them in High Park's greenhouses over the winter and trying to hack back invasive non-native species like American honeysuckle.

Yukich even dreams about bringing back the Karner Blue Butterfly, last seen in High Park in 1926, which uses lupines as the host plant for its offspring. "I believe it's very doable."

But the experiment of two decades ago, which for many people put naturalists on the side of the angels, has also laid the groundwork for inevitable conflict whenever restoration efforts expand

"The kind of plant communities we're trying to restore evolved over thousands of years," says Yukich. "It remains a very fragile kind of environment as far as public use."

At the southern end of High Park, Joe Miller is sitting at a picnic table with his wife, Wanda, minding their daughter's dogs. Brinx, a Jack Russell-poodle-and-dachshund cross, is lounging on the table at Miller's elbow, unleashed, while Cujo, a tiny chihuahua, has got his extendable leash caught in the table's legs.

Miller has heard about the off-leash dispute, the poisoned pets, and isn't going anywhere near Dog Hill. "What's wrong with people?" he wonders. "They don't have enough room for jogging?"

Miller can't help but see the dead dogs as beloved pets, part of a family. "People feel the same way about their dogs as they feel about their children," says Miller, his Glasgow accent undiminished by a half-century's absence. "They get very emotional."

A little later, he and his wife are walking hand-in-hand through dappled sunshine, headed south, near parts of the park whose peripheral geography seems entwined with how they are used.

The area off to the right, running up to Colborne Lodge, has long been a haunt for cruising gays.

Ahead, shielded by shrubbery for much of the year, lies the undulating moonscape of sand that off-road cyclists have carved among towering oaks, overlooking a small pond.

The remnants of a fence remain, and on a rusted fence-rod someone has painted, "You

must be this tall to ride this park," along with an arrow pointing down to a tiny stick figurine near the base.

Nature may have fared better in other areas of the park, but the pressures have remained heavy and constant, not least along Spring Rd., nestled in a north-south ravine cut by a small creek.

It is here, by the water, that Adam Parks and Sagan Bollinger have come to sit on giant boulders. Friends since high school, they've ventured out from downtown jobs for an afternoon of chatting in the shade.

Why here? "The biggest green area with easy access," says Parks, who used to come here as a kid, but only today discovered that Grenadier Pond was much more than a pool of water. "I was looking down there and, wow, this is huge," he says. "We saw a kid fishing."

Bollinger allows that, in recent days, he had been riding his bike off-road in the park. "I didn't know it was a problem," he says, growing sheepish. He didn't notice any signs saying he couldn't ride off-road, which might be because so many of those signs have tended to end up at the bottom of Spring Creek.

The nearby road is paved, but heavy rains have made the adjacent ground a sea of mud, pockmarked by pawprints and the tracks of bicycles. It's part of the off-leash area and on a quiet weekday afternoon Melanie Huston mostly has the place to herself as she walks Keats, a border collie.

A Dog Hill regular, she was among those who found a dead raccoon last year, garlanded with flowers. And she's adamant that Henna's poisoning won't scare her away, either. "I'm not going to be forced out of the park by some whack-job."

Two cyclists come by on the pavement, decked in racing garb. They, too, have heard about the poisoning. "That is so brutal," says Jill Vale, who owns a golden retriever herself.

"I'm sure the dog owners don't like us charging through here," she says, "but there's a good hill at the end."

The real problem, suggests her friend, Jamie Layfield, is the variety of human and canine traffic on Spring Rd., not to mention a "trackless" passenger train pulled by a tractor. "Multi-use trails are more dangerous because of the pedestrians," he says.

"They just get like deer in the headlights," adds Vale.

Layfield has a suggestion: "There should be an area for dogs and an area for cyclists and racers." And another thing: "There's no need for cars to be in this park at all."

As fate would have it, Spring Rd. happens to run right through the middle of some of the park's more ecologically sensitive areas, where restoration attempts have been intense. And dogs, along with people and bikes, have a habit of exploring the surrounding hillsides, fence or no fence.

In the fight for the park, Spring Rd. – and its off-leash status – has become what High Park Advisory Council chair Robin Sorys likes to call "the showstopper," the place where any goodwill and camaraderie among park activists can quickly come to a halt.

It did so this spring, in a series of angry public meetings that ultimately led to a kind of stalemate, which the city now hopes to resolve by forging a new committee to look into the issue, with representation from a broader array of park users.

But it's hard to see that going smoothly for long, despite this week's talk on all sides about trying to work together and build consensus for the good of the park – the chastening legacy, perhaps, of Henna's death.

Neither dog owners nor environmentalists have fundamentally changed their position on Spring Rd.

Yukich still wants it severed from Dog Hill as an off-leash area. "The noise of dogs barking and often owners calling them can be very disruptive and that is an area that's used heavily by both breeding and migrating birds."

Dog owners, equally adamant about not losing any space, have long felt picked-upon.

"We're often the target for enforcement, rightfully so – off-leash in an on-leash area, we should be targeted – but the bike people hardly ever get targeted," says John Cleary, co-chair of the park's K9 Committee. "We have people having bonfires, and people who pick flowers are also breaking bylaws."

And there's another layer of troublesome complexity. The amphitheatre, for instance, where Canadian Stage puts on *The Dream In High Park*, sits atop one of the most sensitive parts of the Spring Rd. ravine, and is part of an area designated by the province to be of scientific interest.

"The rules that apply for us apply for so many other areas," says Cleary. "If we can't be there for environmental reasons, CanStage can't be there, the sculpture gardens can't be there, the zoo can't be there."