

The Neighbour

Whenever she thought about it, Linda realized she was thinking about it too much, and thinking about it only confused her more.

Still, every time something happened, she couldn't help wondering if maybe something should be done. Like yesterday, for instance. She had been behind her back fence, quietly tidying the Brandon cedars, which had been losing too many tiny, newish clumps of baby green. She thought of those fresh sprigs of new growth as tender little hands, reaching out for the light of the sun.

Not the point, though. The point was that while she had been carefully snipping off clusters of tiny dead hands, the neighbours across the back fence got into it again. The son, to be specific. Kevin, she thought his name was; at her age, she couldn't be expected to keep detailed inventories of the names of people she didn't even know. Granted, the neighbours had been there when she and George had moved in thirty years earlier, but they weren't the sort you talked with over the back fence. They weren't the sort you got to know as neighbours.

George had built the fence almost first thing at the new-to-them house. There was a pool and the pre-existing chain-link back fence violated local bylaws requiring pools to be fully fenced at least five feet high, in a way that kept people from seeing in and being able to climb over easily. George had built the new wooden fence smack up against the chain-link. People on the other side could still have climbed over the chain link, but George had talked with the neighbour about sharing costs to tear it and build a nice, new, shared-expense cedar fence. He had not received a positive response.

Linda had the impression the neighbour had been quite rude. George died some years later; his fence remained, weather-beaten and in need of maintenance, but still functional. And, a little like the fence, Linda had learned to do without George; it wasn't easy, because he'd always been the household decision-maker, which was fine with Linda. Her life philosophy could be summed up pretty well with the old line "go

along to get along.” Disagreements of any kind disagreed with her, likely because she’d grown up in a squabbly family.

A bit like the family across the backyard fence, really, though not nearly as bad.

Yesterday, Kevin had been out there, cussing out his father again. Dennis, the father’s name was. George and Linda had pieced together that much over the years. They never did puzzle out the mother’s name. She was dark, heavy-set, slow-moving, perhaps East Indian. Linda had never heard her voice clearly, but sometimes picked up her high-pitched apologetic mumble in the yard. Neither father nor son ever addressed the woman by name that either George or Linda heard. The wife/mother often hung out towels and sheets to dry on the railing of the house’s high sun deck. The laundry usually drooped from the deck railing for days; Linda often wondered if the woman was trying to get mildew out of the cloth by leaving it in the sun for so long.

Dennis, blocky and belligerent, drank. For years he sat on his back deck on occasional summer evenings, cheesy country western music blaring, his drunken voice even louder than the music as he chewed out his wife or his teenaged son. He didn’t do it constantly, just often enough for George and Linda to notice a pattern of weekend drinkfests. They came to understand through his rants that Kevin was a useless, stupid tit who would never amount to anything, a pathetic burden Dennis was forced to bear through no fault of his own. It had been the mother who brought the young idiot into the world, and it hadn’t been Dennis’s idea. The mother was a shiftless, lazy, dumb bitch who dragged Dennis down with her whining and weeping. She was a pig. Kevin was her piglet. Dennis was hopelessly mired in life because of them.

The row of struggling cedars against the fence had been a failed effort to screen out some of the unpleasantness that flowed intermittently into the evening air from the neighbour’s yard. So George and Linda developed the habit of quietly vacating in their own garden deck when Dennis got started. They took their post-dinner wineglasses into the house and gave up the pleasure of evening sit-outs by the pool and flowers and shrubbery.

Kevin grew into a sullen, foul-mouthed adult whose added voice turned Dennis's monologues into vicious verbal contretemps. As they prepared for bed, George and Linda could see the tableau across the fence from their second floor bedroom window, two men in sagging canvas sling chairs on their rotting, high wooden deck, a case of beer or a bottle of whiskey parked between them on the wobbly-looking aluminum table. They sat, drank, and argued until well past sunset.

During the summer, the neighbours left their set of French doors wide open. Linda could never understand why. Mosquitoes in that house must have been horrific. Through the doors, the family's television set was sometimes turned up loud, always set on a sports channel, almost always in tandem with Dennis' heavy, slurred voice shouting obscenities over players' errors, roaring with glee when his team scored. His deck stood about six feet off the ground, and junk accumulated underneath it, finally spilling into the bedraggled yard. Wooden steps off the deck's end led down to the yard, but they collapsed eventually, and someone replaced them with another set of raggedly-built scrap wood stairs at the front of the deck.

After George passed, Linda didn't get into the yard much for a couple of years; she couldn't face the garden they had made together, he with his rock and stonework pathways, she with her perennials and pretty annuals, the forget-me-nots spreading joyously, tumultuously, on their own, moving to different patches every spring as they seeded themselves around the garden. You never knew where where their delicate surprise would pop up from one year to the next, bright blue flowers blazing, then going to seed beside deep green peony bushes and lilies preparing their own brief blooms. The sweet woodruff, though, blossomed snowy-white all summer long and spread more widely each year; Linda didn't have the heart to beat back its growth. Instead she moved perennials to more distant spots as the woodruff took over.

One day, she somehow stumbled again upon the joy she'd taken in nurturing her plants, and she went back at it, pruning, snipping, fertilizing, mulching, weeding, splitting hostas, trying out new, fresh-faced annuals in one spot or another. Life became good again. Peaceful. Soothing.

But complications nonetheless intruded. Linda lived only half-a-dozen houses away from her street's intersection with a four-lane road, down which vehicles blasting emergency sirens raced regularly. The sound always curdled her gut a little.

And yesterday, there was Kevin again, disturbing Linda's pruning, berating his father. Dennis had faded into old age, his voice now weak, tremulous, even frightened. Lately, Kevin routinely laced into the old man with the vigour of decades of suppressed fury. It made Linda wonder if the situation had deteriorated into one of elder abuse. She thought about that every time she heard Kevin curse the old man, who no longer yelled back.

Kevin appeared to be living at home still; he was in the yard for most of the summer, puttering or using noisy power tools for no purpose Linda could see. The spruce trees in his yard had died back to sad, sharp stick forms. He should have cut them down. She had pointedly sheared off dead branches poking into her yard over the fence. He didn't take the hint, probably hadn't even noticed.

Alarmingly, there was now a child in the mix. Perhaps two years old? Whether girl or boy, Linda couldn't tell. The child only seemed to know the word "daddy", which it repeated constantly when in the yard. Dennis, oddly for an alcoholic with a cruel streak, usually talked to the toddler with gruff friendliness. Perhaps the man had mellowed over the decades. Perhaps, like Linda's own father, he had simply quit drinking once he reached old age.

Kevin often spoke harshly to the toddler, telling it to go back in the house. No one ever seemed to play with the child or entertain it in any way. Linda assumed Kevin had become a single father; certainly, she had never seen or heard any signs of a younger woman around the house, and Dennis's wife was clearly far too old to have had another child.

Today, the poor thing was outside again, peeping "daddy, daddy." But there was no answer to the tiny treble voice.

It was a warm, sunny, windless late afternoon. By now, Kevin or his father, or both of them, were normally in the yard, either alone and shoving junk around, or quarreling over one thing or another. Linda carefully unravelled and pulled another thin green line of Creeping Charlie out of the coarse mulch around one of her peonies.

Standing up, she cautiously stretched, then ambled the few steps to the back fence. Years of amending soil and adding mulch had raised her garden bed by at least a foot. She could now stand on her raised mulch bed and comfortably peer over the fence.

The child was alone on the deck in the yard, with only that flimsy railing to keep it from falling into the yard's litter of sharp and pointy chunks of junk. The French doors to the right of the deck were, of course, open. Probably that was how the child had gotten outside unsupervised. But surely, someone from inside the house would reply at any moment, would come outside to shepherd the child back to safety.

There was no laundry hanging on the deck railing. And it occurred to Linda that she hadn't noticed any for some days. That might not mean anything, though. Lots of times there wasn't any laundry hanging. She was thinking about it too much again. The point was, the child was alone.

Perhaps two of the three adults in the house were not home and the third, left to tend to the child, had fallen asleep, or, if Kevin or Dennis, more likely had passed out. What if Kevin had finally taken his fists to Dennis, or beaten him into unconsciousness with a household implement of some sort, possibly even killed him? But where would the mother have been? Grocery shopping?

No, someone would almost certainly step outside any minute and rescue the child. It might be best if Linda minded her own business for awhile and went in to make a pot of tea. She would have her tea and consider the problem. Then she might come back out and, if the child was still there alone and in harm's way, intervene somehow. Perhaps call the police.

Peeling off her gardening gloves, Linda walked into her house, filled the kettle with water and put it on to boil, popped a couple of Red Rose teabags into her pretty Royal Albert Old Country Roses china pot, and pulled her favourite mug from the kitchen shelf over the sink. Red Rose was the only tea she liked, and she liked it in the nice big hand-thrown pottery mug George had given her, with its good strong handle that fit perfectly in her grip.

It was only after she'd poured the boiling water over the teabags in the pot that she realized the child had stopped crying for its daddy.

The emergency vehicle sirens she heard in place of the piping little voice were very close and very loud.

Carrying her empty mug in her hand, she slipped back out into her yard and tiptoed to the back fence. The child had disappeared from the back yard. The sirens stopped, and she could see red flashes from bright revolving lights in the street in front of the neighbour's house. She couldn't tell whether it was an ambulance or a police car. She stood on her mulch bed and watched for a very long time, but there was no movement in the neighbours' back yard. The red flashes began moving up the neighbours' street after awhile, towards the main road. Silently. No sirens.

Linda went back inside to pour her tea. She had oversteeped it. And now it was lukewarm.