

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

STAN ROGAL

THE HOUSE WAS A BARGAIN, all things considered. A handyman special, sure, though solid with tons of potential: converted two-and-a-half storey detached brick with three baths, two kitchens, several bedrooms and full basement on a three-block, one-way street next to a park in an up-and-coming downtown residential area, a ten-minute jaunt to the subway and—major selling point—good-sized backyard. Connie and I'd been living in a cramped apartment for four years until we had enough money for a down payment, and we wanted a place where there'd be room for a lawn, garden, deck. Our own piece of paradise in the city.

It was a bank repossession. Apparently the woman who owned the place, along with several other properties around town, rented out apartments, generally to students, while neglecting to pay the mortgages. She avoided prosecution by rotating the names on the deeds between her various children. Seems she went a bit off her rocker in the end. Dementia or something. Phoning tenants at all hours warning them to keep their racket down; threatening to bring down the law if they didn't stop partying; informing them that she was watching their every move, could see what they were up to through the windows and that there'd be hell to pay. This was mostly fabrication on her part, we were told. No one knew exactly where she called from and she was never sighted in the vicinity. Still, it was unsettling.

We learned all this through our real estate agent.

Naturally, some tenants vacated due to the harassment, though most simply learned to block her calls or shut off their phones after a certain hour. Decent living spaces were at a premium and the rents were affordable. The law eventually caught up with her. She's since been shipped off to an institution where she's confined and sedated. Her kids have also vamoosed. The bank took over the management of the properties and by the time we moved in we had the place to ourselves.

Home sweet home.

The neighbours must've been pleased with us and what we were doing to the house. They'd hang out on their porches or lean over fences nodding and grinning, nudging each other and giving us the odd wave as we dragged out old shelving, damaged appliances, busted furniture and miscellaneous other garbage and put the place in order. The scene reminded me of that Richard Brautigan poem: "Loading mercury with a pitchfork / your truck is almost full. The neighbours / take a certain pride in you. They / stand around watching."

"Mind if I ask you a question?" This was Todd who lived in the semi on the east side of us. We shared a common walkway.

"Shoot," I said.

"How much did you end up paying?"

I told him and he whistled. "Pretty good deal."

"Yeah. Got a lot of work to do, of course. Needs a new roof, new wiring, new paint, gotta repair walls, some plumbing problems to take care of. Then there's the yard."

Todd had a postage-stamp backyard jammed in by the property that ran perpendicular to ours off another street. A massive maple tree took up a corner near his house and thick branches loomed above. In fact, there were just two houses on the block that had deep yards, ours and one on the west side of us, which was comprised of a few sadly managed fruit trees, a stretch of patchy yellowed grass and dandelions.

"All takes time. You gonna do the work yourself?"

"What we can. Got a roofer coming in. Need an electrician. Otherwise, we're both pretty good with a hammer and a paint brush."

"We rent our basement to a guy who does renovations. He knows someone who works for Hydro. They re-wired our place. Probably give you a deal if you're interested."

"Sounds good."

"He's away this weekend. I'll put him in touch."

"Fine." I headed around back where Connie had a paper and pencil and was drawing plans for the garden. Connie was a visual artist and taught classes through the local school boards.

"No great shakes at the moment," she said. "Nothing but weeds. Looks like someone tried to grow vegetables at one point."

"You want vegetables?"

"In city dirt? I don't think so. This area used to be factories. Likely full

of toxic chemicals. Maybe in tubs later. Right now, I'm thinking rock garden in the middle with a Rose of Sharon as a centrepiece. A cedar chip path to separate this from the rear garden. We cover the ugly wire metal fence with a string of boards and plant a row of hedge cedars so we don't have to look at all the junk they've got piled there. Build a new high fence on the east side to cover those two eyesore sheds, maybe plant a climbing rose bush and some lilac trees? There'll be lotsa sun."

"What about between us and Todd?" There was more wire metal enclosure that covered about a third of our yard and all of his.

"I think it's fine. He and his wife seem nice enough and we don't want to look like we're a couple of snot noses. Same with the other side. Maybe just fence in enough near the house to give us some privacy on the deck."

"Should work," I said.

"Raised flower beds all around, leave some grassy area in the middle for lawn chairs and such. Behind us, where it's mainly packed dirt, we build the deck."

"Done," I agreed. "I guess the roots of that maple next door make it pretty impossible to grow anything there anyway."

"Yeah, nice to have the shade though, over the house. Keep it cooler in summer. Speaking of which, the ground'll be thawed enough to dig soon. I'm going to take a drive to Home Depot and check out shovels. Imagine—our first shovel."

"It's early March. Could still have snow."

"I know it. But as someone famous once said: 'The readiness is all!'"

"Yeah, and we know how that ended for Hamlet."

We gave each other a cuddle and a kiss. She went into the house to grab the car keys. I walked to the other side of the yard. A woman sauntered to the metal fence and propped her elbows on the top rail. There was a dog behind her sniffing out a place to crap. The woman had tousled dirty-blond hair, no make-up, wore a baggy blue Aeropostale hoodie, tight Levis, a pair of scuffed Adidas. She held a large Starbucks' travel mug in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She wasn't unattractive in a casual mishap sort of way, early thirties I guessed, similar age to Connie and me.

"You the new owner?"

"Guilty," I smiled.

"Vicki." She tucked the coffee mug under an armpit, extended her hand and we shook lightly.

“Wayne. Wife’s Connie.”

“Huh. That’s Mooch.” She indicated the dog, some kind of terrier cross who was squatted in the business position. “Today he’s Mooch. Yesterday Bingo. The day before ... whatever. I call him something different everyday. Fucks with his head. Gives me something to do. Never misses a meal. You got kids?”

“Nope. No kids.”

“Huh. Too bad. I’ve got a seven-year-old son. I was hoping whoever moved in might have someone he could play with. There’re three other kids close by. Four, I guess, if you count the fact the Chinese couple who live next to me has Siamese twins, girls, joined at the head and pelvis, aged two.” She tilts her head. “Weird. Three doors down from you the other way, a lesbian couple—renters—have a daughter aged eighteen months, total retard, can’t string two words together. It’s all *goo-goo ga-ga*. She drools, sucks her thumb constantly, doesn’t stop. Sad. On the corner same direction a boy aged seventeen who’ll end up in jail or dead, not because he’s necessarily bad, just that he spends all his time sitting on the second-floor porch with his laptop, rain or shine, smoking dope and wacking off to internet porn. Pathetic.”

There was a faint slur to her speech and I could smell a sweetness on her breath. Her coffee was obviously laced with something, maybe Bailey’s. She took a drag from her smoke and tapped ash on the grass. The dog chased after a squirrel.

“What do you do?”

“For a living?”

“Is there something else?” She twisted her mouth to make sure I knew she was being ironic.

“I teach English at George Brown College.”

“Huh, that so? I work in theatre. Props and costumes. My husband designs software for computer games. When he’s not working he’s playing computer games. He has his own room in the basement. Big sign on the door: **VERBOTTEN!** Capital letters, boldface, spelled with two Ts. Don’t ask. Once he goes in, he doesn’t come out. I never see him. Doesn’t matter. We stay together for our son. I have it figured out. I’m leaving him when I’m forty. That’s in eight years. Our son will be fifteen. That’s old enough to deal with divorce. Forty’s still young. Still young enough to be attractive to someone else. I clean up good. Nothing wrong with my body. There’s someone after me now as a matter of fact. Artistic director.” She said the term like it meant

something. “I told him come back in eight years. I’ll be free then and ready for action. Anyway, he’s married too and all he really wants is an extramarital fuck and I don’t fuck around. That’s why God gave me fingers.” She waggles the fingers of her cigarette hand. “I haven’t told my husband I’m leaving. Let it be a surprise.” She knocked back the remains of her coffee. “Anyway, that’s that. No kids, huh?”

“Thinking about it.”

“Too late for me and my son now, isn’t it? See you around.” She wanders toward the house and the dog follows. The pile of fresh crap is left to steam alongside several other cooled piles.

Within a few months we had an impressive garden blooming: California poppies, daisies, day lilies, echinacea, black-eyed Susans making a bit of a splash. It was surprising how many folks popped over just to take a look. The guy in the semi attached to Todd, name of Eric, older, walked with a cane, owned a yappy American Eskimo dog, stood in the walkway, stroked his beard and remarked: “Well, well—first summer in and you’ve already got the best-kept garden on the block. Congratulations.”

Connie and I felt pretty proud. By the following spring, seemed everyone around us was in garden mode. Todd’s wife, Laura, was digging up cakey-clay muck, wheeling it out and hauling in rocks and topsoil, dropping in hostas, ferns, begonias and other shade-tolerant plants.

“It’s the maple,” she said. “You can’t grow shit in this shade. But I’m trying.”

She brought in colourful flower baskets and hung them around the yard. Todd came out, lifted the thin layer of ragged grass and laid fresh sod.

“This is all your fault,” he kidded me. “Everyone’s got the gardening bug because of you guys. I told Laura, between the dog ... you don’t have a dog, right?” They had a golden lab. “Between the dog and the maple, this new lawn doesn’t stand a chance. Don’t matter, she wants it. I told her, doesn’t stand a chance in hell.”

He was right. After a few weeks, the sod turned brown with dog piss and general wear and tear, the baskets sagged, the garden plants withered. The maple was an issue. And the dog. Didn’t help that no one took the time to water, fertilize or weed.

Meanwhile, our garden thrived.

One sunny day, Connie asked if I'd left the hose on out front. It was leaking at the tap and she remembered turning it off the day before. I shook my head no, took a quick peek, said I could fix the leak by replacing the washer, though this didn't account for the tap being on in the first place.

"What's this?" said Connie. She pulled a small, yellow rubber duck from under a hosta leaf.

"Maybe dropped by whoever used the hose."

"But why would someone use our hose?"

"Don't know. Maybe from the park. Wanted to give their kid a drink of water. Or their dog."

Connie twisted her lips. "There's a fountain in the park for that."

"You're right. I'll fix the washer," I told her. "At least it'll stop the leak. If someone does use it again. Maybe they won't."

"Could at least turn it off when they're done."

I nodded.

Vicki walked over. She had a cigarette going and the dog was bouncing at her heels. "That'd belong to the little girl three doors up. The retard." She pointed to the duck with her chin. "The lesbian couple. They've been borrowing your water to use in their garden. Filling up a bucket."

"Why would they do that?" asked Connie.

"They rent a second-floor apartment. There's no hose in front of their house. Easier to use yours than carry water down from their place, is my guess."

"Why didn't they ask? I don't care if they use our hose, I'd just like to know." Connie turns to me.

"Yeah," I said. "Beats me."

"C'mon Rover," Vicki tugged at the leash. "Park." She crossed the street with the dog in tow. I wondered if she had a plastic poop bag with her.

Connie poked me in the ribs and led me up the street to check out the women's garden. There were colourful petunias, impatiens and marigolds in bloom.

"It's nice," she said. "Better than it was. I just wish they'd've asked." She took the rubber duck and placed it in the dirt, slightly concealed by plant leaves. "They'll think she dropped it here."

The next day, Sunday, I walked back from the store with a loaf of bread. Eric sat on his porch reading the newspaper. Orange day lilies sprouted from a small patch of earth below, along with geraniums and begonias. A purple

clematis climbed a trellis. His dog charged the railing and yapped. Eric told him to hush. The dog flattened and growled behind his teeth.

“The garden looks nice,” I said.

“Oh, it’s fine. Not as nice as your’s. Once again, you’ve got the best garden in the neighbourhood.”

“How would you know?” I asked. “You haven’t been by lately.”

“Don’t fool yourself,” he grinned. “I pop over every so often to check it out.”

“You do?”

“Sure I do! In fact, I bring people over with me and show them. Everyone says the same thing: beautiful yard. Best in the neighbourhood. Should be in a magazine.”

“You bring people over?”

“Yeah. I kid ’em and say it’s my overflow garden.”

“I haven’t seen you in the yard.”

“Course not. I do it when you’re not around. Don’t want to be a bother, invade your privacy or anything.”

“How do you know when we’re not around.”

Eric looked at me like I was a lunatic. “Are you joking? We’re neighbours, right? We know what goes on.”

“We might surprise you. Arrive home early one time.”

“Never happen. You’d be spotted a mile away,” he laughed.

“Right,” I said. “Have a good one.”

“You too.” The dog leapt to his feet and started yapping again as I walked off.

Connie was crouched over a spot near the porch stairs. She twisted her neck and shot me a look. “Did you dig up a plant from here?”

“No. Why would I?”

“I put in two red dragon begonias yesterday and today one of them is missing. What the hell? Who would steal a begonia? They’re only like, what, three bucks?”

“I don’t know.”

“And they didn’t even try to cover up the fact. Look! They left the hole. They didn’t even try to fill it. It’s like they wanted me to know.”

“Uh-huh. The neighbours have been visiting our backyard.”

“What? What do you mean *visiting*?”

I explained to her what Eric told me. Connie looked stunned.

“That’s just so ... What’s the word I’m searching for? Wrong. It’s wrong on so many levels. It’s trespassing. It’s invasion of privacy. It’s fucked is what it is.”

I knew her question had been rhetorical so I simply did my best bobblehead and nodded affirmatively to everything she said.

“What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know. It’s perplexing.”

“It’s not perplexing, it’s fucked up.” Connie coiled the hose over her shoulder. “What we’re going to do is fence in the rest of the yard and put up a big fucking gate with an even bigger fucking lock. They can’t just come and go as they please. What the fuck?”

She was riled. I had never heard her use the F-bomb that often in one paragraph. Connie made the call, a crew arrived and within a couple of days we were encased in a six-foot, six-inch stand of pressure-treated posts, boards and lattice. She even had them erect a small lattice fence around the front garden. I think she would have trimmed the entire enclosure with barbed wire if it wasn’t against code.

“Un-fucking-believable,” said Connie, still steamed. She bolted the gate from the inside and slapped on a heavy-duty lock. “Try this on for size.”

We went into the house and made dinner.

Vicki was the first to arrive in the park, cigarette and drink in hand. Her son was beside her as was the dog. They positioned themselves on the grass directly across from our living-room window. Vicki took an occasional drag or sip, but otherwise she was motionless. The kid and dog as well. Todd and Laura were next with their golden lab. Then Eric with his American Eskimo. Then the Asian couple with the Siamese twins and a pair of French bulldogs. Then the lesbian couple with their drooly daughter and a black water spaniel. Then the teen on the corner, puffing on a fat boy and cradling a hairless chihuahua. Once on the grass, they turned to face us and never moved, just stared. Others arrived, some with children, all with dogs.

“What are they doing?” asked Connie. “Where are they all coming from? What do they want?”

“I don’t know. One thing’s sure, they can’t keep this up for long. Just standing there like that. They’ll get tired and go.”

Except they didn’t. Their numbers multiplied. The park quickly began to fill with people and dogs, all fixated, staring motionless at our house.

“When it gets dark,” I said. “They’ll have to leave.” I shut the curtains except for a crack to peek through.

The sun was setting. We crossed our fingers and took a breath. More people arrived, this time carrying firewood. They set to work lighting small bonfires throughout the park, then took up their motionless positions among the others.

“What’s happening?” said Connie. “They’re like a bunch of movie zombies.”

“Yeah, except without the blood and gore make-up.”

“That just makes it more horrific.”

“It reminds me of a story I read. Some guy looks out his window and sees a dark figure on the lawn. The figure doesn’t move, just stands there. The guy lets it go for a while, thinking the figure will eventually disappear. Of course, it doesn’t. The man is terrified. He believes at some point this figure will try to attack him, so he goes down to the basement and begins to tunnel underground. He digs for days. When he thinks he’s gone far enough, he crawls up and emerges on someone else’s lawn. He’s dead tired, so he just stands there catching his breath. The person inside the house looks out the window and sees him like that, standing there, a dark motionless figure.”

“Then what happens?”

“That’s it.”

“That’s it? The end? I hate that story. Why did you tell me that story?”

I didn’t know why I told her that story. It simply popped into my head. A patrol car pulled up outside, lights flashing.

“Look,” I said, changing the subject. “It’s the police.”

“Thank God,” whispered Connie. “There must be some law against this. Illegal assembly, loitering or whatever. They’ll disperse them.”

Two officers walked up to Vicki. One had a German shepherd on a leash. They didn’t say a word to her or to anyone else so far as we could tell. Instead, they took their place alongside, turned and stared straight at us. They didn’t budge a muscle, dog included.

“Oh my God,” cried Connie. “Jesus fucking Christ. What are we going to do?”

“Connie, stay calm, honey. Sooner or later they have to leave.”

“That’s not the point. The point is they shouldn’t be here doing any of this in the first place. It shouldn’t be allowed.”

“I agree. It shouldn’t”

“We have to do something.” Connie scrambled away from the window.

“What? What are you going to do?”

“I’ll tell you what I’m not going to do. I’m not going into the goddamn basement and try to tunnel my way out of here, that’s for goddamn sure.”

She flew downstairs and I followed. She dragged the Sawzall from its hook, snapped on a new blade and attached the battery pack. She put on safety goggles, a pair of work gloves, shot up the stairs, out the door and into the back yard. She squeezed the trigger and tore into the gate, ripping through metal screws and hinges. She laid into the support posts and they toppled in a pile. She tramped through the flower beds, crushing hostas, geraniums, periwinkle, New Guinea impatiens, begonias, lilies, daisies. Didn’t matter. She ripped into the fence boards. Frayed pieces of lattice flew in all directions. Tree branches were lopped. Bushes crushed. She didn’t give it a second thought. She didn’t quit until the entire fence was rubble. Next, she performed a similar act of destruction on the front fence.

Meanwhile, as she converted the wooden fences to chunks, splinters and sawdust, the crowd, lit by the patrol car’s flashing lights, closed in around the house, marched up the walkway in single file and proceeded to pack the debris and convey it hand-over-hand to the park where it was unceremoniously heaved into the flames and incinerated. Even the dogs pitched in, transporting bits of lumber between their jaws.

I helped Connie into the house. We staggered toward the living-room window and looked out. The fires raged then slowly began to die out. The crowd thinned, folks departing from all corners of the park. The two police officers and the German shepherd piled into the patrol car, turned off the flashers and pulled away.

Connie and I showered and crawled into bed.

Next morning the sky was cloudless and the sun hung bright and warm. Connie and I walked past Eric, who was quietly reading a newspaper on his porch. The dog charged the railing and yapped at us. Eric told him to hush.

“Nice day,” he said. “No sign of rain.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Beautiful.”

“I heard the weatherman say maybe Friday,” said Connie.

“Weatherman’s been wrong before,” said Eric. “Only job in the world where you can be wrong more often than not and still get paid.” He grinned.

“You got that right,” I said.

Connie and I walked hand-in-hand to the subway. We talked more about the weather. We talked about maybe getting ourselves a dog.