

Neighbors

When I retired from my job as an elementary school principal, my wife finally agreed to sell our house in the suburbs and buy the hobby farm I'd always wanted. She was still employed as an illustrator for a publishing company and almost all her work was done remotely by then, so she said she could do that just as easily out in the sticks. The place was only twelve acres and less than an hour away from our old house, but it had everything I'd dreamed of. The former owners had recently retired themselves to a warm weather state and were happy to include in the price their dozen or so heads of cattle, handful of chickens, and all their farm equipment. They even left the barn cat.

The son of one of my former teachers worked as a realtor in the area, showed us the place, and negotiated the sale and all other details. One of those was a survey of the property's boundaries, which hadn't been done for more than the century that the deed had been in the former owner's family. The only surprise with the survey involved a short curve in our next-door neighbor's irrigation ditch out towards the middle of our properties that the realtor said actually belonged to us.

"Yeah, the ditch kind of makes a little jog across the boundary line around a tree." I'd put my cell phone on speaker and brought it into the study where my wife worked so she could hear. "My guess is that the original owners simply made some sort of personal arrangement way back when to allow access for that way. Maybe to provide a little shade for the neighbor's cattle in that section. But the stretch is definitely yours, and you can use the water from it to irrigate your fields if you want. Like we discussed, your own irrigation ditch on the other side has become pretty paltry over the years and may eventually dry out altogether. Nice stroke of luck for you actually."

My wife had put down her drawing pencil. We stared at each other for a long moment until I finally asked him, "So what do we do now?"

“Well, you don’t have to do anything yourselves, at least for the moment. I’ll simply talk with your neighbor and see if things can be resolved at that level. Checked his deed, and he’s lived there all his life and has quite a bit more acreage than you, so we’ll see. All that’s really needed is for him to re-route twenty or so yards of barbed wire fencing. Shouldn’t take him more than a half-hour to do that, but he’s an old codger named Dale who I understand is kind of a hermit and pretty crotchety.” He paused. “Anyway, I’ll go explain things to him, show him the survey, then let you know.”

After he hung up, my wife and I continued to look at each other until she said, “No need to hurry worry, I guess.”

I shrugged and said, “Suppose not.”

It took our realtor several days to call again. Like the last time, I put him on speaker in my wife’s study. “Well, he’s not happy,” our realtor told us. “Not at all...spitting mad, in fact. Kept shouting about history, family honor, and all that. But in the end, he moved the fence.” He gave a snort-like chuckle. “Probably won’t be inviting you to dinner anytime soon, though.”

He went on to discuss other details about our move-in, which was still several weeks away. When we ended the call, my wife said, “Maybe we should have left the fence alone.”

“Too late for that now.” I gave another shrug that I hoped looked more dismissive than I felt.

Our realtor hid the keys to the place under a potted chrysanthemum he left as a housewarming gift by the side door. We’d driven from our old house ahead of the movers, and after we’d walked through all our new empty rooms, we went out into the backyard. The big mounded garden at the far end of the lawn was still turned under in the late spring, and beyond it our fenced fields began, more or less evenly divided for grazing and hay, sloping gently towards the forest and foothills in the distance. Our cows were huddled together at the back of the grazing side to the left. The weathered barn sat off to our right, and next to it, the chicken coop and a small corral that I supposed had once been used for a horse. Our next-door neighbor’s own corral mirrored it, split in half for pigs and sheep, as did his house across a narrow cinder driveway. A tall old man in a jean jacket and

tattered ball cap leaned against fence separating the corrals staring at us. I assumed he was Dale.

I motioned to my wife with my chin and said, "Look."

She turned his way. Dale stood perfectly still, his forearms on the top plank of fencing, white grizzle sprinkling his cheeks and what I could see on the sides of his head under the cap. I lifted my hand in greeting, but he didn't return the gesture. Instead, he spat over the fence into our corral, turned slowly, and walked off towards his house.

"Well, hello to you, too," I heard my wife say.

I'd grown up on my grandparents' farm and had nostalgic memories of it, which certainly contributed to my desire to buy the new place. There really wasn't all that much involved in managing it: tend to the animals, irrigate where needed, use the riding mower on our sprawling lawn, fiddle with machinery and little projects here and there, help my wife with the garden, hay and seed the one side of the fields when the time came for each. But it was enough to keep me busy, add some productive satisfaction to the hours I was uncertain how to fill when I'd first retired, and it did remind me fondly of my youth.

Our interactions with Dale remained basically the same as that first one. Every time my wife or I were outside in his proximity, he'd quickly go in the other direction. She and I usually took a walk down the road past his house after dinner and looked over as we passed by. If he was in a window when we did, he'd yank the curtain closed. If he was in his big barn which fronted the road, he'd disappear into its dark recesses. We noticed he left his garden unplanted, so my wife brought over some fresh picked corn when our first ears were ready and left them on his front step with a note; we found them unhusked on top of his garbage can out by the roadside when we walked by that evening.

A couple weeks after that, I took a chance and approached him while he was painting his side of our corral fencing. I came up to him quietly through the soft earth and said, "Howdy."

His head snapped up, then his wide eyes went to slits. The glare behind them was as hard as nails.

"Pleased to meet you," I said.

I watched his jaw clench and he grunted once. Then he spun on his heels and went off carrying his dripping paint brush like a baton, hobbling a little. He left the can of open paint where he'd been standing.

My wife held a basket of eggs she'd collected from the chicken coop as I came back across the corral. When I was beside her, she said, "I saw that exchange. Didn't look too friendly."

"Nope."

"What else can we do?"

I gave her another one of my useless shrugs. "Not much that I can see."

Our lives gradually fell into a kind of quiet rhythm, and where Dale was concerned, we simply did our best to ignore him and his continued coldness towards us. He was a good decade older than me and, as far as I could tell, still did all the work on his place by himself. This included triple our acreage and number of cattle, along with the pigs and sheep, plus a sizable stand of apple trees.

As for the work on our own farm, I mostly taught myself what I didn't remember doing from my childhood. That first summer's haying was a bit of a challenge, but I used the internet to acquaint myself with the old equipment involved, and with my wife's help assembled a stack of bales five wide and eave-high up against the corral side of the barn. We kept the exposed portion covered with tarps, and it lasted as cattle feed well into the next spring. I didn't even try to venture into animal husbandry, but hired a local vet who came out for calving and things like that. We used the same buyers that the former owners had for our cattle and excess eggs. I'd always been pretty handy, so did my own maintenance on all the machinery. I learned to can vegetables from the garden and planted some berry bushes out front by the road that bore well even that first year. My wife's illustration work continued without complication or interruption; she said she appreciated the peace and quiet. And we both enjoyed the passing seasons out there in the country. All in all, we adjusted pretty well.

We didn't need to use any water from Dale's ditch to irrigate; our own remained sufficient. However, I did see him from time to time out where he'd had to move his fencing at that curve; I supposed he was checking to see if I'd installed any piping or a pump. Every now and then, my wife left

him something else from our garden on his front step. I usually walked over with her and waited in the road when she did. Sometimes as she was leaving, I thought I could see a tiny rustle at the curtain in his front door, but I was never certain. She dispensed with any further notes, and although we got no acknowledgment in return, we didn't see anything she'd left for him in his garbage can again either. I wondered why his own garden remained unplanted and untended. Had it become too much work or was there something else involved? I had noticed a not-so-old pair of women's gardening gloves hanging from a peg just inside his barn, but that didn't necessarily mean anything.

As time went on, when I saw Dale outside, it seemed that his limp grew worse. Our bedroom and his were both upstairs and only separated by about fifty yards, so sometimes after my wife and I had gotten in bed and turned out the light, I'd see him through our windows in his plaid pajamas turning down his own bed, his movements slow, labored, and it seemed to me for some reason, sad. He had to grip both hands under his knee to lift that bad leg up under the covers. After his own light blinked off, I often thought of what it must be like for him to have to navigate those stairs every night and then wait for sleep to come in that big bed alone. When I did, I was glad for my wife's warm body and even breathing next to me.

We didn't have any problems or accidents to speak of at our new place until one day at the end of our second summer there. It had been unusually rainy, and my wife and I had been scrambling to get our hay cut, baled, and stacked in the short, dry window forecasted on the weather report. It was late in the afternoon, and she and I were hurrying to finish adding to the stack of bales I'd finished that day. I'd cut and raked all our fields, but had only baled half, so it was about eight feet up on top of the stack on the side of the barn that we'd assembled so far. My wife stood almost as high on the fresh bales stacked on our little hay wagon beside me using baling hooks to swing one at a time to me; I used hooks of my own to grab and position them on the stack. As I was bending down for a new exchange, my feet slipped on the stack's slick edge, and I fell, dropping my hooks. I hit the side of our hay wagon on the way down. We both heard my leg crack then, and again when I struck the ground. I suppose Dale did, too,

where I saw him through my grimace and yelps of pain tossing slops in his pigpen. I was thankful my wife had her cell phone with her because she called 911 right away, and it didn't take more than fifteen minutes afterwards for the ambulance to arrive. While they were loading me on a stretcher into the back of it, she ran to follow it to the hospital in our car, and I saw Dale watching again. He'd moved closer, his slop pan dangling from one hand; with the other, it looked like he'd slowly raised an index finger in my direction.

The fracture near my knee was hairline, but the one in my ankle was compound, so I came home after a night in the hospital in a full cast from my thigh to the top of my foot. My wife had to use a portable wheelchair to get me out of the car in our driveway. Dale was out in his pigpen again as we were making our clumsy attempts to negotiate that; I was aware of him regarding us as we did. My discharge orders directed me to remain in bed for a full week, so my wife had fixed up one of the downstairs bedrooms for me. It was alongside our driveway, so once she'd gotten me situated in bed with pillows under my cast and propped behind my back, I could see Dale through the thin curtains that covered the window. He hadn't moved from his pigpen and was still staring across at our house.

I awoke early that next morning to the sound of a tractor passing my window. I frowned as I became fully conscious and heard it continue chugging past the barn towards our fields. I sat up and heard my wife moving upstairs from our bedroom into the room at the back of the house that she'd turned into her study. A few minutes later, she clattered downstairs and appeared in her robe in my doorway.

Her frown matched my own as she said, "Dale."

"What about him?"

Her eyes widened. "He just started baling what's left in our fields."

I felt my own eyes widen. I turned towards the window where I could see gray clouds gathering high in the sky.

My wife asked, "Did you hear what I said?"

I nodded slowly, then blew out a breath. "He's trying to help us," I said. "Trying to beat the rain."

"What should we do?"

I looked back at her. "Can you handle that hay wagon on your own?"

"I think so."

“Go thank him, then collect the bales he makes and stack them.” A distant roll of thunder interrupted me. I gave a quick look in its direction. “I figure the two of you have about three hours, maybe four.”

She nodded herself. “You okay on your own?”

“Sure,” I gestured towards the fields. “Go.”

The rolls of thunder inched closer as the morning wore on. I watched Dale and my wife finish tarping the last stack of bales on the side of our barn a little before noon. By then, I’d managed to get out of bed, into the portable wheelchair, and had rolled myself out to the open side door. The first splats of rain came just as my wife was reaching up to shake Dale’s hand where he sat on his tractor in our driveway. He reached down, shook, then started chugging away, his baler swaying a little behind him. As he passed the side door, he glanced over. I patted my chest and pointed to him. He tipped his cap once in return. Then he was on his slow way down to the end of our driveway and turned left onto the road towards his own. Rain fell harder as my wife stood getting plenty wet and watching him go. I did the same, dry and grateful for good neighbors, at the side door of the home I knew would be our last.