

WHEN MY HUSBAND AND I WERE A young married couple, we had a neighbor who was a single mother and needed a lot of support. She often came over to use our washer and dryer, or just to drink coffee and visit.

One day I hosted a committee meeting for a community group. The members were all older and more affluent than I was, and I wanted them to think highly of me, so I served dessert and coffee on my best china. Everyone seemed comfortable — until my neighbor walked in with her robe on, got herself a cup of coffee, and pulled up a chair.

Once I'd introduced her, she took over the conversation and proceeded to tell everyone about her troubles with her boyfriend, who was a boating enthusiast. She was thinking of breaking up with him, she said: "He never seems to have any time for me. He's too busy with his boat — and his wife!"

*Carole S.
Three Rivers, Michigan*

I HAVE GOOD NEIGHBORS HERE IN prison, fourteen of them, all living within twenty feet of me. Charles is a black drug dealer from Mississippi; I'm a white lawyer from Memphis. He and I discuss the Bible, his children, and my writing. We condescend to each other, but still value one another's company. Miguel, in the bunk below me, speaks English slowly but animatedly. He is a former restaurateur who sold cocaine along with Mexican cuisine. Though he's long-winded, he is also generous to a fault.

I will get out of prison in a few months. My mother has kindly bought me a small house in a respectable, middle-class neighborhood, where I can rebuild my life. She has confided to a select few of my future neighbors that the house is for her son, who is in prison. Undoubtedly her "secret" has since been discussed at neighborhood-association meetings.

I worry: Will my new neighbors ever trust me? Will I like them? Will I feel isolated? I am more nervous about meeting my neighbors in the free world than I was about meeting my neighbors in prison.

*John A. Jennings
Memphis, Tennessee*



WILLIAM CARTER

Readers Write **NEIGHBORS**

MY WIFE AND I LIVE AT THE END OF a dirt road, in a cabin surrounded by the creeping branches of three live oaks. When we first moved here, we bragged to friends about having no neighbors: we could walk around naked and crank the stereo until midnight. But after a few days we realized that we did have neighbors, and they soon let us know who really owns the place: A wood rat occupies our shed. Squirrels use our roof as a runway, their claws screeching against the metal at

5 A.M. Mule deer graze on our herb garden. A skunk with an appetite for vociferous sex lives under our kitchen.

Our neighbors almost drove us back into town. But now, when we visit friends in the city, there's something missing. These animals remind us that we're alive, that each moment is an opportunity to howl, or hang from a tree limb, or romp in the bushes all night long.

*Paul Grafton
Santa Barbara, California*

KITTY BELONGED TO GLADYS, WHO lived next door. Old and scruffy, Kitty would often slink in through my open window and make herself at home. She and George, my big tom, would gaze lazily at one another for a while and then part — much the way Gladys and I did when we visited each other.

Gladys was in her seventies, and the first couple of times I knocked on her door, it took her a while to answer. Eventually Gladys quit getting up and simply shouted, “Come on in!” She was a good neighbor: quiet, unobtrusive, and understanding of our desire to have her trees topped so we might see the ocean. She had only a few guests each year: a sister from Minnesota, a son, a granddaughter. I didn’t visit her often, but I always brought her some of my dahlias when they were in bloom. Each time I visited, Gladys would ask, “Kitty’s not bothering you now, is she?” I’d tell her Kitty never bothered me.

Last winter I realized Kitty had not dropped by for some time. When I went next door to investigate, Gladys didn’t answer. That afternoon I saw a van parked in her driveway. I walked over and asked the driver, who turned out to be her son, if anything had happened to Gladys. He told me his mother had died. She’d been in the hospital, he said.

I was shocked. If I’d known, I would have visited her. Why had no one told me? I felt hurt and left out.

Then I realized that Gladys’s family had no reason to tell me about her condition. I had played only a peripheral role in the life — and now death — occurring on the other side of my property line. I wondered why I hadn’t taken more time to get to know her. Are we all so uninterested in the people who live just thirty feet away?

*Jo Nelsen
Pasadena, California*

AT THE AGE OF FORTY I WAS DIAG- nosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and chronic fatigue syndrome. Then my health benefits were cut off. I didn’t know how I would survive, financially or physically.

I found a new living arrangement with a woman named Patty, who had multi-

ple sclerosis. She needed in-home care; I needed free rent. But this home-sharing arrangement took care of only a third of my living expenses.

When my story got out, one of my new neighbors began bringing me food; she told me she volunteered at the Salvation Army, and the food came from there. I gave her a list of foods I ate (I have a restricted diet) and was surprised and grateful that the Salvation Army had so many of them.

Eventually I learned the truth: the food didn’t come from the nonprofit organization but from people in the neighborhood. Each time someone went grocery shopping, they bought a few items for me, which the one neighbor then doled out in small, believable increments.

When they learned that their cover was blown, my neighbors brought their gifts of food to me directly. This went on for six weeks, until my situation improved and I no longer needed their help.

*Teresa Verde
Seattle, Washington*

AFTER BEING OUT OF TOWN FOR A while, my boyfriend Abe and I arrived home to find the dirt road to the Buddhist retreat center where we live buried in knee-deep snow. Our truck got stuck four miles from the center, and Abe hiked to get the tractor while I stayed behind and began shoveling out the tires.

A few hours later, as daylight faded, I heard voices. There was only one other homestead on our ten-mile road, and the residents were rumored to be rough, toothless drug dealers with illicit sexual habits. The voices grew louder, and a group of people came walking up the neighbors’ driveway. I was excited to meet these notorious characters, but nervous to be so outnumbered.

There were three adults and two kids. (Nobody had mentioned kids before.) The grown-ups looked far from rough and toothless and greeted me amiably, offering me a cup of coffee while we talked about snow-removal techniques. The kids both had big blue eyes and freckles, and their apparent well-being made me less

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Gambling	July 1	December 2006
Nothing To Lose	August 1	January 2007
Help	September 1	February 2007
Good Friends	October 1	March 2007
Praying	November 1	April 2007
Too Close For Comfort	December 1	May 2007

wary of the adults. Surely these people couldn't be drug dealers.

One of the women eventually asked me about our property and what we were doing down there. They had heard rumors about us too. "Yes," I verified, "we're Buddhists."

"Well, we're nudists," the woman replied.

*Jesica McDonough
Hyampom, California*

TWO YEARS AGO I MOVED INTO A STUDIO apartment. It was my first time living alone, and I could have been lonely, but I wasn't, thanks to my neighbors Heather and Dylan. We were the only ones in the building with direct access to the backyard, and the two of them had created a wild urban paradise there, with a tall fir, an overgrown fig tree, a trailing bougainvillea, and various herbs and flowering cactus plants that attracted hummingbirds.

Heather and I were both at crossroads in our lives, struggling to make decisions about relationships and careers. We pulled weeds together, had tea at my picture window overlooking the garden, and ate dinner at each other's apartments. A couple of times I came home to find her playing her fiddle in the backyard. One evening she and Dylan and I sat at their kitchen table with small canvases and tubes of paint, and we spent the evening painting, drinking wine, and listening to music.

When Heather and Dylan moved on after a year, they left their potted plants and the butterfly kite they'd draped over the porch. I tried to create an outdoor space for myself after they were gone, but it wasn't the same. Each night I came home to a quiet yard. It wasn't long before I moved away too.

*Dietlind J. Vander Schaaf
San Francisco, California*

MY NEIGHBOR WANTED TO CUT DOWN a beautiful maple near our property line to keep fallen leaves out of an aboveground pool she planned to install. (When we moved two and a half years later, there was still no pool.) I fought hard with her over the maple, though it wasn't on my property. I even called the police to stop the

tree cutters and contested the property line, forcing her to get a survey. I knew these were only delaying tactics, but I got much enjoyment out of the tree, whose limbs spread over our yard.

That same neighbor's daughter made a game of knocking on our door and asking if our son could come out and play. By the time he could get his shoes on and make it outside, however, she would have disappeared into her house, laughing loudly at him from a window. This prank hurt my son's feelings, so my wife and I decided to have a talk with the girl's mother. It wasn't pretty. There was cursing and name-calling. A month later the tree was cut, and my neighbor and I never spoke again.

When I think about neighbors, however, I also remember when I was thirteen, and my family got snowed in. A neighbor drove his tractor to our house to pick up my mom and my little sister, who had congestive heart failure and needed to get to a hospital. He brought them to the nearest clear road, where an ambulance met them. My sister died a couple of days later, as we'd all known she would, including the neighbor. Still, he'd come out at two in the morning in a snowstorm to help.

*Scott L.
Altamonte Springs, Florida*

ONE SUMMER NIGHT MY DOWNSTAIRS neighbor was raped by a knife-wielding intruder while I was sound asleep upstairs. The rapist was quickly arrested. In the weeks leading up to the trial, my neighbor badly needed moral support, but she didn't get it from me, or anyone else. Men she dated distanced themselves (after sleeping with her). Our landlords — who lived in the house with us but had been on vacation when the rape occurred — theorized that perhaps she'd done something in a past life to bring the rape upon herself. Then they asked her to move out so they could "purify" their home.

I let my housemate down by leaving her alone in the empty house in the days following the rape, and by thoughtlessly talking to the defense attorney about her drug use. I even reflexively smiled at the rapist as he was led into the courtroom. He smiled back.

The defendant was convicted and sent to jail. During the trial, it came out that my neighbor had insisted her attacker not rape her on our landlords' bed. She'd refused to yell to me for help, either, fearing I'd be raped too. When the rapist had asked if anyone else was home, she'd said no. Only after it was over had she woken me and told me to call the police.

Our neighbor deserved our gratitude and support, not our judgment.

Name Withheld

WHEN I WAS A GIRL, MY MOTHER TOLD me that widows were older women who lived alone, hated noisy children, and confiscated toys and bikes left on their property. I was afraid of the widows in my neighborhood, especially the one next door, who wore long, dark dresses and had white hair, deep wrinkles, and a black cat. I saw her peer out through her lace curtains, as though waiting to catch children misbehaving. She once shook a finger at my brother when he used her yard as a shortcut, and he told me later that she'd tried to cast a spell on him. When I walked to school, I made sure to pass quietly in front of her house. I didn't know what widows did when they got mad at girls, and I didn't want to find out.

Every autumn the widow next door paid my brother to rake her leaves. One year my brother was away on a Boy Scout trip, and I got the job. I was nervous but eager to prove that I could work as hard as any boy, and I wanted to earn some money. I raked fast and thoroughly. When it was time to get paid, I tapped quietly on the widow's door. She answered and, rather than just hand me the money, invited me in.

I froze. The story of Hansel and Gretel ran through my mind. Then the widow took my arm — I was surprised by the strength of her grip — and pulled me in.

While she went to fetch me a glass of water, I sat down at her polished kitchen table, its legs scratched as though her cat had sharpened its claws on them. The tabletop was covered with torn lace, and picture frames lined the counters. I wanted to examine them for clues about the widow's life, but I stayed in my seat.

She returned with a glass of water, a plate of oatmeal cookies, and a starched

white napkin. I had used a cloth napkin only at my grandmother's Sunday dinners, and I hesitated to put this one on my dirty jeans.

The widow said I'd worked as hard as my brother. Sometimes, she told me, when she looked out the window at sunset, she would see me riding my bicycle or roller-skating, and it reminded her of when her son was young. She missed him, but he was too busy to visit her very often.

The black cat curled in her lap, and she petted it with long, gentle strokes. I wanted a cat, but my mother said they got hair all over everything. I didn't see hair anywhere in the widow's house. I wanted to sit at her kitchen table every night and hold her cat and listen to her stories.

The widow gave me a dollar for my work. I had never received so much money and was afraid my mother would make me give it back. I thanked the widow and skipped down her porch steps, planning to hide the money under my mattress. On the short walk home, I searched for cat hairs on my sweater.

*Carole Urmy
Franklin, Tennessee*

ON THE FRIDAY BEFORE THANKS-giving, in my sophomore year of high school, my mother woke up in a pool of her own blood. Our family doctor came and called for an ambulance to take her to the hospital. She was scheduled to have a complete hysterectomy on Monday and would not return home until after Thanksgiving.

My father gave me permission to stay home from school that day: he could see I was shaken up. The sight of my mother's blood had frightened me, and I worried I might never see her alive again.

I decided to go for a walk in a nearby park. As I was leaving the building, I ran into our elderly neighbor from across the hall. She was dressed in black from head to toe, as always — though she wasn't a widow; I'd seen her husband. She'd heard the commotion and asked about my mother. After I told her what had happened, she promised to say a prayer for my mother when she went to Mass.

Later that afternoon, the same neighbor knocked on our door and handed me a steaming tureen of chicken cacciatore

and a loaf of warm garlic bread. When I tried to mumble my thanks, she waved her hand dismissively and said, "Oh, it's nothing."

She appeared again the next day with veal cutlets and pasta, and again on Sunday with a pork roast and potatoes. She never came inside to visit, but simply handed us the food and disappeared back into her apartment.

On the fourth day, when she brought food over, I invited her and her husband to have Thanksgiving dinner with us. She told me she planned to spend the holiday with her daughter's family, so she wouldn't be home.

"What about your husband?" I asked. "He's welcome to come."

She explained that her husband spent holidays with his mistress. Amused by my astonishment, she patted my hand and said, "Every day I go to Mass and light a candle for that woman."

*George C.
Alexandria, Virginia*

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