

The Christmas Dog

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As Betty Kowalski drove home from church on Sunday, she realized she was guilty of two sins. First of all, she felt envious—perhaps even lustful—of Marsha Deerwood’s new leather jacket. But, in Betty’s defense, the coat was exquisite. A three-quarter-length jacket, it was beautifully cut, constructed of a dove-gray lambskin, and softer than homemade butter. Betty knew this for a fact since she had touched the sleeve of Marsha’s jacket and audibly sighed just as Pastor Gordon had invited the congregation to rise and bow their heads in prayer.

“It’s an early anniversary present from Jim,” Marsha had whispered after the pastor proclaimed a hearty “Amen.” As usual, the two old friends sat together in the third pew from the front. On Marsha’s other side, next to the aisle so he could help with the collection plates, sat Marsha’s husband, James Deerwood, a recently retired physician and respected member of the congregation.

Naturally Betty didn’t show even the slightest sign of jealousy. Years of practice made this small performance no great challenge. Instead, Betty simply smiled, complimented Marsha on the lovely garment, and pretended not to notice the worn cuffs of her own winter coat, a charcoal-colored



Harris Tweed that had served her well for several decades now. Still, it was classic and timeless, and a new silk scarf or a pair of sleek leather gloves might dress it up a bit. Not that she could afford such little luxuries right now. Besides, she did not care to dwell on such superficialities (especially during the service). Nor would she want anyone to suspect how thoughts such as these distracted her while Pastor Gordon preached with such fiery intensity about the necessity of loving one's neighbors today. He even pounded his fist on the pulpit a couple of times, something the congregation rarely witnessed in their small, dignified church.

But now, as Betty drove her old car toward her neighborhood, she was mindful of Pastor Gordon's words. And thus she became cognizant of her second sin. Not only did Betty *not* love her neighbor, she was afraid that she hated him wholeheartedly. But then again, she reminded herself, it wasn't as if Jack Jones lived *right* next to her. He wasn't her *next-door* neighbor. Not that it made much difference, since only a decrepit cedar fence separated their backyards. It was, in fact, that rotten old fence that had started their dispute in the first place.

"This fence is encroaching on my property," Jack had said to her in October. She'd been peacefully minding her own business, enjoying the crisp sunny day as she raked leaves in her backyard.

"What do you mean?" She set her bamboo rake aside and went over to hear him better, which wasn't easy since his music, as usual, was blaring.

"I mean I've studied the property lines in our neighbor-



hood, and that fence is at least eight feet into my yard,” he said.

“That fence is on your property line, fair and square.” She looked him straight in the eyes. “It’s the public access strip that’s—”

“No way!” He pointed toward the neighboring yards where the public access strip had been split right down the middle. “See what I mean? Your yard has encroached over the whole public access strip and—”

“Excuse me,” she said, shaking her finger at him like he was in grade school. “But the original owners agreed to build that fence right where it is. No one has encroached on anyone.”

He rubbed his hand through his straggly dark hair, jutted out his unshaved chin, narrowed his eyes. “It’s over the line, lady.”

Betty did not like being called “lady.” But instead of losing her temper, she pressed her lips together tightly and mentally counted to ten.

“And it’s falling down,” he added.

“Well,” she retorted, “since it’s on your property, I suggest you fix it.” As she turned and walked away, she felt certain that he increased the volume on his music just to spite her. It seemed clear the battle lines were drawn.

Fortunately, the weather turned cold after that. Consequently, Betty no longer cared to spend time in her backyard, and her windows remained tightly closed to shut out Jack’s noise and music.

Now Betty tightened her grip on the steering wheel, keeping her gaze straight ahead as she drove down Persimmon



Lane, the street on which Jack lived. She did not want that insufferable young man to observe her looking his way. Although it was hard *not* to stare at the run-down house with the filthy red pickup truck parked right on the front lawn. Obviously, the old vehicle couldn't be parked in the driveway. That space was buried in a mountain of junk covered with ugly blue tarps, which were anchored with old plastic milk bottles. She assumed the bottles were filled with dirty water, although another neighbor (who suspected their young neighbor was up to no good) had suggested the mysterious brown liquid in the containers might be a toxic chemical used in the manufacturing of some kind of illegal drugs.

Betty sighed and continued her attempt to avert her gaze as she slowed down for the intersection of her street, Nutmeg Lane. But despite her resolve, she glanced sideways and let out a loud groan. Oh, to think that the Spencer house had once been the prettiest home in the neighborhood!

As she turned the corner, she remembered how that house used to look. For years it had been painted a lovely sky blue with clean white trim, and the weed-free lawn had always been neatly cut and perfectly edged. The flower beds had bloomed profusely with annuals and perennials, and Gladys Spencer's roses had even won prizes at the county fair. Who ever would've guessed it would come to this?

The original owners, Al and Gladys Spencer, had taken great pride in their home. And they had been excellent neighbors and wonderful friends for decades. But over the past five years, the elderly couple had suffered a variety of serious health problems. Gladys had gone into a nursing home, then



Al had followed her, and eventually they both passed away within months of each other. The house had sat vacant for a few years.

Then, out of the blue, this Jack character had shown up and taken over. Without saying a word to anyone, he began tearing into the house as if he was intent on destroying it. And even when well-meaning neighbors tried to meet him or find out who he was, he made it perfectly clear that he had absolutely no interest in speaking to any of them. He was a rude young man and didn't care who knew it.

As Betty pulled into her own driveway, she wondered not for the first time if Jack Jones actually owned that house. No one had ever seen a For Sale sign go up. And no one had witnessed a moving van arrive. Her secret suspicion was that Jack Jones was a squatter.

It had been late last summer when this obnoxious up-start took occupancy of the house, and according to Penny Horton, the retired schoolteacher who lived next door, the scruffy character had brought only a duffle bag and three large plastic crates with him. But the next day, without so much as a howdy-do, he began tearing the house apart. Penny, who was currently in Costa Rica, was the one who informed Betty of the young man's name, and only because she discovered a piece of his mail that had been delivered mistakenly to her mailbox. "It looked like something official," Penny had confided to Betty. "It seemed to be from the government. Do you suppose he's in the witness protection program?" *Or perhaps he's out on parole*, Betty had wanted to suggest, but had kept these thoughts to herself.



Out of concern, Betty had attempted to reach the Spencers' daughter, Donna, by calling the old number that was still in her little blue address book. But apparently that number had been changed, and the man who answered the phone had never heard of anyone by that name. Even when Betty called information, citing the last town she knew Donna had lived in, she came up empty-handed. So she gave up.

Betty frowned as she bent to open her old garage door. The wind was blowing bitter and cold now, and she had forgotten her wool gloves in the car but didn't want to go back for them. She didn't usually park in the garage, but the weatherman had predicted unusually low temperatures, and her car's battery was getting old. She gripped the cold metal handle on the single-car garage door and, not for the first time, longed for a garage-door opener—like the one Marsha and Jim had on their triple-car garage. One simply pushed the remote's button and the door magically went up, and once the car was inside, down the door went again. How she wished for one now.

Her grandmother's old saying went through her head as she struggled to hoist up the stubborn door. "If wishes were fishes, we'd all have a fry." Oh, yes, wouldn't she!

Betty shivered as she got back into her car. She still couldn't get that obnoxious neighbor out of her head—all thanks to this morning's sermon! But what was she supposed to do? How could she love someone so despicable? How was it even possible? Oh, she'd heard that with God all things were possible . . . but this?

She decided to commit the dilemma to prayer. She bowed



her head until it thumped the top of the steering wheel, asking God to help her love her loathsome neighbor and to give her the strength she lacked. “Amen,” she said. Then she tried to focus her full attention on carefully navigating her old Buick forward into the snug garage, although she was still thinking about that thoughtless Jack Jones—if that was his real name.

The next thing she knew, she heard a loud scratching sound and realized she’d gotten too close to the right side of the garage door. She took in a sharp breath and quickly backed up, readjusted the wheel, and went forward again, but when she turned off her engine, she knew it was too late. The damage was done. And, really, wasn’t this also Jack Jones’s fault? He was a bad egg—and had probably been one from the very beginning.

As Betty sat there, unwilling to get out and see what the scrape on her car looked like, she replayed the man’s list of faults. And they were many. Right from the start, he’d stepped on people’s toes. With absolutely no consideration for his neighbors’ ears or sleeping habits, he had used his noisy power tools in the middle of the night and played his music loudly during the day. Of course, these habits weren’t quite so obnoxious when winter came and everyone kept their windows shut. But how many times had Betty gotten up for her late-night glass of milk only to observe strange lights and flashes going on behind Jack’s closed blinds? Sometimes she worried that Jack’s house was about to go up in flames, and perhaps the whole neighborhood along with it. She would ponder over what that madman could possibly be doing. And



why did he need to do it at night? What if it was something immoral or illegal? For all she knew, Jack Jones could be a wanted felon who was creating bombs to blow up things like the county courthouse or even the grade school.

Betty removed her keys from the ignition and reached for her purse and Bible. She slowly got out of the car, and out of habit ever since that notorious Jack Jones had moved into the neighborhood, she securely locked her car's doors. Then she sat her purse and Bible on the hood of the car and peeked around the right side to see the front fender. The horizontal gash was about a foot long with a hook on one end, causing it, strangely enough, to resemble the letter J. Betty just shook her head. It figured . . . J for Jack.

So she continued to obsess over him—and over today's sermon and her futile prayer. How *was* it possible to love someone so completely disagreeable and inconsiderate and downright evil? She grunted as she struggled to lower the garage door. *Really*, she thought as she stood up straight, *even Pastor Gordon would be singing a different tune if he was forced to live next to Jack Jones.*

Betty let herself into the house, turning the deadbolt behind her—another habit she had never felt the need to do before Jack Jones had entered the picture. She set her purse and Bible on the kitchen table, then went to the sink and just stood there. She gazed blankly out the window. It was a bleak time of year with bare trees, browning grass, dead leaves—all in sepia tones. A nice coat of snow would make it look much prettier.

But she wasn't looking at her own yard. Her eyes were



fixed on her neighbor's backyard. As usual, it looked more like a dump site than a delightful place where flowers once flourished and children once played. The dilapidated deck was heaped with black plastic trash bags filled with only God knew what. And as if that were not bad enough, there were pieces of rubbish and rubble strewn about. But the item that caught Betty's eye today, the thing that made her blink, was the pink toilet!

Betty recognized this toilet as the one that had once graced Gladys Spencer's prized guest bathroom. It had been a small, tidy bathroom with pink and black tiles, a pink sink, and a matching toilet. Betty had used it many a time when she'd joined Gladys and their friends for bridge club or baby showers or just a neighborly cup of coffee. Gladys had always taken great pride in her dainty pink guest soaps and her pink fingertip towels with a monogrammed S in silver metallic thread.

As Betty stared at that toilet, so forlorn and out of place in the scruffy backyard, she realized that time had definitely moved on. Betty could relate to that toilet on many levels. She too was old and outdated. She too felt unnecessary . . . and perhaps even unwanted.

Betty shook her head in an attempt to get rid of those negative thoughts. Then she frowned to see that last night's high winds must've pushed the deteriorating fence even further over into what once had been the Spencers' yard. Jack Jones would not be the least bit pleased about that. Not that she cared particularly.

Betty had long since decided that the fence, whether it was



her responsibility or his, could wait until next summer to resolve. But if she could have her way, she would erect a tall, impenetrable stone wall between the two properties.

She filled her old stainless teakettle and tried to remember happier days—a time when she'd been happy to live in her house. She thought back to when Chuck was still alive and when they'd just moved into their new house in Gary Meadows. It had seemed like a dream come true. Finally, after renting and saving for eight years, they were able to afford a home of their own. And it was brand-new!

Al and Gladys Spencer had immediately befriended Chuck and Betty as well as their two small children with a dinner of burgers and baked beans. And that's when the two men began making plans to build a fence. "Good fences make good neighbors," Al said. Since Chuck and Betty's children were still young, whereas Al and Gladys had only one child still at home who was about to graduate, it was decided that they'd put the fence directly on the Spencers' property line, allowing the Kowalskis the slightly larger yard. "And less mowing for me," Al joked. And since the city had no plans to use the public access strip, and there was no alley, it had all been settled quite simply and congenially. That is, until Jack Jones moved in.

Not for the first time, Betty thought she should consider selling her house. Depressed market or not, she didn't need this much space. Besides that, the neighborhood seemed to be spiraling downward steadily. Perhaps this was related to tenants like Jack Jones, or simply the fact that people were stretched too thin these days, and as a result, home mainte-



nance chores got neglected. Whatever the case, there seemed to be a noticeable decline in neighborhood morale and general friendliness.

It didn't help matters that both her middle-aged children, Susan and Gary, lived hundreds of miles away. They were busy with their own lives, careers, and families and consequently rarely visited anymore. These days they preferred to send her airline tickets to come and spend time with them. But every time she went away, she felt a bit more concerned about leaving her home unattended—and with Jack Jones on the other side of the fence, she would worry even more now. Perhaps she should cancel her visit to Susan's next month. She usually spent most of January down there in the warm Florida sun, but who knew what kind of stunts that crazy neighbor might pull in her absence? And who would call her to let her know if anything was amiss? There could be a fire or a burglary or vandalism, and she probably wouldn't hear about it until she returned. A sad state of affairs indeed.

The shrill sound of the teakettle's whistle made her jump, and she knocked her favorite porcelain tea mug off the counter, where it promptly shattered into pieces on the faded yellow linoleum floor. "Oh, bother!" She turned off the stove, then went to fetch the broom and dustpan and clean up her mess. She had never been this edgy before—at least not before Jack Jones had moved into the neighborhood. And she was supposed to love her neighbor?

