

There Goes the Neighborhood

by Barrett Shumaker

Virginia laid out the last pieces of her fine china and stepped back to critique the table setting. The wildflower centerpiece of yellow bells, Black-eyed Susans, yellow gold Lantanas, baby's breath and day lilies caught the dappled sunlight streaming through a large pin oak next door and seemed to glow. Virginia reused the baby's breath and day lilies from an arrangement she made in the spring. They were desiccated but still held their color. The rest were fresh, collected only moments ago. Her placemats were squared: forks on the left, knives on the right, dessert fork and spoon at the top, butter knife across the side plate, teacup handles to the right. Everything was perfect, just like the tea parties she attended when Eldon was stationed in London during the war. Her grandmother's tablecloth hid the wrought iron patio table well enough, and the thin gold lacing stitched throughout accented the centerpiece wonderfully. Eat your heart out Martha!

She hated to use the patio table for such a grand occasion. Virginia tiskted at herself for not buying that antique table she fell in love with when they were in London. Almost 60 years had gone by and she *still* couldn't stop kicking herself for that. Oh well, what's done is done.

A breeze swept past her, bringing with it the stench of rotting meat. She pinched her nose shut and waited a moment for the breeze to stop. When it did she waved the air in front of her face futilely and breathed through her mouth. Dear Lord, that smell could choke the breath out of you. She turned to face the crowd gathered at the wrought iron fence surrounding her home. Virginia nervously fingered the cameo pendant hanging at her chest. It was a gift from her mother, given to her the day she married Eldon.

The sturdy black iron fence still held them back, but the east corner—the one she had nagged Eldon to fix for almost a year before the world died—had separated further from its brick post. Three lag bolts at the fence's top had been pulled out of their mortar anchors in the last ice storm. The bottom three were still holding but just barely. The black iron bars leaned in slightly, betraying their presumption of security. If not today, then tomorrow all those dead people staring back at her would be on her manicured lawn, invading her home and making mince meat out of herself and Eldon. They wouldn't get much flesh off of an 86-year-old woman or her 89-year-old husband, but she doubted quantity was of any concern to the undead.

"Honey?" Eldon called from the back of the house.

"On the porch dear," she answered. Virginia turned up the volume on her hearing aid. The batteries were very low.

Floorboards creaked in the home where they had spent the last 50 years of their lives together. Eldon was coming. She hoped he wore the right suit.

The screen door creaked open, and he stepped out onto the wrap-around porch. He'd added the porch himself a few years after they moved in. Virginia had had to have it. She told him she'd dreamed of having her own wrap-around ever since she was a child, and Eldon could never say no to her. Add to that her promise of back rubs and hanky-panky whenever he liked, and Eldon was at the hardware store at the crack of dawn. Their daughter, Elisa, came along nine months later.

Eldon stepped out wearing his slate grey suit—V’s favorite—and the gold and ebony cuff links she bought him for their twenty-third anniversary. The screen door slammed closed behind him and smacked into the door frame with a sound like a cracking whip. He had covered his hairless and liver-spotted head with his favorite brown fedora. Eldon smiled wide and held his arms out in a “get a load of me” gesture. Virginia looked him up and down. “Oh! Don’t you look...Eldon!” she snapped when her eyes wandered to his shoes. “You go inside right this minute and put your dress shoes on.”

Eldon looked down at his sneaker-clad feet and turned the right one out to show the instep.

“This is a special occasion!” Virginia reminded him tersely.

“Bah!” Eldon waved her off. “God don’t care what shoes I got on, girl.” He stepped back inside, content to leave Virginia to smolder for a moment, and returned carrying a silver serving tray containing a half of a pack of saltine crackers and a bottle of mustard. “Sit yourself down, honey, and let’s get while the gettin’s good.”

Eldon set the tray down behind the centerpiece and pulled Virginia’s chair out for her. Once she was settled he went back, shut the door and then seated himself. Eldon took off his fedora and rested it on his left knee, then started shaking out the crackers. “Beautiful day ain’t it?” he said cheerily. Just then another breeze picked up, blowing the stench of rot into their faces. Virginia held her nose. Eldon continued like nothing happened; he squirted mustard on a freshly liberated cracker and stuffed it in his mouth.

When it was safe to breathe again Virginia poured the tea. “You should be thankful you can’t smell that,” she said, setting down the pot.

Eldon grunted. “Yeah, ‘cause there ain’t nothin’ like flames shooting up yer nose, lemme tell yuh. Thanks for dropping that mortar in my face, Adolf.”

“Don’t get smart. I’m just sayin’ it stinks is all,” Virginia said in a defensive tone.

They ate crackers and drank Earl Grey tea in quiet contemplation while all around them the chattering of teeth and clanking of bone striking metal sounded. Eldon broke the silence first.

“Well whaddya know?”

“What’s that, dear?”

Eldon motioned to a stretch of fence behind Virginia. “There’s that knuckle-head I was gonna have fix the fence. Small world ain’t it, boy!” he shouted to the putrid thing pressed against the iron bars. The zombie’s shirt was saturated with a soup of liquefied flesh that trailed thickly down onto its denim shorts. Its arms and legs were sheathed in patches of yellow-brown mummified skin, made translucent as the subcutaneous fat baked in the southern heat. The jagged edges of violent wounds on its body were blackened and turned up like overcooked bacon.

“You know what he wanted to charge me?”

“Three hundred doll-” Virginia began.

“Three hundred dollars! Can you believe that? ‘Well hell,’ I says, ‘all it needs is a few new bolts and a little straightenin’ up!’ And you know what that joker says to me?”

“‘Fix it your-’”

“‘Fix it yourself, you old coot!’”

Eldon spread some mustard on a cracker and pushed it into his mouth.

“If I were a younger man I’d uh punched his clock!”

“If you were a younger man you’d of fixed that fence when I asked you to.”

“Bah,” Eldon said, waving her off. “Semantics.”

“Well you showed him, dear.”

“I sure did! I showed that joker the door! I told ‘em not to let it hit ‘em in the ass on his way out.” Eldon reached for another cracker, but they were all gone. “And then he went and flipped me the bird! I tell yuh, V, don’t nobody respect anybody anymore. Not like they did when we were growing up.”

Virginia sipped her tea silently, and then pulled the cup from her lips just enough to say, “That Darius was a good man.”

Eldon tongued some cracker paste out from between his back molars. The waddle under his chin trembled as his jaw worked up and down. Virginia knew he’d taken a shine to Darius, and though she’d never said it, she was proud of Eldon. He was finally stepping out of his father’s shadow and the wickedness it bore.

“Yeah. Darius was a good man. Real good. Always a kind word in his mouth and a smile on his lips.” Eldon sat in silent thought while Virginia finished her tea. She knew to give him time to gather his thoughts and not to push him. He would speak when he was ready.

“My father... was a mean man. Mean as a snake. He had nothin’ but hate for the coloreds.” Eldon paused, his jaw working up and down. Virginia slid her hand along the table’s edge and laid it gently over his. Eldon straightened up at her touch, drawing strength from her support. “The man sowed nothin’ but fear and mistrust in me. I would listen to my little friends talk about playing catch with their old man or goin’ fishin’. Things I never did with my old man ‘cause he was either cursin’ the coloreds for taking white men’s jobs or slapping my momma around.” His lips quivered as the memories of a young, frightened and neglected boy threatened to overwhelm him. Virginia squeezed his hand, reminding Eldon that he wasn’t alone anymore.

“Yuh know, V, I never touched a colored’s hair before.”

“Well, why would you?” she said comfortingly. “The only black people you know moved into the neighborhood, what, eight months ago?”

“Yeah... yeah, about eight or so.” Eldon blinked back a tear threatening to run down his cheek. “Darius was out one day walkin’ his little boy around the block. Little tike was just learnin’ to walk, and Darius was right beside him, holding that little hand as his boy put one foot in front of the other. I was out there lookin’ at that damned fence and he comes over and introduces hisself. People now-a-days don’t do that, V. Nobody thinks outside their selves anymore. Darius’ parents did right by him. They did a *damn* good job.

“Well me and him’s talkin’ and his boy is eyeballin’ me like I’m gonna eat him up. Scared, yuh know. I forgot how cute they are at that age,” he said. A smile stretched across his lips. “I reached over and mussed that boy’s hair all up. He got to gigglin’ and hid his face in his daddy’s chest. That boy had a head full of curly hair, puffed out like he stuck his finger in a light socket. His hair was so soft, V. Just like Lissa’s was when she was little. Remember?” Eldon took a staggered breath thick with emotion.

“Yes, dear,” Virginia said as tears welled in her eyes, “I remember.”

“My heart changed that day, V. God answered my prayers. He finally answered.” Eldon’s voice hitched with a sob, and tears spilled down his weathered cheeks. “I prayed for Him to clear the stain from my soul my father put on me: the fear and mistrust of the coloreds that he worked into me all my life. I never hated ‘em V,” he said, turning to face

her. His eyes brimmed with tears. "I kept my distance, but I never hated the coloreds. Lord knows I didn't. But that man, God damn him, I couldn't get his words outta my head. 'You watch 'em, boy. You watch 'em close. Them coloreds will smile in yer face and stab yuh in the back if yuh offer it to 'em,' he'd say to me. He spouted that garbage at me all my life. As soon as I could, I signed up with Uncle Sam and never looked back. But I couldn't shake that man's words outta me. Not until Darius and his boy came along. God brought 'em here, V. He brought 'em here to show this old man that anyone can be redeemed." Eldon put his hand to his eyes and wept.

Virginia leaned against him and cried. She knew Eldon carried a great weight on his shoulders, but she never knew the extent to which it burdened him. He was a man of his generation; a product of the generation before who showed no weakness and never admitted defeat. He rarely spoke of the pains he bore or the sorrows he'd seen, and she had watched, helplessly, through the years as it slowly wore him down. She had prayed that the Lord would lead him out of the darkness and into the light. At last, her prayers were answered as well.

When the tears finally stopped, they sat together, hand in hand, and recited the Lord's Prayer one last time.

"It breaks my heart to think about what Darius and his boy must have gone through when the dead started walkin' the Earth." Eldon wiped the tears from his cheeks.

"I'm sure they're fine, sweetheart. Darius is a smart man. I'm sure they got somewhere safe. Somewhere far away from all this...this death."

Eldon's face set with a grim look as he turned toward the undead mob surrounding their property. "I wish that were so, V," he said with a sigh, "but it ain't." Eldon pointed to the section of broken fence and the dead pressed against it. There in front stood Darius, maimed and torn from a violent death at the hands of the dead and months of decay. He reached through the bars, clawing the air hungrily. Virginia gasped. She pressed her hand to her lips and whispered, "Dear God."

"I don't rightly know how long he's been there," Eldon said. "I haven't seen his boy, thank God, but Darius...I only just noticed him a few weeks ago. He's been in that same spot ever since. He don't know me, but I don't think any of 'em knows anything anymore, to tell yuh the truth."

As Virginia stared at the horrific remains of a once kind and loving man, Eldon turned in his seat and pressed his palms to a windowpane positioned behind them. A sob caught in Virginia's throat, and she shut her eyes to purge the image from her mind. The window squeaked open just a crack. Eldon didn't need much more room than that.

"You smell it yet hon?" the old man asked as he turned back around in his seat.

Virginia swallowed the lump of grief in her throat and sniffed the air. It reeked of rotten eggs. The smell wafted out from the open window behind her. Pungent and thick, the stink of it stole her breath. She coughed, clearing her lungs of the offensive air. "Will it be enough?" she asked solemnly.

"Yeah. The house oughta be good and full by now," Eldon rasped before a fit of coughing hit him.

The fence didn't make much noise as it gave way. The bolts simply grated free of their mortar moorings with a crunch, a noise easily lost in the clacking of dozens of hungry jaws. What drew Eldon and Virginia's attention was the sudden commotion of the

fence striking the ground, spilling dozens upon dozens of the walking dead onto their yard.

As the zombies closest to the fence fell through the breach, the ones behind clamored over them using the prone corpses as a footbridge of rotting flesh. Like a cancerous mass the dead spread out as they filed into the yard. The shrubs and flowers of Virginia's garden were trampled flat under their heels. A few of the more nimble undead being trod upon managed to get back on their feet. They rose from the ground and staggered shakily toward the house as the elderly couple looked on. Leading the pack of ravenous dead was Darius. His rot-slicked teeth chattered hungrily as he climbed the porch's bottom step.

"I'm glad you're here, son," the old man said as tears welled in his eyes. Eldon drew an old, tarnished Zippo lighter from his suit pocket and thrust his hand through the narrowly opened window. Virginia laid her head on his shoulder and held him tight.

Darius climbed the second step.

"We'll go to God together," Eldon said to the dead thing as it stepped onto the porch and staggered closer. He thumbed open the Zippo and rested his thumb on the flint wheel. Eldon turned his face into Virginia's hair and kissed the side of her neck.

"I love you, Virginia."

"I love you too, Eldon."

A hand grabbed Eldon's shoulder. The Zippo's flint sparked, igniting the natural gas filling the house.

The explosion could be felt from a mile away.

The column of smoke and flame could be seen from many, many more.

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