

We Must Not Disturb The Peace

NICOLE CIFANI LEHMANN-HAUPT

We never should've listened. But how can you ignore the new neighbors? We weren't raised to be rude. So later, when they questioned our decisions, we said that building a backyard pool was outrageous. It would disturb the peace, were our words. They were a young family, new to the neighborhood. They drove an imported SUV; the wife was a former supermodel. We learned they had purchased the largest lot in our development, and the one next to that, and, in a few years, the one next to that.

We had to give them credit—they were good at being persistent. Every Friday we discovered a new gift on our doorstep—cookies, craft beer, gift cards to Outback Steakhouse—and we felt their request. We're getting this permit whether you like it or not was what they hinted when we engaged in small talk on Sunday after mass. We spent evenings at home repeating our reasons to each other, as though we were reinforcing them to ourselves.

It will be too loud. It will make our neighborhood unpleasant. It will drive our property values down. The noise will scare the animals—the birds, the ducks, the deer—ruining the tranquility we treasure. Besides, we were here first, we thought.

In retrospect, maybe we should have agreed to the construction in order to be amenable people. Their children reminded us of our grandchildren. We did not mind the bribes, and we appreciated the attention. We imagined sharing beers with the young couple, perhaps relaxing around a bonfire, or starting up a weekly game of poker. It was not our desire to be known as the tart neighborhood oldies. Maybe, in retrospect, we would have reconnected to our younger days.

But soon it will be winter, we reasoned. Who uses a pool for more than three to four months of the year anyway? And so we turned to our other neighbors—our longtime allies who should've talked some sense into us—but they, too, were in agreement. Our coffee group discussions turned to us making heads and tails of things: homeowner's rights,

property values, gauzy economics. We felt a new unease in our regular conversations, and our eyes flared with worry.

So, we unanimously rejected the application. Our partners baked goodies for the family as a peace offering—thumbprint cookies, jelly rolls, and gluten-free bread, because one of us read this was popular. We left a basket on the front porch. We knew it was not what they wanted, we said to each other, but we wanted to let them know that we care. Then, all we could do was wait. When the new neighbors drove by the next day, they smiled brightly and waved. We felt relieved. No harm no foul, we said to ourselves, pleased.

We talked nonstop in those early weeks about our success. We couldn't help it. We brought up local political intrigues, red-handed municipality players, and the best unpopular stocks to line our portfolios with, as if using our brains for the very first time. We gave passionate speeches in our backyards. We formed the town's first accountability action committee. Mainly, we bragged about how we kept the peace in our small sliver of heartland. We admitted that we were tired of seeing the town change without us, the longest term residents (and the highest taxpayers) not consulted ever, not once.

Please, the developers said the following month, when they wanted to put a shopping mall in our backyard. Ha! we said, as we told them we had already mobilized against it. The monstrous mega mall cannot go in. It cannot disturb the peace, we said. And so it didn't. Each week, our agenda grew. Now we could finally check those obnoxious, deafening leaf blowers. Let's limit air traffic to Monday and Friday! Trash pickup? Why not once every other week? A camera on every corner! No, FIVE! The clock tower should NOT be fixed, we said, since the broken arm dangling from the elbow was a relic. Opinions poured from our mouths like gasoline when we suggested that squeaky vehicle brakes be fined, that shrubs be trimmed into octagonal shapes in accordance to the Euclidean synthesis (all obvious shapes need proof), the bridge into town be painted yellow and blue like Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night*, that we ration chemical-based food, petroleum-based underwear, and for god's sake we must perform background checks on applicants to the public garden so they don't paint little affirmations on the rocks like last time.

The folks at city hall did not understand. Please, they said. It was as if they were the adults admonishing a group of children (us) to behave. We tried to tell the mayor why we felt unsafe. We tried to explain the benefits of having at least some restrictions in place—like more speed bumps, for example. That’s all we wanted, speed bumps. It’s for the good of the city. Why was everyone in such a hurry all the time, we demanded to know. We remembered when our town was quiet, quaint, and charming. We need you to understand. The mayor said she understood and then went back to work. But when she continued on with her meetings, how could we be sure she’d listened? How could we know for certain we’d be safe?

We knew we had to keep going. We printed flyers listing the consequences of building commercial facilities, and went door to door asking neighbors to sign on the dotted line. We wheat-pasted posters onto office buildings after dusk. We purchased ads in the papers and on the radio stations. The next time, when we went to city hall our group took over a quarter of the folding chairs in the wood-paneled conference room. We even brought our own pastries (homemade). The time after that, we doubled in size. It was then, finally, that city council blinked in the realization of our existence. Of our power. We made them make promises (after all, they worked for us), but these promises went unfulfilled.

We couldn’t tolerate this hypocrisy. So, we worked harder. We found ways around them. We cancelled the satellite connections. The cable lines. We hired contractors to remove the unsightly wiring that dangled from the streets like rusted costume jewelry. We clogged access to the interstate and major arteries with our beater cars and lawn rubbish. We shot fireworks into the sky during peak air traffic times. We made a commitment to remove the town from the grid completely.

The city did not respond well to this. They sent the pigs who pounded on our doors and windows; they tucked phony cease-and-desist letters written by lightweight thug accountants beneath our doormats. We informed them in so many words that we would not cooperate.

One morning, the radio news reported a nearby brush fire. It was started by drugged-out campers the night before, the announcer suggested. But the fire was over ten miles

away—not our problem. We decided to put it out of our minds. Just another thing, we said. Besides, we had recently brought in a tribe of goats to chew away the brush, we said. We'd taken steps.

In the evening, we learned that the fire was moving quickly, getting closer. We could smell the char and see the dusty ash fall from the rupturing sky. We need the fire trucks, city hall said, but they can't get through. We need to clear the roads.

Absolutely not, we said.

You can't do this, they said.

Watch us, we said. Besides, the winds will blow the fire someplace else. It was now as though they were the children, and we were the adults.

Please don't do this, they said.

Did we understand how easy it would be to open up the road? We did. But why would we make our private town public by exposing our roads?

Looking back, it was as though if we believed emphatically enough it simply wouldn't happen. As if we prayed harder, the fire would simply fade. Perhaps the fire would agree that, yes—it would be better to travel in a different direction. Then it would go engulf some other town, one less sensible and wholesome, one less righteous and as good as ours. As if catastrophe as a concept happened in other, lesser, towns. The real problem was our belief that we were exempt from it all. We believed that by isolating ourselves, we would become unexposed to the grotesque and perhaps stochastic elements of the real world.

If only there was a massive swimming pool we could jump in to save ourselves.

Instead, we stood on the side of the interstate watching everything we knew burn to the ground. We looked at each other with the realization that we could start over. And then we smiled. That is, we smiled until the fire leapt across the four lanes, swept into our development, and burned our beautiful homes down one by one. One week later, at the cemetery, a lone visitor arrived. She placed a sign near our tombstones. They Kept The Peace, it said. R.I.P. □