

Just A Neighbour

by W A Stewart

Jason's neighbour was a sharpshooter, a story left behind with yearbooks and graduation diplomas and the notion of having ever had a dream. It eventually came to common knowledge, as all good tales do. Thaddeus Harnett, Thad to a few, Mr. Harnett to the bank teller, was a heavy-middled man with short stubby bowed legs, a thick unkempt beard mottled with grey that matched the mad mop surrounding his large round head. A faded navy blue t-shirt, of which he must have had an unlimited supply, stretched over his rotund belly. Lovely gardens surrounded his cement block house, a house that seemed to be holding its breath, to keep from collapsing in a heap amidst the lilies and yarrow and Martha Washington geraniums and Thad's favourite primrose.

Harnett Plumbing, precariously written in white paint on one side of the battle-scarred van, seemed a generalization. There may have been a ladder, may have been tubes of piping and trunks of fittings and washers and a miscellaneous collection of taps, but the van seldom left the yard. In fact, the pile of snow behind the van in winter often grew higher than the van's back doors. The community whispered about Thad's occupation, possibly a cover for a Canadian

member of the CIA or someone in witness protection. Thad surely abandoned his family because he wore a plain gold band on his left hand and what other possible explanation might there be. They whispered and gnawed on the particulars of Thad's life like an old dog on a pork shank. Never during the community's ruminations did they imagine the man of flesh and bone, focussing merely on his circumstance as small communities of farmers and bankers and insurance agents are inclined to do. They called themselves friends and neighbours despite never having invited him to be one of them.

Thad lived next door to Jason, a dairy farmer, only slightly less a hermit. Jason was average height with watery blue eyes. He milked twenty-eight Holsteins in the same barn in which his father milked and his grandfather before, a history all its own. The sweat from hard work leaked out between the old steel stanchions that clanged and banged whenever the cow moved, holding her like a thief placed in the stocks in the town's centre to be ridiculed. Though not alarmed by his cows' discomfort, Jason paid meticulous attention to his flowerbeds. His wife had fled and could no longer divert his attention from his almost obsessive removal of weeds and bugs and grubs.

Jason and Thad had always been neighbours, since Thad moved to Chesterfield from somewhere for no apparent reason. He bought the ancient block home four years before Jason was born. The two lived side by side, both wifeless and childless. Thad's house, nestled right beside the trees that lined their mutual drive, was the original home to the now green and white dairy barn behind Jason's brick house. Two hundred and sixty acres with two houses side by side seemed out of place, awkward even.

The farm was to be passed over to Jason from his father, like a baton in a relay race, but a faulty, ill-repaired tractor rolled down an embankment and crushed Jason's father. Jason's

fourteen-year-old arms tried in vain to pull his father loose until Jason collapsed from exhaustion, collapsed in a heap of sobs and rage. He and his father had plans, a carefully laid out road map. The barn said Robert Johnson & Son. There had never been a script for a solo act. Jason was almost certain he couldn't be a son, without a father.

Mrs. Johnson died with less commotion four years later from a broken heart or breast cancer, the neighbour's gossip never quite certain which was the cause, if either. It was rumoured she was a drinker despite her tea-totting habit at the Ladies Auxiliary. She was a severe woman with a shrill voice. Then Jason, like Thad, was alone, alone with his gardens, his empty house muddled with clutter, alone with himself.

Jason married the willing Mary-Beth five years after his mother's death, a marriage that ended sadly a mere twenty-three months later when Mary-Beth bolted with the local veterinarian.

"But Mary-Beth," Jason had pleaded. "What has happened?"

"Nothing," she said, almost spitting on him. "Nothing ever happens. You milk cows and you milk some more cows and then you milk again. Nothing else happens but milking cows. Seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. Nothing happens." She didn't even try to keep her voice down and Jason was certain the sound wafted out the open windows into every neighbour's kitchen to be tasted and chewed on over the dinnertime meal. Alone seemed to be a uniform that fit Jason perfectly.

Jason's arm always shot up when he stumbled from the back door of his home heading for the barn. Thad saluted in response.

"Looks like rain," Jason might shout on any given day, rain in the forecast or not.

“Could be,” Thad responded with apparent disinterest not bothering to examine the sky or the clouds or the horizon. There was a bit of chatter when they simultaneously walked for the mail, before one of them could re-route his legs to avoid a collision of conversation.

“Anything good in the mail today?” Jason would ask as he reached in to the crumpled mailbox that had been battered by the snowplough.

“Junk,” Thad would say with disgust before he smiled and waddled back across the road.

Jason kept Thad’s lane free of snow in the winter despite Thad’s infrequent travel. Thad reciprocated by cutting Jason’s front lawn with his pint-sized garden tractor. It was a cooperative arrangement that required no choreographer.

Thad’s skill as a sharpshooter came to light on a September afternoon when the sun was brilliant, not hot. The stock truck arrived with a collection of cull cattle already onboard destined for the abattoir at Cookstown. The driver, Harold Kneeshaw from a farm two concessions over, came to pick up one of Jason’s geriatric Holsteins. The truck creaked and groaned as it backed fitfully to the feeble loading ramp that seemed more like a pile of firewood. Old Grace, despite encouragement from behind with the prongs of a hay fork, wasn’t quick enough up the ramp before an eight hundred pound steer leaped or rather crashed from the truck through the failing boards. The steer immediately found his feet beneath him and with a startled but determined look, galloped to the open field and freedom. There must have been some injury to the steer’s pint-sized brain because the dash to liberty resulted in concentric circles of one hundred and twenty metres while bawling boastfully to the others on board the truck.

Jason and Harold exchanged puzzled and annoyed looks, each blaming the other for the inconvenient mishap. They leaned on one of the broken rails of the line fence, removing their dusty, sweat-creased caps. The performance continued for most of the afternoon. There would be

no corralling the Hereford mad with freedom. Harold needed to be on his way and an urgency was creeping into their discussion. The solution lived next door.

Thad appeared from the cellar of his beige blockhouse carrying a polished, high-powered rifle complete with scope and a barrel that seemed modified for just some task as this. He dragged the ladder from his van, waving at the cobwebs as he did so, leaned it against the eave of his shed and made the climb to the flat roof. Thad lay down on his over-sized belly, cocked the rifle, and pulled the scope to his eye in one fluid movement. A crack pierced the air as his finger pulled back. The bawling ceased, the running halted mid-air, as the Hereford steer was dropped like a sack of sand.

Thad nodded in humble recognition of his skilful display of shooting accuracy and strolled back to his house, returning the weapon to its place of honour, or concealment, depending on your point of view. Jason and Harold whooped and hollered and slapped their knees for three or four minutes until Old Grace asked for clarification as to her pending departure. After Jason made some quick repairs, Grace eventually found her way on to the truck with the remaining passengers that seemed inexplicably less interested in escape. A quick call to the local vet rendered the beef safe for consumption and the steer was later lifted ungraciously from the field by the front-end loader of Jason's tractor to be claimed by the original owner.

Thad and Jason continued their mostly silent neighbourly relationship. "That was quite a shot," Jason said each time they met at the mailbox, Jason shaking his head while massaging his forehead. Thad merely nodded. They continued to verbally burp about the weather and the mail delivery and the hay yield each year. Jason continued to remove the snow and Thad tended to the grass while their homes continued to decline in their outward appearance, Thad's looking more

abandoned than not. They kept up their dance of mutual respect, including the waves and salutes and the sharing of flowers and plants that needed thinning and the application of manure.

Thad died eight years later from complications of diabetes, a condition that never found its way into the mailbox conversation. A lawyer from town notified Jason that the house, its contents and the three-quarters of an acre had been left to Jason under the terms of Thaddeus' will written thirty years earlier.

Jason, gathering his wits and resolve, carefully opened the back door of Thad's house. A surprise befell him. Thad's jacket hung faded from a single hook. A small table sitting atop a worn, hand-tied rug was immaculately set for a perpetual meal. The rest of the dishes were tucked neatly away in the plain plywood cupboards. A bouquet of dried flowers stood in a simple glass vase next to the sink, a small hand towel folded beside. The stainless steel sink was polished to a shine.

The room was unusually silent. There were no ticking clocks, the refrigerator's hum indiscernible. Not a sound as Jason moved respectfully around the room. In the corner on an ornate bookstand, sat a framed acknowledgement, an official document presented to Thaddeus Harnett on November 29, 1942, by His Majesty King George the Sixth along with a Victoria Cross, proudly propped beside a photo of Thad minus the beard and obtrusive belly. A handwritten account, for no one in particular, penned by Thaddeus Harnett and dutifully signed, was recorded in a small green leather-bound journal. Jason slid into a chair and read about his neighbour, digesting the words slowly, chewing each one. The journal, like Thad's garden, was precise and tidy. "I killed my first man today, October 13th, 1940," it read. "It was no more difficult than downing that deer three falls ago. I convinced myself that it was neither man nor beast but something more eager to kill me if I hesitated. Told myself he had no family, no regrets,

no dreams, and no unfinished business. He fell the instant I heard the sound from my rifle. Fell like a crumpled doll. Then I vomited.” The journal went on to provide the details of the considerable length of shots and the frequency of his successes. “They want to honour me,” Thad wrote. “Honour me for my rewards of childhood target practice, honour me for the lives taken that they translate to lives saved to make the honour more worthy. Lives I took in the name of war. Is there honour in that? I will forever wonder, a question that prevents me from sleeping, prevents me from living and at times I wish I had fallen with the men I killed.”

Jason placed the journal and the medal atop his fireplace, wiped the dust away with the back of his sleeve.

“I hear that Harnett left his house to you,” the people in town said when they collided with Jason. “That was a strange thing to do. He was just a neighbour, wasn’t he,” and there was a suspicious sound to their voices.

“No, he was more than just a neighbour,” Jason answered.