

Offshoots

Virtual Privacy

by Aurelia C. Scott

WHILE watering cleomes in her garden one summer, my friend Susan heard her name mentioned on the neighbor's side of a six-foot-high fence that divides their backyards.

"Did you see that Susan has painted her garden shed *purple*?"

"Uh-huh. Never can tell about your neighbors."

"Well, you can tell that she's not from around here, that's for sure."

Susan spent the next half hour in a back-killing crouch, not wanting the white-haired sisters on the other side of the fence to know that she had heard them. "I couldn't even go inside in case they heard the door bang!" she told me. "And the shed isn't purple—it's *lavender*."

A crouch would not have worked for me: The old chain-link fence that divides my backyard from my neighbors' yards is only three feet high, and sparrows and finches like to perch in the holes. We plan to replace it soon with picket or lattice fencing to complement the style of our 1886 Victorian house. Whichever style we choose, the fence will be no more than four feet high.

It's the neighbors, you see.

We live on Munjoy Hill in Portland, Maine, a working-class part of town where residential dwellings are mainly three-story apartment buildings and two-story-plus-attic single-family homes like ours. Backyards are tiny, and, for the most part, they abut each other.

In our case, five backyards are separated by low, rather worn fences, and in one unfenced section by a narrow bed of asters and purple dahlias. It is our own little greenbelt, which would change irrevocably should any of us ever erect a vision-blocking barrier. Instead of stockade fencing, we share a view of my perennials and herbs, Larry's perfect lawn, George's annuals,

Suzanne's wading pool, and Mary's brown metal moose statue. We make the occasional loan of trowels and offer advice on watering. We also share an intimate knowledge of what each of us wears to weed when we think no one is looking.

In a way, no one is. For we also share privacy. A looking-but-not-seeing-each-other mentality that is essential to surviving in crowded places. Knowing when to engage and when to turn away, and when to speak up and when to hold one's council, are skills shared by the inhabitants of our greenbelt. For those of you whose yards are secluded, this is how it works:



It is 10 a.m. I am pruning a buddleia when George comes out to water the marigolds along his driveway. From the corner of my eye I see that he is wearing slippers and, well, they might be blue swimming trunks decorated with yellow smiley faces, they might be short pajamas, or—I realize mid-snip—they might be boxer shorts. I move my kneeling pad several feet further into our yard and bury myself in a three-foot-high coreopsis that always needs deadheading. I snip quietly and scoot even further away toward some salvias as George holds a garden hose over

each marigold plant. Fifteen minutes pass until I hear the thwack of his screen door.

An hour later, as I am trying to tame the thorny branches of a climbing rose, George reappears wearing khaki shorts, polo shirt, and white sneakers.

"Aurelia!" He waves enthusiastically.

"Good morning, George! Such a gorgeous day."

"It certainly is. I'm glad I finally got outside to enjoy it."

I nod my complicity.

Life on Munjoy Hill is a stark contrast to my childhood home in a village in the Berkshires, where my parents still live. There, most homes have an acre of hedge-guarded yard. Sometimes when returning to my urban plot after visiting my parents, I find myself wishing for the dense stand of trees that separates my parents' back lawn from their neighbors'. Yet, my parents' backyard conversations are hushed, for they have long known what my friend Susan has learned—that voices carry even when neighbors remain unseen. Walking along Main Street, I am reminded that all the gardens here are private affairs. Only owners or invited guests are able to admire one gardener's carpet of naturalized crocuses or inhale the fragrance of another's rose.

So, for the time being, I am content with a low fence and a clear view. I like to be able to hand a fresh-picked tomato over the asters to Larry. To stand on our back deck exchanging tips with Mary about how to keep mildew off the phlox. There comes a day mid-summer when I realize that although Suzanne's children have been screaming in their wading pool all afternoon, I haven't heard a thing. Just as I know that George has never seen me in my ancient white nightgown picking raspberries—and I have never seen him wear his boxer shorts to water the marigolds.

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