

Vera's Nemesis

by M. F. Sullivan

The dog was there before Vera was there, so she supposed she couldn't hate it too much. It wasn't like she had to live with the thing, either, though she might as well have hosted it in her ear for the eight months it took that particular batch of neighbors to move away.

Never a sleeper, Vera. She'd been kept up nights since she was young, nothing in particular hampering her quest for sleep but everything conspiring in a grand network of agony. Here an itch, now the temperature too hot, then the squeak of a bedspring from the room down the hall. Here she had expected it to be her roommates. To escape her past as Vivi, as a confused girl in college, Vera had reinvented herself and fled as soon as resources allowed to a place which was the exact opposite of the Midwest: the desert. She had even found right away an enclave of artists to room with, which was why she expected to be kept up by parties, or music plucked in the dead of night, or practice for some appalling piece of performance art. That was just fine. She had her typewriter. She would be up nights anyway.

But, in reality, her roommates were peaceful, and at first she slept like an angel, even on an air-mattress on the floor. They were welcoming and kind, and more or less minded their own business unless invited.

The dog, though. The dog was there, all the time. Barking. Barking and barking. Generally between the hours of noon to eleven-thirty a.m. or so, barking and barking. When Vera came home from the mortuary, the dog barked. When home from work at the mortuary, already miserable, there was the tan mutt leaping in The Neighbor-Across-The-Street's yard, barking and barking. Not at all normal barking, either, but barking that cut to the bone. Barking that set off other dogs barking for miles away. And all over the neighborhood, exhausted from their sweltering July days, their

owners slept through it. Sometimes a dog in the distance quieted down—but never this dog.

Zoey, the dog's name. (She would have preferred the variant with an umlaut over the 'e' and no third letter because she was pretentious like the rest of her family in some ways, but she had no doubt The Neighbors-Across-The-Street would have no idea what an umlaut was.)

She knew Zoey's name because every morning, all day, the children would scream it in the street while the dog ran loose without so much as a collar.

“Zoey!”

A bellow of a barking.

“Zoey!”

An elephant trumpeting.

“Zoey!”

Etc., sometimes what seemed to be hours. Vera did not care to consider herself a violent person but there were times she wished a car would careen around the corner to scatter them like bowling pins.

Of course, often the dog wasn't in the street, being fenced in out back. But that fence seemed really more a suggestion, Zoey leaped it at will. One afternoon as Vera walked from the bus stop to the house, the dog accosted her. As a rule, animals loved Vera, and Vera loved them back—but this wasn't an ordinary animal, and as Zoey ran up to her, Vera pointed at The Neighbor-Across-The-Street's house and made herself large.

“Get out of here. Everybody thinks you're cute but I know you. I know what you are.”

Zoey sat back on her haunches, head tilted and ears perked.

“You're an asshole.”

The dog's mouth opened in a tremendous doggie smile, and, barking, it ran to chase a car. Vera watched only long enough to confirm it would not be miraculously hit on this excursion, then, inside, found Jim the cartoonist hard at work on his comic. It was the sort of grim-yet-endearing story that Vera could appreciate—about a

dysfunctional family. She was also fond of Mary, Jim's wife, though Mary did have her moments. She was a magician, it seemed, and lived to impress people. Jim did not. Jim lived for his work, and wasn't a prick about his talents, which was something Vera found refreshing in a human being. He and Mary were not only a great couple and welcoming hosts, but they were much better siblings than Ada and Susan in many ways.

"I haven't slept more than three hours a night because of that dog, Jim," said Vera as she dropped her bag on the counter. "I'm going to lose my mind."

"It's awful," he agreed without looking up from his drawing. "Nobody stays in that house more than a year or two though. This neighborhood seems full of people who can't afford what they buy."

As she sank into the chair opposite his at the kitchen table, she tilted her head back, closed her eyes, and listened to the barking. "That dog never sleeps, either."

"I wouldn't either if I was left outside all the time in this heat."

"It's cruel, but still. You'd think the people living there are sick of hearing it, too."

"I'll bet it's better than a white noise machine for them."

Scowling, Vera tilted her head back against the counter. "Has anyone around here ever said something to them?"

"I don't know. I haven't."

"Well why not?"

"It seems rude. I don't know. It's none of my business, who am I to tell them what to do with their dog?"

"It's inhumane and disrespectful."

"So why not say something yourself, then?" Now Jim looked up. "You've got hands. You can knock on their door just as soon as I."

Her lips twisted to one side of her face. Though Vera liked to think of herself as an aggressive person, there were certain situations wherein that did not apply. For one, she did not know The Neighbors-Across-The-Street, and conflict seemed such a personal thing to her. It wasn't wise to agitate unless one knew a person and could extrapolate their reactions. These people had kept a dead

Christmas tree in their front yard until March and frequently dropped beer cans on the gravel there. She was sure they would not respond to direct confrontation with anything other than inbred insult.

The next step, then, was not active aggression, but rather passive aggression. She didn't like being passive aggressive, but this was what came of sleepless nights. Besides—allowing a dog to bark and bark and bark and bark was passive aggressive, in a way. Do unto others.

So, Vera wrote a note. It was a very polite note, and went something like this:

Dear Neighbors,

Please bring your dog inside at night or find another way to quiet it. I have to sleep for work in the morning and can't even close my eyes with Zoey barking all night.

Signed,

A Neighbor

Then on her way to work the next morning she taped it to their front door and had done with it. When she came home, the dog was actually quiet. The house was so still she went to bed immediately, there at five in the evening, and slept until she got up at four to start her day again. If the dog had barked in the night, it hadn't jarred her.

"You see," said Vera over breakfast, "all you need is a little expression."

"We'll see," said Jim.

"We'll see," said Mary.

And they saw, three days later, when it started up again. Soon after Vera went to bed that night, right as her mind hovered on the twilight of sleep, warmth and comfort pervading her body, the first bark shot through her skull with the force of a bullet.

For awhile she lay staring at the ceiling. Her eyes burned after fifteen minutes, so she closed them and turned to her left side, then to her right. At first she had thought wearing ear-plugs would solve the problem, and she tried them again, but the preternatural evil in

The Neighbors-Across-The-Street's yard penetrated even those uncomfortable things. Downstairs, she drank several shots of Jim's cooking brandy, which was thick and grainy and old because Jim and Mary were teetotalers who used their booze for cooking. She sat on the back patio and smoked a cigarette. A stray cat whom she called Lucy wandered down the fence, then hopped down to bump her delicate head against Vera's ankles.

"You hate that dog too, don't you."

The cat said nothing, just crouched in front of the ever-present food bowl to nibble what was there. All the while, the dog barked. Vera finished her smoke and read inside an hour and the barking continued, the whole neighborhood in on it now, a bloodhound a mile away roo-roo-rooing, and a chihuahua yapping, and a shepherd howling—and in the midst of it all, the orchestrator, Zoey, whose bark was a nasty laugh directing the cacophony.

How Vera hated that animal. She imagined faintly going over to poison the dog. Of course she couldn't do it, she couldn't hurt a thing. Certain other members of her family might, but she was from bad blood. She had overcome that. She was not a Vasko as the rest of them, but gentle and loving. Even towards that dog.

But it was hard to be gentle and loving towards The Neighbors-Across-The-Street. So the shitheads could sleep through it, could they. Well! Perhaps she'd go and wake them up.

With her ankle-length robe wrapped around her, Vera slipped on her sandals and marched across the street to a house which looked more or less like the one she lived in. The dog barked, barked, barked louder with her intrusive approach, leaping to the top of the fence just in case she wasn't sure there was a dog there.

"I can hear you," she said to Zoey, with the tone one might use when being condescended to. As she marched to the door, she pushed the linen sleeves to her elbows and readied her fist. Then came a burst of vicious staccato knocking, as loud as she could until she thought her knuckles would bruise.

Then, she ran away, and as she ran across the street she heard the door open. Whomever was there didn't say anything after her,

and she did not turn to look, but the dog did stop barking that night.

The next day, though, it was at it again. Not that it made a difference. Even without the barking Vera had not been able to sleep. When she began to doze off around ten in the morning, having called off of work, Mary knocked on the door of her room.

"What is it!" Vera practically screamed the words, her eyes tearing as she opened them.

Mary laughed. "I have donuts, I thought you might want them."

"No. I haven't slept at all, I feel sick to my stomach." Part of a set of symptoms to which Vera had become accustomed, either separately or en masse, as a result of chronic sleep deprivation: tight skin, aching bones, raw stomach, diminished attention, nonexistent patience. Squeezing shut her eyes, she took a breath and said through the door, "I'll come get one later if they're still there. Thank you."

"Did the dog keep you up again?"

"I have no idea what to do. I've talked to them. I knocked on their door last night but it'll start back up again."

"Probably," said her too-cheerful roommate. "Maybe one day the dog-catcher will get it when it gets out."

Then Mary was gone from the door, and Vera was left with her genius idea. Yes. The dog-catcher. It was a terrible thought lest something happen and the dog be put to sleep, but Vera was desperate for her own, less-permanent shut-eye. After consulting the yellow pages, she called animal control.

"I'd like to report a dog that runs around my neighborhood."

The city worker was not impressed, always looking for the next dramatic call about javelina chasing somebody up a tree or a coyote giving somebody rabies. "What neighborhood is this?"

Vera gave her address.

"And the dog?"

"A tan mutt."

"You know," said the woman on the other end in that same bored tone of voice, "I seem to remember other people in your area complaining about that dog, too."

"It runs around and just barks all the time. You've got to do something, please. I'm losing my mind."

"We're doing our best, ma'am." Her tone indicated otherwise. "We'll dispatch someone soon."

And they did, but of course, the dog was neither out nor barking at the time. Vera slept through their visit, or else she might have seen them bumbling past her house and the neighbor's in their white van.

The next night, it began again. It carried on and Vera tried to find a way to live with it. She played music as she tried to sleep. She took pills and drank booze until she passed out. She took walks in the night and listened to the barking, sat on the cool front porch to commiserate with the cat.

Then, just as it seemed it would never end, she returned from work one day to find the dog-catcher van back, parked on the corner. A fine job they were doing—Zoey ran right past her as she rounded the corner and Vera all but hissed, bursting into the house to shout at Jim, "The dog-catcher is here for Zoey!"

"No way," said her roommate, looking up from his pages. He leapt from the table and both sped upstairs to watch from Vera's window as the dog-catchers rounded the corner. They paused by their van, had a short conversation and then moved towards the house of The Neighbors-Across-The-Street, who opened the door at the knock and had a brief conversation which Vera opened her window to try fruitlessly to hear.

Finally, the men in white returned to the street, where they looked around like helpless children. Vera pushed the window up further and stuck her face to the screen to shout, "She went that way!"

The men looked up in the sound of her voice and, pointing, she shouted, "To your right!"

"You dick," Jim chuckled, and Vera scowled as the men wandered at her direction. "It's not the dog's fault. Why are you punishing the dog?"

"I'm not punishing the dog, I'm doing it a favor. You said it yourself, nobody wants to live outside in the Arizona heat."

In the end, the dog wasn't caught, but it wasn't seen anymore, either. Nor heard, for that matter, except a few hours in the afternoon when it would bark and the children would scream "Zoey!" and Vera was at work were everything was quiet because half of the customers were dead.

She still couldn't sleep nights, not even when the neighbors moved away in November and there was not Zoey at all anymore, even in the day. But now, at least, the barking was distant if it came, and she could be alone with her itches, and the desert heat, and the creak of a bedspring down the hall.

