

The Boundary Line

by Michael Hartford

I came home for my first Thanksgiving vacation from college to find my father standing on the curb, his back to the street, staring intently toward the far corner of the back yard. I waved to him, but he didn't respond. So I waved to my ride instead, a senior who lived a few miles away, and lugged my laundry and book bag to the front door.

The living room still had an unsettled feel. My parents and little sister had moved out to the suburbs of Indianapolis in late August, just as I was moving off to college; I had spent only one night at this house, sleeping on a mattress on the floor because our furniture hadn't come yet. For sixteen of my first eighteen years, we had lived in a bungalow on a postage-stamp of a lot, shaded by some of the last big elms in the city.

My parents had a feeling that our Indianapolis neighborhood was changing, declining, over the last ten years; that feeling was confirmed the night our television, silver, and microwave left us while we slept soundly upstairs. Because I was going to college and my sister had yet to start high school, the incident was the perfect excuse to leave. My father could keep his legal practice from the suburbs, and my mother looked forward to book club meetings and quiet streets.

"Welcome home, David," my mother said from the couch. She didn't get up and run to hug me, or move very much at all, except to close her magazine and take off her glasses. Our family isn't known for exuberant displays of affection; weepy hellos and goodbyes have always made us a little uncomfortable.

"Hi, Mom." I dropped my laundry basket in the foyer. "What's Dad doing out on the lawn?"

"Surveying," she said. There was a hint of bemused annoyance in her voice.

"Surveying what?"

“Oh, he had some man here last week to mark the boundary lines, and discovered that five of the neighbor's trees are on our land.”

“No, six!” It was my father's voice, coming from the sitting room attached to the garage. I could hear the rumbling, clicking sound of the automatic door.

“Four apple trees, a plum tree, and a pear,” he said when he came into the foyer. “The pear's a little close, but I ran a string down the line and at least half of it is on our side.”

“And what does that mean?” my mother asked, returning to her magazine.

“Well, it certainly increases the value of our land,” he said. “And there are some other things I have to look into ...” He wandered back into the sitting room, through the kitchen, and out the back door.

Every evening I was home, between coming from work and sitting down to supper, my father made a course around the property line. In my political science class we had been reading Jeremy Bentham, a great inventor of words, and my favorite of his neologisms had been “anteprandialcircumgyration”—a “before dinner walk around the garden” to aid digestion. My father's nightly walk, though, was more like a king walking the parapet around his castle. It was done for land rather than for health.

A few times I joined him. He was mostly silent, intent on the muddy white twine stretched an inch above the grass from one orange-flagged post to the next, five in all. The yard was roughly pentagonal, about half an acre in size, with the bulk of it behind the house. We had neighbors on three sides—a young family to the south, two duplexes to the west, and the fruit-bearing neighbor on the north. Relations with the south and west were generally good; a state of extreme tension existed on the northern frontier.

Our northern neighbor's name was William Hendrickson (we called him Bill). There were four or five Hendricksons—Bill, his wife Elise, and some children who were rarely seen. Bill was an odd character, and his house and yard reflected it. Although his ranch-

style, two-storey house was the same size and shape as ours, the clutter in his yard and the color of its outside walls—a dark, nearly black purple—made his seem half as big as ours. Bill's front yard looked like a permanent garage sale: lawn furniture, picnic tables, car trailers, and spare tires rotated through like passengers in a Greyhound station. His back yard was dominated by a weird, jungle-like garden, a swing set made out of railroad ties and fence posts, and an old and inoperative beehive. Bill was a collector of hobbies and junk, buying only at half price and discarding the old purchases as soon as he had acquired new. Our Spartan, close-cut lawn and bone-white house looked huge and empty next door.

My father couldn't stand Bill. He claimed it was because of Bill's loud music, erratic mowing, and slovenly dress. I think it went deeper than that, though. I think that what my father hated most was Bill's ability to live in near-total chaos.

I was still at home the Saturday after Thanksgiving, when my father went next door to tell Bill that the trees along the border were contested ground. My mother and I had mixed feelings about the issue—Bill had, after all, bought (or at least acquired) and planted the trees—so we stayed behind, watching the confrontation through a partly drawn curtain in the living room.

My father walked down our driveway to the street, along the curb, and up Bill's driveway. Except when he was patrolling the property or cutting the lawn, his feet never touched grass. He weaved through a maze of wooden crates piled on the front stoop and knocked on Bill's navy blue door. His presence announced, he waited with affected casualness, hands in his pockets, swaying back and forth, whistling some tune that we couldn't hear through our window.

After a few moments, the door opened and Bill appeared. He was shorter than my father, who stood at about six feet, and darker (my father would still have sandy brown hair into his sixties). Bill sported a wide, hairy growth on his lip—a moustache, I guess, about as well-groomed as his yard. Unlike my father, who had dressed in his tan slacks and yellow shirt with a plain blue tie, Bill

was disheveled and untucked, his yellowed T-shirt rising up to reveal a hair-covered navel. There was an exchange of formalities: hands were shaken, an invitation into the house was declined by my father with a head gesture, a few strained laughs passed over their faces. Then diplomatic negotiations were officially opened.

My father talked in a straightforward, business-like manner: his hand gestures were slight and repetitive, his head stayed at the same angle throughout his first speech. Bill waved his hands as wildly and erratically as his mowing, which either invaded far onto our property or missed large swaths of his own grass. His speech was so loud that we could almost hear the words through our window.

Loud encounters on a public street are not what my father, a back-room, careful-deal negotiator, is best at. Apparently sensing himself at a disadvantage in a shouting match, my father led Bill across the lawn (on the grass itself!) to the trees in question. Now they were close enough that my mother and I could hear them through the window.

“... and then I ran a string along the surveyor's line,” my father was saying, “and I found that these five trees are as much as three feet over the boundary.”

“Well, maybe so!” Bill yelled, “Maybe so! But these trees”—he put his hand on a gnarled apple limb—“I planted these trees with my own hands—” he held the hands in question up for my father's inspection—“and I pick the apples off them with my own hands, too!”

“I understand that,” my father said.

“Like hell!” Bill yelled. “Like hell you understand, Mister I-Hired-a-Freakin'-Surveyor! The trees are my property, not yours.”

“Actually, according to Indiana law ...”

“To hell with Indiana law!” Bill was red and gasping, arms windmilling. “To hell with Indiana law! No judge in this state would let you breathe on my trees!”

“Mr. Hendrickson,” my father said in the same voice he used with me when I was seven, “I understand your position. That's

precisely why I have chosen to talk to you, reasonably, about this situation.”

Bill relaxed his arms, shaking his fingers near his thighs. He looked away from my father and down the line of the small orchard—ten trees altogether, including the six in dispute. He looked away, but from the angle of his head I could tell he was still listening.

“Mr. Hendrickson, I think we can come to an agreement on the trees. You can continue to harvest the fruit as long as I own the land. All I ask is that you mow up to the boundary line in the spring and summer, and that you allow me to make minimal use of the fruit on the six trees on this side of the property. But if I ever sell the house, then the trees go to the next owner. I shall make their inclusion quite clear to any potential buyers.”

Even on the front lawn, my father sounded like a lawyer.

“Well, okay.” Bill turned back to face my father. “But you can only have fruit from these four apples and the plum.”

“But the pear tree—”

Bill strode down the line of trees to the pear. It was the smallest of the six, barely taller than my father and not much bigger around than his leg. The string that marked the border had been stretched around so that the tree was on our side of the border.

“You stretched the string,” Bill said.

“Because the boundary cuts the tree in half,” my father said.

“Bull.”

“It does. You can see for yourself if you look from the post by the street.”

Bill strode back to the street, turned, and stretched out flat with his cheek beside the orange-flagged steel rod. He closed one eye, as if he were sighting a rifle, and stared down the muddy twine. After a few moments, he stood back up and wiped the grass clippings from his knees.

“More than half is on my side,” Bill said.

“Not much more!”

“It's enough. A majority. Majority rules.”

“Not when it comes to property. Anything on my side of the line, even if it's only a part of the tree, is my property.”

“Then you can have the pears that are on your side of the line,” Bill said, “but you keep your hands off the ones on my side.”

“The same applies to you, Mr. Hendrickson.”

Bill wiped his hand off on his trousers and stuck it out to my father. “Then it's a deal?”

“It's settled,” my father said, and shook Bill's hand. And there it stood through the winter.

Relations were still amicable, if tense, when I came home for Easter. My mother had a few funny stories about Bill's changing hobbies, like the tiny ears of corn which had started to sprout underneath his kitchen window, though my father had some complaints about Bill's mowing incursions.

The mowing was a real issue for my father, legally as well as aesthetically. Indiana property law was still shaped by the Homestead Act of 1820 or so, which meant that if Bill “worked” the land between our houses for a certain number of years, it became his. This was a subtlety that I'm sure was lost on Bill, but my father took no chances. He ran the wheel of our old gas lawnmower just inches from the twine (which he replaced monthly), allowing the spinning blade to reach only the grass directly on the border.

The Monday after Easter I was outside with my father trying to transplant a lilac bush which was growing too close to the house. Although we were careful about it, the operation ended in eventual failure; the lilacs would never bloom again. During the digging up and burying down of the shrub's roots, I was vaguely aware of the sound of Bill's sputtery, rusted lawnmower behind us. As my father patted the last mud and dirt into place around the base of the lilac bush, the sputter of Bill's mower turned into a distressed whine and, after a high-pitched shriek, the machine fell silent. Bill's loud and creative cursing filled the void the mower had left.

I stood by the lilac for a long time, watching Bill as he intermittently stooped and danced, stooped and danced, sometimes

looking as though he were trying to salvage the mower by careful mechanical inspection, sometimes by some voodoo ritual. My father, who can't stand mechanical incompetence, finally gave up and walked across the yard to see what help Bill needed. I followed him.

"Goddam mower!" Bill yelled. "Goddam thing just conked out!"

My father bent down and looked at the engine for a moment, then flipped it on its side. The muddy twine which had stretched from front to back of the property line was tangled around the blade of Bill's lawnmower. He sighed deeply and began to unwrap the string.

"What is that?" Bill demanded. "What the hell is that?"

"It's the boundary line," my father said. "You cut it and it got tangled in your blade."

"Well, what the hell is a string doing down there? What the hell do you need a Goddam string for?"

"It marks the boundary line," my father said with his lecturing-a-seven-year-old voice.

"Well, I know where the freakin' boundary line is!"

"Obviously not," my father said. "You had to cross it to cut it."

Bill had no response. He simply stared at the tipped mower, the tangled string, the half-cut grass. Finally, he asked, "Is it broke?"

"No. It should start. Just don't cut the string again."

Bill went back to cutting the grass after several yanks of the mower's cord, and my father gathered up the stretched and tangled twine, balling it up in his jacket pocket as he walked the property line. I followed my father, who remained silent. As soon as the string had been collected, he climbed into his car and drove off, as intent and quiet as he had been while pocketing his boundary line. He came back two hours later with an order slip for fence posts, planks, and nails.

The truck from the lumber yard delivered my father's order while I was at school, but the bulk of the planks were still in the driveway when I came home in June. My father was planning to build a boundary line that Bill could not mistake. According to the municipal

codes, he couldn't run the fence directly along the property line, but the minimum distance from the boundary—six feet—was exactly the size of two widths of our lawnmower. The posts were planted and the two-by-four runners had been placed, but I was to help with filling in the spaces.

It was an uncomfortable summer because I was going through my Marxist phase. I had always been a little more radical than my father, who came from a rock-ribbed Yankee tradition of hard work and stern attitudes. He was proud to have dissented from the election of Kennedy in 1960, and confided that he had felt vindicated when Nixon was elected in 1968 (we did not discuss Watergate at our house, even twenty years later) . My mother told me once that my father had wanted to name me “Richard Milhouse” when I was born just hours after the inauguration.

My radicalism was not terribly deep, nor terribly radical. I had read Marx in philosophy class—the early Marx especially, devouring “Alienated Labor” with genuine gusto—and I had participated in a debate or two with the campus Trotsky club. I was certainly not Marxist enough for the Trotskyites, who called me a “commie-wannabe,” but I was far too Marxist for my father.

“I'm not sure about the tree thing, Dad,” I said on our second day nailing planks to the fence frame. We were on the south border, twelve feet from that property line.

“Well, I can't weave the fence between them,” he said. “The trees will still be ambiguous—at least we can save most of our yard.”

“I mean the whole thing,” I said, being intentionally vague. I wasn't even sure why I had brought it up.

“What do you mean? ‘The whole thing?’”

“I think we should let Bill keep the trees.”

He stopped pounding nails into the plank he was holding and turned to look at me, the hammer dangling as loosely from his fingers as his jaw from the rest of his face. He looked as if he wasn't sure that he had heard what I had said.

“Keep the trees? They're on our property.”

“Well, I know that ... kind of ...

"What do you mean, 'kind of?' 'Kind of' our property? I'll tell you, David, this land is not just vaguely ours. I'll show you the deed if you like."

"But . . . we're not doing anything with it." I hadn't stopped hammering. I was hoping that the banging would keep him from hearing everything I said.

"Stop hammering," my father said. It was the voice he had used in his trial-room days to shout out an objection.

I stopped.

"We don't have to do anything with it," he said. "I bought it."

"But Bill uses those trees," I said. "He planted them, he cares for them, he harvests the fruit."

"What's your point?"

"Well . . . if we don't let him keep them . . . if we take the fruit off them . . . well, it's . . . it's theft." I winced at the last word as though I had caught my thumb with the hammer. It sounded like a weak paraphrase of Proudhon's anarchist maxim, "property is theft."

"It is not theft," my father said. He started pounding nails again, loudly, heavily, driving each in with one or two blows. "What he's doing is theft."

"But he planted the trees . . ."

"On my land!"

"But that doesn't make them yours . . ."

"Oh, yes it does!"

I walked back to the garage to put my hammer away. My father was still pounding. We didn't talk to each other for nearly a week.

I never became a good Marxist because I found it impossible to romanticize the downtrodden proletariat, especially Bill Hendrickson. Bill had always been as mean-spirited and acquisitive as I feared my father was becoming: the stories about Bill's skin-flint deals for the junk in his yard were legend in the neighborhood. Put in the same situation, he would steal the trees without a second thought.

I watched Bill watch our yard that week. He eyed our fence during its construction, rubbing the stubble on his chin between his thumb and index finger. I don't know if he was bright enough to be plotting, but that's what it looked like he was doing.

If he was plotting, trying to goad my father into a confrontation, then he was much subtler than I had given him credit for being. But also much clumsier, because the incident that precipitated all-out war worked against him.

While in my Marxist phase, I made a scrupulous study of the causes of revolution. It was that study, I suppose, which led me away from Marxism. Marx had a deep and unfounded faith in human rationality; to him, the only reason to start a revolution was because the vanguard of the revolutionary class had analyzed the situation and seen that the moment had arrived at last for historic action. But when actual revolutions happened, it was almost always because of some silly, trivial, meaningless event in an atmosphere of tension, like a food fight near the Bastille or a pear swiped from the wrong side of the tree.

It happened just before I was due to return to college that September. My father and I had made amends — I would mow the lawn (a form of "working the land," I conceded) and he would build the fence. By July the fence was up, a six-foot high wooden wall that followed the rough shape of the property line all around the back yard and flowed gracefully up to the north and south sides of the house. During the construction of the fence, I had been given the task of watching "our" fruit trees and alerting my father to their degree of ripeness. In the last week of August, the pears had reached optimum firmness.

The next day, we went out together to the trees with a pair of plastic pails to gather the fruit on our side of the line, and discovered that the tree was bare. Bill would have flown into a rage; my father simply surveyed the empty tree with a stormy calm, walked all the way around it twice, and went back to the garage. I followed, bucket swinging against my leg, hoping that I would be

back at school before diplomatic ties were severed and the war began in earnest.

My wish was granted. My mother served as the combat correspondent during the brief campaign, sending me two letters that detailed the single battle of the Great Pear Tree War and its aftermath. She had taken an independent position in the conflict, neither for Bill nor my father, but simply aloof from the whole silly thing.

I went back to school on a Wednesday. On Saturday, my father rose with the sun and, shovel in hand, began the liberation of the trees on occupied soil. He moved the apple trees first, digging them out of the lawn, lifting them over the fence, and burying their roots well within our jurisdiction. Then the plum tree, on Sunday, while Bill watched silently and angrily. He had missed the first volley — Bill apparently didn't stir until after noon on Saturdays — but the very obvious absence of the apple trees had drawn his attention.

According to my mother, Bill didn't say a word during the uprooting. I found that hard to believe — he had always been so animated whenever I had seen him before — but perhaps my father's betrayal of their Thanksgiving treaty had stunned him. According to my mother, my father silently dug up the plum tree, heaved it over the fence, filled in the hole, and started toward the garage. And then Bill spoke.

"What about the pear tree?" Bill asked. My mother claimed that it was asked facetiously; I suspected that Bill was genuinely curious.

My father smiled at him, went into the garage, and came back with a single-bladed axe. Being careful to cut only the trunk on his side of the boundary, my father chopped a wide wedge out of the base of the pear tree. Then, lifting up on the larger boughs that hung over our yard, he pushed the tree until it fell onto Bill's lawn. I can imagine my father walking back to the garage, the ax slung Paul Bunyan-like over his shoulder, whistling a tuneless little ditty.

When I came home for Thanksgiving, I discovered that Bill's lawn had sprouted our fence's smaller, darker twin, just as Bill's house was our house's smaller, darker twin. His was a rushed fence, not as meticulous and measured as ours. It stood only four feet high, weaved drunkenly along the boundary line ("in clear violation of municipal codes!" my father proclaimed), and had been built from a motley collection of boards and shingles. Bill had created the crazy-quilt of fences.

The one place Bill had been careful in his building was on the southwest corner of his property, where his four surviving trees still stood. All four were on his side of the fence, although one apple tree's limbs reached across into the no-man's-land. That November, there were still apples hanging on Bill's trees, turning brown in the autumn wind.

My father's apple trees had been too shocked by the move to bear fruit. My mother wrote that the tiny green balls that had not been shaken loose in the trip over the fence had turned brown and fallen off soon after I had left. Three large limbs of the plum tree were brown and brittle, and the others had not borne fruit. Even my father, who was brightly optimistic about the apple trees, didn't believe that the plum tree would survive the winter.

The last mowing of the season belonged to me — my father demanded a final cutting before the snow. While I walked between the fences, the mower occasionally brushing against Bill's uneven fence, I thought in lazy circles about property and the need to patrol it against every incursion. I thought about the junk behind Bill's fence — certainly he had acquired more since last I had seen the yard — and about our trees, soon to be facing their first winter behind our fence. These things were indeed the wealth of our respective nations. The grass clippings shot out from the back of the lawnmower and sprayed across my shoes.

