

The Great Wall of Suburbia

by Todd Keisling

Old man Hensley was fed up. With everything, he would say, if one was so inclined to ask (which was not advisable). It was his first morning as an official retiree and, if it was any indication of the mornings to come, he would much rather return to his job as a contractor. It wasn't the concept of not having to support himself that pushed him over the edge (quite the contrary, actually—after working so long for Fairview Contracting, he had quite a hefty pension under his belt); rather, it was his surroundings.

If asked, Mr. James Hensley would say: “It's the fuckin' neighbors.”

He found it somewhat ironic that the place he now called home resided at the far end of a housing development known only as “Fairview Acres.” Hensley had spent most of his career building neighborhoods such as these—next to fast food restaurants, they were his most reviled type of project—and when his now ex-wife demanded they relocate to one, he'd had little say in the matter. Their layouts were always the same: one gated entrance that spawned winding tentacle-like side streets that ended in extravagant cul-de-sacs. Lining every stretch of ungodly pavement was a cookie-cutter house. They called it “cookie-cutter” in his line of work because of the nature of the designs—one mold for all. Such neighborhoods had a tendency to spring up at the most inappropriate of times like acne on the face of an adolescent the day before prom.

These cookie-cutter suburban hells were home to fancy business executives, seedy lawyers and rich widows. Worst of all were the rich widows. After he divorced his wife, word spread like herpes and soon every widow in the entire development was paying him a visit.

This was just one straw of many.

What happened on this particular morning was nothing out of the ordinary. Old man Hensley had simply had enough. He woke up, scratched himself and walked out to his front porch. There he found the daily newspaper, wrapped up in a bag of plastic and filled with reports about crap for which he did not care. He observed his surroundings. Birds chirped above; one even shat upon the hood of his brand new black Cadillac. Hensley grit his teeth together when he saw this.

Across the street, Judge Potter was in the process of washing his new Porsche. A series of sprinklers spat a hazy mist across his lawn, creating a faint rainbow with the refracted sunlight.

Next door, Mrs. Grover walked the a tiny Chihuahua named Brutus. Hensley watched with clenched jaws as the rodent canine wandered over to his mailbox, hiked its leg and pissed.

From the opposite direction came Tim Mullins, the local mail carrier. Everyone in the neighborhood knew him by name because he was the only mail carrier with access to the front gate. Mullins approached Hensley's mailbox; as he did so, Brutus the Chihuahua growled. The mail carrier gave the dog ample space and, upon noticing Hensley standing on his porch, redirected himself.

"Morning, Mr. Hensley."

Old man Hensley said nothing.

"Got some mail for you here."

Mullins retrieved an envelope. Hensley took it. He said nothing, but his eyes told Mullins to get the fuck off his porch.

He opened the envelope as Tim Mullins left his porch and began to read the contents of the letter contained within. It was from the Fairview Acres Homeowner's Association, which read:

Dear Mr. Hensley,
It has been called to our attention that you are flying a banner from your front porch which contains the image of a sun with a smiley face. While we appreciate your cheerful festivity and appreciation of the Summer season, your banner is a clear

violation of Section 34A in your Homeowner's Association contract (hereinafter referred to as "The Contract"). Please remove said banner and you will incur no penalties as outlined in Appendix B of the contract.

Also, the Fairview Acres Homeowner's Association would like to congratulate you on your recent retirement. We would also like to take this opportunity to set up an appointment with you to review your new financial status.

As always, thank you for calling our community your home.

Sincerely,

Brian Plick

Chairman

Fairview Acres Homeowner's Association

Hensley crumpled the letter into his fist and turned his gaze to the banner hanging from his porch awning. Its gleeful, smiling face billowed in a soft, summer breeze.

"Shit," Hensley whispered.

He liked that banner.

Motion caught his eye, and he turned his gaze back toward the street. Jogging up from the end of their cul-de-sac was Brooke Xavier, fully adorned in a bright, neon-purple jump suit. The blatant bounce in her breasts as she jogged gave away one simple, undeniable truth: she was the neighborhood slut. Hensley shook his head and was about to return to the safety of his home when he heard her whiney, attention-starved voice cry out to him:

"Hey old man, shouldn't you be inside on a day like this? I hear the heat's not good for old farts like you."

Hensley sighed and shook his head once more. Brooke was bitter with him ever since he denied her sexual advances. This was immediately following his divorce. As far as Hensley could figure, he was the only adult male in the neighborhood upon which Brooke had failed to leave her mark. Since then, she had made it a point to

hurl insults in his direction whenever possible. He, like everyone else in the community, simply learned to ignore her.

Like most days, Hensley retired to the solitude of his home, but on this particular morning, he found no solace. He stared at the crumpled piece of paper in his hand and thought about the banner hanging from the awning.

He thought about the day they broke ground for this housing development. He thought about the sweat that went into building the fancy walls which marked off this makeshift community, this mini-society of big shots and plastic-faced socialites. He thought about all the fancy cars; all the nosey neighbors; all the goddamn widows knocking at his door.

Something clicked, then. An idea. Later on he would wonder why he had not thought of it sooner. It did not matter. This was the moment when James Hensley decided a line had been crossed. He would keep his banner, and no one would tell him otherwise. He collected his wallet and keys; he put on a pair of shoes; soon he was out the door, into the summer heat that was so unfit for a man his age. Old man Hensley climbed behind the wheel of his black, bird shit-covered Cadillac and sped off to the local hardware store. He did not drive less than sixty-five. The following morning, like the previous, was painfully normal. The sun rose. Flowers blossomed. Bees buzzed, birds chirped, and clouds rolled overhead. Life was exactly as it should have been in Fairview Acres.

Except for one thing.

Judge Potter was the first to notice. He emerged from his house with a briefcase in one hand and a jelly donut in the other. A spot of red jelly stained his beige tie, though he was completely oblivious. He walked to his Porsche, turned off the car alarm and opened his door. As he did so, his gaze fell upon it. At first he wasn't quite sure what to make of it. He set down his briefcase and left the driver's side door of his Porsche standing open. More jelly from his donut dripped onto his tie.

By this moment, other neighbors on the block were emerging from their homes. Most carried briefcases. Some were dressed in business-formal attire. Some wore scrubs. All of them saw the spectacle that had become old man Hensley's house.

Well, they saw the spectacle *surrounding* it. A brick wall, perhaps seven or maybe even eight feet high, grew out of the ground, right along Hensley's property line. Just above the wall line, Hensley's sunny banner was still visible, and it billowed lazily in a quiet, morning breeze.

Brutus the Chihuahua was the first to investigate it up close. He sauntered over to the red brick structure with his nose to the ground, taking in the new sight and its curious scent. His tiny, shivering legs carried him from one corner to the next. When he reached the end, he turned and expressed a soft, melancholic whimper. His pissing post was missing, after all; this new wall would simply have to do, and he set about marking his territory.

The rest of the neighborhood stood on their porches and sidewalks, staring at the bricked oddity, wondering: How? What? Why?

Had old man Hensley finally fallen off his rocker?

Surely he knew the Homeowner's Association would frown upon this?

These questions remained on the tips of all their tongues. Mere sight of it made their skin crawl. Something was amiss; they could feel it in the air, and it made them uneasy. Some retreated to their cars; others stood in place, pondering the meaning of it all. Such meanings were obscure and fleeting. Feeling strangely defeated and unsatisfied, they climbed into their expensive cars and SUVs and drove off to their respective salaried professions.

The rest of the day went by quietly. Quietly, at least, from the inside of Hensley's home. On the outside, beyond the wall and across miles of telephone line, the Fairview Acres Gossip Train made its way through town with frequent stops along the way. One such stop happened to be the desk of Brian Plick, the chairman of Fairview's Homeowner's Association. He let his answering machine

take the message as he was too busy mounting his secretary from behind.

No matter: the Gossip Train continued its trek across town. It stopped by Brooke Xavier's cell phone; she then pushed the train along to Judge Potter's wife, Donna; from there it spread to the Widow Gertrude's telephone; she, in turn, called Mrs. Grover, who confirmed that, yes, she knew about the wall and, as a matter of fact, she was staring at it from her window at that very moment and, yes, she did hear sounds throughout the night, but thought she was simply dreaming.

Every stop of the Gossip Train yielded the same results:

Old man Hensley built a wall? What? No! You're kidding me! But why?

Hensley himself had successfully remained out of sight for the entire day. There was rampant speculation that he had, in fact, bricked up his home to keep out potential peeping toms (because, as most of the widows absolutely knew, James Hensley had an enormous cock). A popular notion among the community was that he was dead, and that he built the brick wall around the home as a sick kind of memorial to himself just before pulling a trigger or popping X amount of pills. Of course, no one would know for sure until a few days had passed. If he was dead, it would take a few days for his body to grow ripe enough to cause a stench.

Most of the neighborhood kids took bets on the matter. Little Billy Finnigan, from an adjacent cul de sac, bet twenty of his best baseball cards that the old man was raving mad and would hop the wall at any moment with an axe in hand. Allison McGovern, who spent most of her free time freebasing with her girlfriends across the train tracks from Fairview High, bet against her boyfriend Monty Pilmont on the premise that the old man was suffering from extreme agoraphobia. The stakes: a sit-down dinner-date, or oral sex with a complete oral finish. Odds were in Monty's favor.

Eventually those who gawked at the wall that morning returned home and resumed their previous dispositions. Brian Plick, Homeowner Association extraordinaire, found time to un-mount his

secretary to check his answering machine; upon hearing the message, he drove straight over to Hensley's house. There he parked alongside the curb and opened his door, but paused long enough to observe the odd amount of dirt around the curb itself. His gaze followed a series of tire tracks which led out toward the street and eventually faded from view.

"Odd," said Plick. He got out of his car and marched up to the door in the wall.

"Hensley?"

Silence. Well, except for the sound of slamming doors which trailed down the street. Apparently this was an event the entire neighborhood could not afford to miss. After all, their precious property value was at stake. The last thing they wanted was the value of their homes to plummet by proxy of one supposed lunatic's pet project.

Plick tapped his knuckles against the coarse brick.

No answer.

Someone across the street sneezed.

Brutus the Chihuahua wandered over and pissed on the far corner of the wall.

"Hensley?" Plick asked again. Frustration could be heard in his voice. A banner was one thing, but an honest to God brick wall? That's permanent and just gosh-darn uncalled for.

"James Hensley, are you in there?"

Again: silence.

Brian Plick shrugged, shook his head and sighed. He reached into his pocket and retrieved a folded piece of paper, which he then tossed it over Hensley's wall. Across the street and adjacent to Hensley's house, the neighbors wondered just what, exactly, was on that piece of paper. Was it an eviction notice? Worse: it was a warning regarding Hensley's extreme breach of contract. A clear violation of Section 36D, which read: "No homeowner shall place any unsightly landmark in their front or back lawn unless first approved by the Fairview Acres Homeowner's Association"; the term "landmark" was, in this case, defined by Appendix A: "*Landmark*'

means fences, fountains, ponds, gazebos, or any other form of lawn decoration or modification."

Mr. Plick lingered outside the wall for a moment longer before returning to his car. The rest of the street's residents sighed and retreated into their homes, disappointed that no answer-ridden confrontation came to pass. Most of them found it difficult to focus on their household chores. Some could not even pass by a window without pausing to gaze upon the wall in front of the Hensley place. Lingered in the darkness beneath all their thoughts, beneath their curiosities and insecurities was the unsettling appearance of a seemingly innocent brick wall. Just what had possessed James Hensley to build it? And why?

These anxious questions remained unanswered. No one slept well that night. Well, no one except Brutus the Chihuahua—he was content with things. After all, he may have lost his favorite pissing post, but he gained four wonderful corners in return. As for the rest of the neighborhood, they tossed and turned in their beds, while those same questions floated above them like equally restless phantoms. Why would old man Hensley wall himself up inside that home, away from such a lovely community? And how? What manner of dark, suburban witchcraft had called forth that wall from the ground?

Judge Potter and his wife sat up half the night, enraptured by endless alcoholic conversation. They traded theories along with shots of bourbon; by midnight they were equally toasted.

Brooke Xavier spent most of the night by her phone, waiting for someone to call her, to shower her with the attention she obviously deserved, but no one did. Sometime in the dawn she went up to her bedroom and masturbated. While she did so, she fantasized about being young and allowing Mr. Hensley to take her virginity. In her fantasy, she was pressed up against the wall around his house while he performed the deed.

Mrs. Grover smoked a cigarette at her kitchen sink. She kept the window open to hide the smell from her husband and children. She did not have to look far to see the wall; it was right

outside her window. There used to be a view of the pretty dogwood tree in Mr. Hensley's backyard. Brutus the Chihuahua peeked his head through the tiny doggy-door. She looked down and blew smoke in his direction.

Some of the neighborhood kids, including little Billy Finnigan, conspired to scale the wall, but as the night wore on, their fears mounted and the quintessential "plan" fell apart. Instead they spent a fraction of the night playing flashlight tag until Chris Jenkins fell and twisted his ankle.

Worst off was Brian Plick. How was he supposed to handle this situation? Never in his fifteen years as chairman of the association had anything like this occurred. He spent most of the night in his home office, reading form after form of association policy, looking for some how-to. He fell asleep shortly after three in the morning.

Some did not sleep at all.

Some believed that answers to the obsessive curiosities in all their minds would ease this new tension that was foreign to all of them. Such tension was something none of them understood. What made it worse was the physical manifestation of it all—a crudely built brick wall that stood too high for any of their tastes. It seemed too strange, too random, and so . . . just so *wrong*. There were *rules* in a place like this. That's how things worked. Someone couldn't just build a wall because he or she felt like it. Someone couldn't do something like this with blatant disregard to what his or her neighbors would think.

But James Hensley had done so, and quite unapologetically from the look of things.

This dark cloud of anxiety hovered over Fairview Acres and its residents for three more days. Not much changed in those three days, except for the wall. One of Fairview's resident graffiti artists (still at large) took it upon him or herself to scribe a passage in neon yellow spray paint: **We Will All Be Famous Fifteen Minutes Ago**. No one got the point and the graffiti artist's hopes of notoriety

died in less than fifteen minutes, thus proving the message to be somewhat ironically true.

In those three days, Brian Plick rallied the community. He called a meeting on the evening of the third day. Everyone met at Judge Potter's house, seeing as how it was directly across the street from their intended target. Mrs. Potter made hors 'doeuvres for the guests; Mrs. Grover carried Brutus in her arms, who shivered constantly due to the Potters' desire to have a thermostat reading of less than seventy degrees; Brooke Xavier wore her skimpiest outfit as a means of garnering attention, but such efforts failed as she had nothing new to show.

After half an hour of mingling, Brian Plick began a long-winded speech which he never got to finish. As soon as he mentioned a small stipulation he'd found in the Homeowner's Association contract (an addendum to Section 36D, listed in Appendix C), which mandated removal of any such offensive object by any available member of the association's committee, a collective cry rang out through the crowd and, before he could stop them, the entire community began to make their way across the street toward Hensley's wall. Judge Potter went to his garage to fetch a sledgehammer. Plick, on the other hand, stood and watched, slightly taken aback by the animosity surging through the community. Had Hensley's wall driven them to such a level?

Judge Potter thrust the long handle of the sledgehammer into Plick's hands.

This answered his question.

Brian Plick made his way across the street and through the crowd, which parted as easily as the legs of his secretary earlier that afternoon (and every afternoon, for that matter). When he reached the wall, he raised his hand to quiet the rest of the mob. With his other hand, he raised the sledgehammer, and the crowd obediently shushed.

He raised his voice and said: "James Hensley, you have violated Section 36D of the Fairview Acres Homeowner's Association contract and made no attempt to apologize for your actions. As a

member of the committee, I have been authorized by the contract to tear down this wall for . . .”

His voice faltered. He looked around at the sets of eyes poised upon him.

“ . . . for the good of the community.”

Words fell upon silence. Far off, beyond the gates of the community, crickets chirped and traffic rushed past. Somewhere outside of Fairview Acres, life was going on, but none of them paid any attention. They were too busy focused on the impromptu wall before them. Their ears strained to hear the slightest noise from within its boundaries. A quiet, muffled “piss off” would have sufficed, or even a low, agonized croak of “help me,” for that matter.

Silence.

Brian Plick lifted the sledgehammer, hesitated, and then nodded to reassure himself. He swung. The hammer connected with a loud thud against the brick.

“Again!” cried Judge Potter.

“Yeah, again!” shouted Mrs. Grover.

The chairman of the Fairview Acres Homeowner's Association did as his people bade him. He raised the hammer, pulled back and swung. This time he made a visible dent. The cheers of the crowd spurred him on, and suddenly he found himself lost in the act—with teeth bared, he brought blow upon blow against the brick wall. He became enraptured by the possibility of what awaited on the other side. Would they find a corpse? Would they find the old man waiting for them with a shotgun? At some point—possibly in the middle of his fifth swing—he became slightly aware that it wasn't about the fate (or state) of Hensley at all, but rather the simple desire of knowledge—of knowing—what lay behind that wall. Its presence had driven them all over the brink. Now he would satiate their inquisitive hunger brick by brick.

Brian Plick let out a cry of victory as the last bit of brick fell to the ground. He had carved out a narrow hole in the wall; he was also the first to take a step beyond Hensley's self-imposed barrier. His eyes darted about, looking for some sign of life, for lights or

smells or the silhouette of an elderly man. Instead all he saw was a banner with a smiling sun flapping lazily to and fro in a nightly wind.

Something caught his eye. He approached the front door and, as he did so, he called back to the crowd.

"Does someone have a flashlight?"

He did not have to wait long. A flashlight made its way to his hand in a matter of moments. He pointed it toward the front door. There, taped at the edges, was a single piece of paper.

"What's it say, Mr. Plick?" asked Brooke Xavier with a tone that was, to most, all too snooty for their tastes (which was saying a lot, considering their current company).

"Yeah, read it," said Mrs. Potter.

Brian Plick squinted his eyes and scanned the document. As he did so, his mouth slowly opened into a wide gape. When he finished, he pulled the sheet of paper free from the door and cleared his throat:

To Fairview Acres:

If you're reading this (as I suspect you will), your own insufferable curiosity got the better of you. I wonder how long you waited? I'm sure I'll find out when I get back. Lord knows, you people can't leave a man alone for five minutes. That's why I had some friends come and help me build this wall (or whatever's left of it, you nosey pricks) at night—just to keep you out of my business. A simple "leave me alone" isn't enough with you thick-skulled imbeciles. I figured a wall would prove my point. Question is, did you really get it? As for myself, I'll be in Miami for two weeks. I don't expect my wall to be standing when I return. That's fine. I'm moving anyway.

When I see you again, it will be too soon.

Sincerely,

James Hensley

P.S: To Brian Plick,

The banner stays, asshole.

Plick dry-swallowed. His throat clicked as he did so. The crowd of people standing in Hensley's front yard collectively scratched their heads.

"That's it?" asked the Widow Gertrude.

"That's it," said Plick. He folded the letter and shoved it into his pocket. "Come on, people, there's nothing more here."

Groans filled the air as the residents of Fairview Acres turned and made their way through the hole in James Hensley's wall. All of them sulked back to their respective homes. All of them except one: Brutus the Chihuahua. Free from Mrs. Grover's arms, he pranced rather proudly up to the pile of bricks in the street. He paused to sniff alongside the curb.

His ears perked up. He turned and watched some of Fairview's resident children initiate a game of flashlight tag. Then he shifted his tiny, rat-like gaze toward the wall. Eventually his tiny legs carried him toward a far corner, where he proceeded to hike his leg and piss.

Standing there on three legs, with the fourth perched firmly against the bricks, Brutus the Chihuahua let loose an arc of urine. It left a long, dark trail down the side of the wall.

For the moment, it appeared that he, at least, understood the point of the damned thing.

