

## The Odd Man on the Block: Maybe it's about community

Linda Diane Feldt

For the sixteen years we shared our tiny west-side block, my neighbor Dave (that's not his real name) was rude, mean, snarly, and bizarre. A cigar-smoking pack rat, he lived alone, his only companions two elderly parakeets. His house was a mess on the outside, and the inside, glimpsed through the windows, didn't look any better. The roof was caving in, and he was such a curmudgeon that when he did hire people to replace the main roof he refused to let them fix the smaller side roof, even though it had rotted through.

He drank, he smoked, he ate dinner every night in front of the TV with a bird perched on his head. I thought of him as the troll on the street. No one could enter our dead-end court without his scrutiny. Yet when we passed his house and caught his eye, he would turn away.

Dave seemed compulsive in his hermit's routine. So as we gradually realized there'd been no recent activity at the house, we all had a similar creepy feeling. When I called to ask if she'd seen Dave, my closest neighbor recalled that she had told a friend only last week that if he ever died, we'd never know until the smell reached us.

I went out in the dark cold drizzle to check the house, prepared for him to come out and yell at me for getting too close. The mailbox was stuffed full. I felt anxious and sick. I called his number. It was busy.

I had seen him work a few jobs, and I called the hardware store where he'd been a few years ago to see whether they knew someone who could check on him. No, no one there particularly liked him or even knew where he lived. My neighbor thought he had worked for a small businessman nearby. I called. He hadn't seen Dave since fall, but he gave me the number of someone who knew him. I'll call her \*T.\* When I reached her, T. confessed that she had had a bad feeling the last few weeks. She normally saw Dave only every month or so.

Knowing Dave, T. understood my reluctance to get involved. Uncertain what action to take, I said I'd take another look and call her back. I tried to look in the windows and couldn't see anything, but the feeling that he was lying dead inside the house was growing. I called the police nonemergency number. When I described the situation they said a car would be sent right away. I called T., and she decided to meet the police with me.

As they broke down the side door, I walked away and paced our street. I knew without question what they would find, and I couldn't contain my dread and revulsion. In the midst of the anxious wait, a fire truck pulled up. In moments the police and fire crew were calling for us, and confirmed what we knew. Dave was dead, on the second floor. The cause of death, we would learn, was heart problems exacerbated by alcoholism. It had been at least two weeks since he died. The fire truck left, only to be replaced by detectives, a medical examiner, and animal control to corral the birds flying wild through the house.

I found myself in the peculiar position of attempting to answer the intimate questions that have to be asked when a person is found dead. Luckily, T. knew a great deal, and I learned more about my neighbor in the next few hours than I had in sixteen years of living on the same block with him. He had a glass eye. He had retired as an accountant. He owned property near the golf course, where he fed the wild animals. She listed the people and places in town that he had antagonized or claimed to hate. She described the abusive treatment to which he subjected his parents before they died. She told me he took good care of his teeth.

The trash and debris made his house nearly impassable. The police and other professionals looked shaken by the scene inside. I looked in the front door and stopped in my tracks, knowing that I did not want to have the images and the smells of this place embedded in my memory forever. I chose not to go in.

I found myself wanting to pursue his life further, at least to find a relative, or someone who would want to know that he had passed away. In pursuing the few leads that T. could give me, I was told of a dog that had annoyed Dave and was thought to have been poisoned, of property Dave was suspected of stealing.

But I also remembered our elderly neighbor Helen, who had lived between us. As her relatives and helpers became incapacitated or died, she became more isolated and unable to do things for herself. Dave eventually started to visit her daily. They talked, he helped fix things, he did yard work and shoveling in the winter, he made it possible for her to stay in her home until her death. Even though something happened between them just before she died, and she refused to see him, he had still been an invaluable friend and caretaker.

The unusual spelling of his last name, combined with T.'s remembrance of a family name, made an Internet search relatively easy. Of thirty-two matches only six fit the geographic hint we had, and T. felt that only three of those were possible. The detective agreed to call the numbers we gave him, and one of them turned out to be a nephew. We left the nephew to sort the situation out with the authorities.

Why did I get involved? Certainly I can claim concern for my property, and the welfare of our small street. Morbid interest also has to be included in the mix. I also live alone, and I have had poignant thoughts of my death and how long it would take for anyone to notice. Although I feel immersed in a vibrant and caring community of friends, family, clients, and associates, I can't help feeling concern that this lonely death could happen to anyone.

Dave was not a good neighbor. He died without a true friend. We can find no lasting value to his life. His passing will surely be a burden to his estranged family, who have to clean up his mess. But I find some comfort knowing that, however unwillingly, he was also a part of the community and that in the end, he was watched over and remembered. Maybe that is enough.

A postscript: Dave's brother came to town to find a will and to scatter his cremains. A local bank is handling the cleanup and disposition of the estate, which Dave left to the small college his mother attended. His family and his friend T. struck me as especially generous, kind, friendly, and grateful people.

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