Neighbors

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Sarah and Pa had been up there just a week before. It was a run-down old house that hadn't been lived in since Mrs. Blackert died eleven years before. The wild blackberries grew clear up to the front door, but around to the back of the house the daffodils had gone wild and covered the whole yard including the path that led to the outhouse. Sarah thought they looked like melted, fresh-churned butter and told Pa so, but he pulled her braids and said no, the field looked like it was filled with tiny, bobbing, blonde-haired girls."

Cover Page Footnote
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Sarah and Pa had been up there just a week before. It was a run-down old house that hadn't been lived in since Mrs. Blackert died eleven years before. The wild blackberries grew clear up to the front door, but around to the back of the house the daffodils had gone wild and covered the whole yard including the path that led to the outhouse. Sarah thought they looked like melted, fresh-churned butter and told Pa so, but he pulled her braids and said no, the field looked like it was filled with tiny, bobbing, blonde-haired girls.

She'd never seen anyone come down from the north pasture before. Pa was milking, resting his head against the cow's flank. He turned to look as a large, red-faced man approached with two boys, a big one walking beside him, a smaller one a few steps behind. Pa walked over and reached out his hand in welcome as the man came through the gate. Pa was thin and his pants were always baggy, but this man's pants were stretched tight in the front and hung down below his belly so Sarah could see his dirty grey underwear where the buttons were missing from the front of his shirt. His pants were held up by wide green suspenders with brass buckles.

"Hello," the man said, in a voice as big as his belly. "Guess we're your new neighbors. Name's Willy Parker and these here's my boys. Got three more to home." Pa introduced himself and Sarah. Mr. Parker started right off calling Pa Charlie while Sarah took it on herself to tell the boys to take care about the daffodils when they went to the outhouse.

The big boy laughed at her. "What do you expect me to do, piss all the way from the back porch and hit the hole dead center?"

The smaller boy, about Sarah's age, maybe ten or eleven, spoke up. "That ain't no way to talk to a girl, Chauncy."

"When I need your advice, Runt, I'll ask for it," Chauncy said. He picked the boy up by the shirtcollar, threw him on the ground, then landed on top of him and started to punch him.

Mr. Parker came over and clapped him on the back. "That's my boy. Don't take no guff from no one," Chauncy looked proud as a gamecock.

Pa put his hand on Sarah's shoulder and pulled her close. He always knew when Sarah was scared or worried. "It's all right, Sarie." Then he reached down and helped the little boy to his feet, brushed him off and asked what his name was.

"Sampson Michael Parker, sir. My ma calls me Sonny." He was trying to hold back from crying.

Mr. Parker and Chauncy grunted goodbyes and started across the pasture. Sonny held back, breaking off wild daisies as he walked. He kept turning back to smile and wave.

At supper that night, Ma asked Pa who were the people they were talking to over in the milking pasture. "Some squatters moved into the Blackert place. Name of Parker. Wants to use our bull."

Ma decided she should call on Mrs. Parker. "People ought to know they've got neighbors they can come to when they need help."

Three days later, Ma and Sarah walked up through the north pasture across the big basin where the man had the deer drives in the fall and up the next ridge to the old Blackert house. The berry bushes still covered the front windows, but the Parkers had let their pigs root in the backyard and the daffodils had been trampled into a mudhole along with tablescraps even the pigs wouldn't eat. Ma knocked on the battered screen door. Someone yelled inside the house, "Hey Ma, get the door. You got comp'ny."
A woman who looked as if she'd once been fat came to the door, "What'cha want?"

Ma introduced them and handed the basket of cakes and jams to Mrs. Parker. "We've come to see if we could help you get settled."

"Don't know as I need any help," said Mrs. Parker. She took the basket and yelled to the inside of the house. "Hey, Sonny, come get this basket and bring me my cigarettes." Then she said to them, "Well, you might's well come in and rest yerself you're here. The place don't look too good but ain't nobody been livin' here."

Sarah and Ma followed Mrs. Parker into the livingroom. An old couch sat along one wall and a couple of dilapidated chairs with the cushions leaning to one side and springs and batting sticking up all over, sat along another. An unmade bed with a torn patchwork quilt and dirty grey sheet was in one corner.

Mrs. Parker motioned toward the better looking of the chairs which held a mangy black and tan coon hound chewing a bone. "Get yourself outta that chair, Joe. You sit there, Missus," she said to Ma. "Only decent chair in the place." The big dog pulled himself out of the comfortable chair into the next one with one motion, not losing the rhythm of his chewing.

Sonny brought the cigarettes into the room and took the basket. He stayed and watched but he didn't say anything.

"...got five boys, another one on the way," Mrs. Parker was telling Ma. Her saggy body moved beneath the flimsy sacking material of her loose dress; her breasts swayed like a cow's udder after milking. "Old man ain't worked steady in two, three years. Gets bored laying around the house."

She put her hand on Sonny's head and took the cigarettes. "Sonny's my boy. The rest, well, they's like their Pa. You take this girl out to play now, Sonny. Don't let your brothers rough her, you hear?"

There was a cry like that of a baby kitten from the bed in the corner. Mrs. Parker dragged herself over and picked up an infant about seven or eight months old with a red face and blond hair from the bundle of rags on the bed. His diaper was filthy. "This here's Lemuel. He's not feeling too good." She opened her dress, pulled out one of the saggy breasts and tried to force the baby to take the nipple, but he broke into a gasping cry. "He don't like the tit no more. Guess I oughta wean him but he's always been poorly." She let the child whine in her lap and began to pat Sonny's head again. "You and the girl go on out now and play."

"Hey, Sonny, you better get yourself outta that chair, Joe. You mean about the baby. Is he real sick, Mamma?"

"I don't know."

"Can't you make her take him to Dr. Warren?"

"People have to decide for themselves. We can't interfere."

"That's what Pa said when Chauncey was hitin' Sonny ... We could help. If it was my baby, I'd want people to help me."

"Maybe so, Sarah, but we don't have a right to butt in." Sarah thought about that and when she heard Ma telling Pa about it, he said the same thing. "It's not our affair."

They rode home from meeting in the truck. Sarah sat in the middle, her white-gloved hand nervously pulling at the hem of her skirt. "Ma, did you hear what Mr. Pruitt said about people should love their neighbors and help them?"

"Keep your voice down, Sarah. This is the sabbath. And watch you don't get your good shoes dirty."

"Pa," Sarah turned, "What did he mean, Mr. Pruitt?"

"That's what the good book says and Mr. Pruitt's speakin' the word of the Lord. Yessir," Pa said more to himself than to Sarah, "a good Christian has to help his neighbors."

"But ..." Sarah began.

"No buts," her mother insisted, "You sit there and think on what Mr. Pruitt said today. That was a fine sermon."

They drove in silence.

"Didn't see any of that new family in church, did you, Charles?"

"Can't say I did, but Erma Winston was there with her brood."

"First time I seen her since that worthless man of hers run off."

"Henry Morton said he saw her down at the county seat goin' into the public office."

"Noooo," Ma answered, the word long, drawn out. "Old Martha'd turn over in her grave if she knew her grandchildren was applying for the public dole."

Sarah could tell that Ma didn't love Erma Winston, but maybe that was because Mrs. Winston wasn't a neighbor. She lived way over by Jacob's Corners. Pa reached over and patted Sarah's knee. "You got furrows in your forehead a man could plant corn in."

"Why don't we help our neighbors, Pa?"

"Don't you and your Ma always carry to the neighbors when somebody gets sick or dies?"

"What a silly you are, Sarah," Ma said. "Just last week your Pa went down to Russells' for the barn raising and you and me baked all day to feed the men."

"But what about the new people, the Parkers?" Sarah asked.

"Your Pa offered his bull to those people."

"I mean about the baby," Sarah cried.

"Quiet yourself, Sarah. It's the Lord's day." She drew her hand up quick but instead smoothed Sarah's
hair back from her face. “Now let’s not talk anymore about it.”

On Monday morning, after Pa had gone to the fields and Mamma was in the henhouse, Sarah headed up toward the Blackert place. She’d just crossed the creek near the ridge when she saw Sonny sitting up against a tree, his arms pulling his knees up to his chest, his head down as if he was sleeping. Sarah went closer and saw he’d been crying. He tried to hide his face.

“What’s wrong, you get punished or something?”

Sonny said nothing was wrong and seemed like he didn’t want to talk so they just sat. Sarah threw stones into the creek and tried to get Sonny to play skipper. He wasn’t in any mood for playing, so Sarah rattled off about the new calves and the weather and how’d he like the Blackert place. “Do your Ma and Pa fight?” he asked suddenly.

“They argue sometimes.”

“Do they fight? Hit?”

“No. Our people don’t believe in hitting.”

“You’re lucky. Pa hit my Ma real hard.”

“Why?”

“She was telling him how your ma wanted to take Lemuel to the doctor. He got mad and told Ma not to go whining our business around to people. Then he punched her hard and she hit the table in the living room.”

“Is she hurt?”

“She’s bleeding something awful. Not where she hit her head, but under her dress. Pa made me get outta the house, but I didn’t want to.”

“I’m going to tell my Ma.”

Sarah started down the hill, running toward home. Sonny was screaming and crying behind her. “No, you can’t. You can’t.” But Sarah kept on running with Sonny right behind until she met Ma coming in from the henhouse, the basket of eggs on her arm.

“Mamma, Sonny’s Pa is hitting Mrs. Parker.”

“Calm yourself,” she said wiping Sarah’s face with her apron. “Sonny, what’s going on?”

He didn’t answer, but he was crying loud and shaking all over. Ma took him by the shoulders. “Now, Sonny, you tell me what’s happened.”

“I can’t. I can’t. My Pa’d kill me.”

“No he won’t. Now you tell me.”

Sonny told her about the fight and the blood and how his Ma was crying cause she’d lost the baby.

Sarah was still crying, “We have to help now.”

“Sarah, go get your Pa. We’ll take the truck up there.” Ma half-carried, half-pushed Sonny toward the truck.

Pa came running when he heard Sarah calling. They piled into the truck and headed up to the Blackert place. When they got
there, Mr. Parker was sitting outside on a stump with a bottle in his hand. Pa told Sarah and Sonny to stay in the truck, and he and Ma ran past Mr. Parker into the house.

"Sarah, come with me. Pa'll beat me for sure bringing you people back here." They ran wide around the stump and into the house.

In the living room, Pa was helping Mrs. Parker off the floor. She was covered with blood, but it wasn’t fresh now, and her face was covered with purple bruises. Ma had gone to the kitchen. She came back with water and cloths and Pa carried Mrs. Parker to the bed in the corner. "Sarah, you straighten those covers so I can lay her down," Sonny watched from the doorway. Mr. Parker was still drinking in the yard.

Sarah leaned over to pick up the baby. He wasn’t whining. She touched him. He didn’t move. "Pa, he feels funny. He’s cold."

Quickly, Ma scooped the baby up in the dirty sheet and took it out to the kitchen.

Mr. Parker staggered into the room and over to his wife, pushing Sonny and Pa aside. He sat down on the bed. "That’s what comes of you making our business public, Gerta. The boy was dead already, and now you killed the new one."

"We’d better take your wife into the doctor," Pa suggested.

"No doctors. You hear." Mr. Parker reeled to his feet "Get outta my house."

"Your wife’s ailing, Mr. Parker," Ma said. "She needs some attention." She looked around the room. "No one here to help her."

"We don’t need no help from your kind."

"We just wanted..." started Sarah but Ma’s look shut her up.

Mrs. Parker looked up from the bed, holding the wet cloths Ma had put to her head, just barely able to talk, "My man’s right. This ain’t none of your business. You best get off our property."

Sarah went outside to the truck, then Pa and Ma climbed in on either side and Pa started the truck toward home. They rode along in silence until they were almost up to their gate.

"We only wanted to help," Sarah said. "Why didn’t Mrs. Parker want us to help?"

Pa stopped the truck and Ma got out. She picked up the egg basket and went into the house. Pa patted Sarah’s hand and opened the door on his side. As he stepped down, he warned Sarah, "Don’t sit here too long in the hot truck."

She watched as he headed back out behind the barn to his plowing. "It is, too, our business," she whispered, but her Ma and Pa were already out of hearing. Then she said it again, to the inside of the truck, louder and louder, until at last she was crying it out.

Heritage

I am
black, female,
chronologically under twenty-one,
spiritually over sixty-five;
poor, oppressed, neglected denied,
un/under educated, un/under qualified,
un-American.
Human: weak, strong,
lacking of my inalienable rights,
my forty acres and a mule.

I
have survived.
Who am I?
The new Negra
with three hundred years
on my back,
on my mind.

Rebekah McCloud