

Fences

Lucy Hamilton

The fence at the end of our garden blew down in February, and leaned, once it had fallen, against the trunk of our cherry tree. Where the fence had once stood, a dry-stone wall was revealed, the only barrier now between us and the adjoining garden at the rear.

We had met the neighbours either side, sometimes waving to them from our driveway, but we had never thought to wonder who lived in the house behind.

It was several weeks before we met them.

We had moved into our semi that previous October, and through a cold and lingering Winter, we'd mostly stayed indoors. Had the fence remained intact, we'd have kept this up until the Springtime, but then the storm came along and forced us to confront it.

Once the fence had come down, the void at the end of the garden was glaring. With just the cherry tree and the low wall to divide us, our proximity to the house over the back was suddenly striking. In Summer, the opening might not have been so present, but the tree, without its blossom, seemed to draw attention to the gap.

We hadn't previously considered with whom we shared that rear perimeter, but now they overlooked us daily, as floating heads above a kitchen sink, or as silhouettes in bedroom windows.

They weren't nosey or intrusive, but it was a presence of which we became persistently aware. It had caused a shift in our conception of where we lived and where we didn't, of our illusion of remoteness, and of the privacy that, until now, we had unknowingly valued.

When the storm passed, we ventured out to survey the damage. The collapse had been a neat one. The panels largely remained whole, with just a little splintering, and they took an hour at most to clear, dragged clumsily into our garage.

We were halfway through the job when Paul came out to see us. We heard a patio door slide open, and he emerged in his navy polo, and in faded slippers, crossed his lawn.

We introduced ourselves and apologised for the flimsy fence we had inherited. And for ten minutes, we got to know him, talking over and about his wall.

He'd built it eighteen years ago. And he impressed us with its precision. It was a passion of his – dry-stone walling – and he asked us to think of him if we had any stones going spare. We told him we'd look out for some, though it seemed a feeble thing to offer; with its patchy turf and flagstone patio, our side was uninspiring and sparse.

Not to worry, he said, with a faint glimmer of disappointment. He was supposed to be taking it easy; he'd had surgery last year.

Cancer. He told us, and he pointed to his stomach. It was a difficult comment to respond to, so we shuffled awkwardly and tried to think of something meaningful to say.

We didn't see him again for several weeks, as the weather returned to miserable, and we spent our breakfasts looking glumly out through the drizzle towards his garden. Though reassured by Paul's insistence that there was no hurry to replace the fencing, each mealtime, we discussed our options for reinstating the divide.

And when the weather became finer, we made a show of going out into the garden as though to measure, standing thoughtfully beside the cherry tree, and raking the earth to prepare for fence posts. Keen to stay visible, we tried to busy ourselves with work at that far end of our garden, and as we'd hoped, one sunny Saturday, managed to draw Paul out towards us.

As he approached, we downed tools and asked how he was doing.

I liked Paul. I think we both did. He was neither cold nor too forthcoming, friendly but reserved. He seemed to me to be the kind of person who wouldn't readily give affection, who was careful with his decisions, and whose trust you'd have to earn. My husband and I never spoke of this directly, but I could tell that we both were hoping he'd approve of us as neighbours.

Small talk over, we reassured him that a fencing contractor was coming. He insisted there was no rush, and the conversation moved on. He talked about his grandchildren, patting his stomach unconsciously, as though grateful he was recovering well from the surgery for their sakes.

But as we talked, he began to glance with increasing frequency at our cherry tree, and at a pause in the conversation, he nodded purposefully at the branches. It used to blossom well, he

said, but these days it hardly bothered. I blamed the weather, and he shrugged as though he didn't really care. I said the new fence would fit behind it.

And then that evening, as we watched a movie, I happened to glance out at the garden, and noticed Paul at his upstairs window, gazing out towards the wall. A few minutes later, a woman joined him, but when I looked again, they'd disappeared.

Some weeks later, I was posting cricket balls back through the hedge to next door's children, when Paul's wife, Joan, came outside to hang up her washing. I called hello, and she replied with that same pleasant reservedness that Paul had. I apologised again for the delay with the fencing. She similarly didn't seem worried.

It was the tree she was concerned with, and she asked if we had plans for it. The branches scraped their summer house, and its fallen blossoms clogged their pipes. That was the first time I'd really noticed how the tree reached over from our garden. It wasn't a problem, Joan told me, but I could tell she was being polite.

That night I spoke to my husband. Reluctantly, we agreed to fell it.

Having never seen the tree in blossom, we weren't particularly sentimental; our reluctance stemmed from the knowledge of the scale of the project. The trunk was wide, and the roots reached almost to our garage, raising nodules between flagstones and sprawling deep underneath the wall. But Paul and Joan seemed delighted, and we found a gardener who would do it. It was pricier than we were hoping. Six weeks later, it was down.

We'd awoken the following morning to find Paul and Joan clearing debris, happily picking up twigs that had fallen onto their lawn. As I watched them, I wondered what words they were exchanging, if our names crossed their lips, and how they spoke of us in private.

It was my husband who spoke to Joan next, a couple of weeks later. She'd seen him weeding in our veggie patch and come to ask what we planned to grow there. She had a tan that looked recent, so he'd asked about her holiday. He'd also asked how Paul was doing, but Joan's answer

was cryptic. He was planting sprouting broccoli, she'd said, and he planned to be here to pick it. That was it, he said, it was a little awkward; we should get a move on with the fence.

The delay wasn't entirely our fault. The contractor was being flaky. But we were beginning to look like the kind of people who couldn't afford the repair. Or else that we weren't bothered.

Later that evening, I'd been tossing cricket balls back to next door, when one rebounded and bounced into Paul and Joan's flower bed. For a moment I froze, weighing up my options: hop over and retrieve it, or leave for Joan to find later. I looked up at the house; I couldn't see them at the window. I could be over and back on our side before they noticed what had happened.

I swung my legs over the wall, and dropped down into their garden, then, as though to avoid leaving footprints, stepped tentatively across their lawn. I found the cricket ball in the azaleas and glanced again towards their window. The house looked dark. They weren't home. I turned to climb back over.

That's when I saw the damage. At the foot of the wall, a large stone had been loosened. And the ground was furrowed, as though the movement of a tree root had dislodged it. The wall above it had held firm, fixed with scree and compact soil, but without a solid base, it would only be a matter of time before it crumbled. And Paul had said nothing, though there was no doubt he'd noticed.

One afternoon in early June, I was out exploring some nearby farmland, when I came across a brook at the boundary of a cow field. I was half-way over the stile, when my attention was drawn to a rock, half wrapped in ivy, sitting just below the surface of the stream.

There was nothing remarkable about this rock, though perhaps more angular than the others, but I knew instantly it was exactly what was needed to fix wall.

I wasn't far from home, and it didn't look too big to carry, so, steadying myself on the stile, I slipped the stone into my rucksack.

As I picked my way back through the fields, slightly unbalanced, I imagined what Paul would say when I showed him what I'd found. I wouldn't tell him what I had in mind for it, or even

where it had come from. If he asked, I might say out front, but he'd be much too pleased to care.

I'd keep it casual though, offer it up to him as though I wasn't even sure he'd want it. I'd say no worries if he couldn't find use for it. But I knew he would. I knew he'd love it.

It was about two miles back to my house, but I barely noticed the distance, nor the nettles that brushed my ankles, or when a thorny barb snagged my hair. I had what I needed in my rucksack. The perfect gift from the perfect neighbour. It was a beautiful, hazy Saturday. I knew he'd be out there on his lawn.

Once home, I headed straight down to the end of my driveway, dropped my bag beside the garage, and pulled out the stone. It was better than I'd remembered it. A smooth, flat top, and not too bulky. I took care peeling off the ivy, which left tiny pock marks in the sandstone. Cradling it, turned the corner.

I stopped.

There was the wall, but behind it stood five tall panels. Six feet high, a slate blue fence now cut us off from Joan and Paul – the same blue as their summer house. It spanned the width of our garden, sealing us off from them entirely. The stone grew heavier in my arms, and I let it thud onto the soil.

That evening, I said nothing to my husband, and he said nothing about it either. I tried to believe he hadn't noticed yet, but his sadness said it all.

What pained him, I think, was that he knew we'd never learn why Paul had left the wall on our side. Perhaps he'd tired of looking out at it, or perhaps the damage was substantial. If it was a gift to us, I knew we'd never truly see ourselves as its owners. I felt like a thief, forced each morning to look out on what I'd stolen.

Over dinner we discussed our days, keeping our eyes from the patio window, and when we did look, said something vague and complimentary about the colour.