

Bye-Bye, Jojo

If that dog doesn't stop barking, I'm going to kill someone. It's not like I don't know how.

I think back to when I inherited this house after my mean SOB father died two years ago. Of course, there were questions about how he died and what I knew. I faked grief and ignorance, and that was that.

It takes a while to settle his estate, but when I move in a year later in the summer, all is quiet. The house behind mine is on the market and unoccupied. Well-behaved retired couples live on either side of me.

I work at home, and with the ultra-acute hearing I've had all my life, I need quiet. The neighbors do not disappoint, and they tell me they head south to climes warmer than Massachusetts for the entire winter.

I know the neighbors are happy in the fall when I start methodically removing the vines that range over all the walls of the house. I clean up the herb garden near the side door and keep the lawn tidy. Pop had let the place go to hell in a handcart, but I'm not that kind of homeowner. I have one more wall of vines to go, and then I'll repaint. I buy a nice teak patio set for the deck, where I enjoy a drink and a good book at the end of the day.

My life goes to all to hell in the spring. A woman – Kay Hobart – moves in behind me. She and her asshole dog. Let me amend that. She's the asshole. Not her dog. Still, it's a big black thing with a deep voice, and it's outside barking nearly constantly. In the morning. All afternoon. Every evening.

Did I say my hearing is better than ninety-nine percent of humans? That might have to do with my Dumbo ears. I can't help it if my ears stick straight out from my head, but I was endlessly bullied about them in school. The plastic surgeon I saw this winter said it's because I have underdeveloped antihelical folds as well as too much cartilage in both conchas. I'm afraid of surgery, so I just have to live with these ears. Unfortunately, they make any set of headphones hurt, including the best noise-canceling ones. I go through pair after pair of silicone earplugs. I can still hear the damn dog.

One Saturday in May, I watch from my kitchen window as Kay sets bricks in a small circle in her yard. I head out to the four-foot-high chain link fence that divides our properties. I don't open the connecting gate but call to her from my side.

"Kay, can I have a word with you, please?"

She glances up, waves, and comes back to the fence. The dog comes with her.

"Hey, Pat. Nice day, isn't it?"

“Yes.” I clear my throat. “I’m not sure you’re aware that your dog barks all the time when you’re at work. And it barks all evening, too. I’d appreciate it if you’d restrain it from barking when you’re home and keep it inside when you’re not.”

She laughs. “Oh, that’s just the kind of dog he is. You know I live alone. Jojo protects me. Do you know how dark and isolated this road is with the woods on the other side?”

“Well, can you put him in while you’re at work?”

“He wouldn’t like that. Would you, Jojo boy?” She rubs his head with both hands. “Who’s a good boy?”

I manage not to roll my eyes until after she turns away.

I file a complaint about the barking with the animal control officer. Nothing happens. Kay’s job as secretary to the mayor could have something to do with it.

Shouldn’t home be a respite? A place of escape and comfort? The barking is a jackhammer drilling into my brain. My productivity suffers.

Kay takes to starting fires in that circle of bricks. She sits out there drinking. Sometimes she has a man over. She never puts out the fire when she goes indoors. It smolders until late into the night. Our breezes usually come from the west, blowing smoke away from me, as her house is to my east. One night the wind changes. My house fills with smoke before I can close the windows. I cough all night. Between the smoke and the dog, I need a plan.

It’s a dry June. Instead of disposing the vine branches in black trash bags as I had been doing, I leave some out to dry, then cut them into foot-long sticks. One moonless night I glove up. It’s midnight and the damn dog is finally inside. Kay’s lights are out, too. After I apply WD-40 to the hinges on the gate, I deposit a load of branches on top of the pile of sticks Kay has been using to start her fires.

The dog starts barking. It must be standing at one of the open windows, because the bark is almost as loud as when it’s outside.

“Nighty-night, Jojo,” I whisper.

I spend the next two nights in a hotel at the coast. Kay’s car is gone when I get home Monday morning. The dog is outside. Barking. After a day at my laptop not producing what I should, I head to the kitchen at five to make a mint julep. From the window I see Kay.

“Damn.” I watch as she dismantles the brick ring.

A few minutes later, I take my drink to the back fence. “All done with fires?” I call to her.

She makes her way to the fence. Her voice is raspy. “I was in the hospital for a day. They said I had urushiol smoke in my lungs.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What kind of smoke?”

“Poison ivy oil. I guess I must have had some growing in with the brush I’ve been burning.”

“That stuff’s nasty.”

“I know. I had it a couple of times when I was younger. Got it at camp, but then it was just a rash. Anyway, I can’t risk breathing that smoke again. They said every reaction will be worse.”

“You be careful, now.” I raise my glass.

“Thanks!” She scratches the head of the ever-present and temporarily quiet Jojo. “We will, won’t we, Jojo-boy?”

That evening, I finish taking the last of the vines off the front of the house.

“Looking good, Pat,” the silver-haired man who lives to my left said as he passes walking his reddish dog on a leash at his side. This dog is large and rangy with a beautiful tail. It never barks.

“Thanks.”

My neighbors feel safe here. Neither house has a security camera front or back. I’ve checked.

After darkness falls, I glove up again and strip the leaves off the vines into a plastic grocery bag. I empty the bag into a big mason jar in the kitchen and fill it with vodka. I cap it, shake it a little, and put it under the sink.

On Thursday a week later, I strain the liquid into a different jar and fill a spray bottle with it. A couple of hours after all goes dark and quiet at Kay’s, I don a fresh pair of gloves and go for a walk, carrying the bottle in a dark bag.

Her street is as dark and isolated as she’d claimed. I’m confident no one sees me spraying the handle on her car door. I also spritz the knob on her front door and the knob on her side door, the one she uses to get to her car.

My after-hours walk the next night is for the same goal.

The following morning, I watch from the window as she lets the dog out. She’s scratching her hands something fierce. I smile to myself.

I repeat my walk for the purpose of spraying a week later. This time I try the car door. She thinks she needs a guard dog, but she doesn’t lock her vehicle? Fine with me. I lift the mask hanging from the mirror and spray the inside, then replace it. I spray the inside door handle and the steering wheel, too.

I stay in Friday night. Saturday morning when she comes out, she’s rubbing her face and neck as if plagued.

I go walking and spraying again the following Wednesday night. And Thursday, for good measure.

Kay doesn’t emerge Friday morning. I can hear the dog barking inside the house. I don’t see her Saturday or Sunday, either. By Sunday, the dog’s barking is much diminished in volume. Someone with average hearing might not even notice.

On Sunday evening, I drain my spray bottle and run it through the dishwasher, adding a little bleach. Later that night, gloved of course, I deposit a black trash bag full of vines in her trash barrel. For the first time in a month, it’s raining. Gardens and lawns really need the rain. It’s good for my purposes, too, as it will dilute or even wash away any traces of urushiol that might be left on the handles I coated.

On Monday, I phone the police, but not the emergency number. I identify myself and give my address.

“My neighbor directly to the rear – Kay Hobart – hasn’t been out since Thursday afternoon. Her car is there, and I can hear her dog barking inside the house. She lives by herself, and I wonder if an officer should do a wellness check or something.”

“Kay who works at Town Hall?” the dispatcher asked.

“I’m not sure where she works. I would have called her, but I don’t have her number.”

“Did you knock on her door?”

“Oh, no,” I say. “I’m afraid of dogs.”

She assures me they’ll check on her and thanks me.

I keep vigil at the kitchen window. Ten minutes later a cruiser pulls into Kay's drive. The officer tries the side door. Kay apparently doesn't lock her house as well as her car.

Within half an hour, an ambulance has arrived *sans* lights or siren, along with several other vehicles.

Bye-bye, Jojo. He and his bark are gone. Of course, there are questions, since I'm the one who called in Kay's disappearance. I simply express the kind of regret any stranger would at a death.

My life is quiet once more. Kay's house, after a flurry of movers and workers coming and going, is on the market again. I can work in peace. I can sit on my deck and sip a cocktail without my brain exploding from the unceasing noise. It's a quirk of my personality that I don't feel remorse. I never have. I don't even understand what that would be like.

The leaves on the big maple in the yard behind are a scarlet red when a family with two school-age children moves in. The parents erect a play structure. The mother works endlessly in the yard, turning over soil and fencing in a vegetable patch. The father kicks a soccer ball with both daughters. I hear squeals of delight and shouts of sibling rivalry sometimes, but it's not bad. It's not Jojo.

One late afternoon, as I sip my martini – dry, three olives – the mother is on hands and knees in her garden, but children and dad aren't outside. I wander out to the fence.

"What are you planting?"

She looks up and smiles. "It's garlic. We eat lot of garlic, and it's easy to grow."

"You plant it in the fall?"

The family car pulls in.

"Yes," she says to me. "Oh good, they're back."

"Open the gate, girls," the father says, going around to the back of the car. A minute later, a dog bounds into the yard. The dad closes the gate behind it.

I stare. The dog – big, black, and looking way too familiar – races to the fence and starts barking. At me.

The mother dusts off her knees and stands. "Isn't it great? Our girls have been after us to get a dog, and they're finally old enough for the responsibility of taking care of a pup. This one was at the rescue place." She strokes its head.

"It looks a lot like the dog that used to live here," I murmur.

"He is! This is Jojo himself. We couldn't believe it when we gave them our address, and they said he'd be going home." She beams, first at the devil hound and then at me. "You must be so happy to see him."

I turn without speaking. Back on the deck, I drain my drink right down. My brain winces at the relentless noise.

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