Runner-Up

The Fence

By Mary Scott

Stan has been manicuring his lawn border. Straightening up with a grunt, he reviews his back garden. It had been described by the estate agent as a suntrap, and while it's not a patch on the large garden he left behind, he is satisfied it will suffice for his retirement years. He has a different life now.

He checks his watch; it's coffee and biscuit time. This newly-adopted habit is embedding comfortably into his daily routine.

In the next garden, Jean frets. Her carefully-curated border is submerged in shade where, apart from a few brief hours of early rays, it stays hidden from the sun. She knows her beloved dahlias thirst for light, and a new planting scheme is urgently needed; something more to heighten her unhappiness with her new neighbour.

Stan sits very close by. Jean could poke him with one of the bamboo canes that support her flowers, if only the new fence was not in her way, separating them.

Dear, friendly Alice used to live on the other side of the perfectly adequate three strands of wire which just acted as a marker, not a barrier. She misses their chats and makes a guilty mental note to visit Alice in the care home where she now resides.

But what Jean misses most are the glimpses of another person, someone close by. It was comforting knowing there was someone watching out for her, keeping an eye on her, someone who could help in an emergency. And she is more than happy to return the care; something that selfish new neighbour obviously has no interest in doing.

Jean sighs. Two single people in their sundown years living next door to each other, they should be friends: company for each other over shared pots of tea, sharing stories of their pasts, sharing trips to the garden centre.

Meanwhile, Stan sits comfortably in his garden with his drink, two custard creams and book. The pages of his book are as familiar as the backs of his hands; they are old friends.

Though she knows little about him, Stan's choice of reading matter would still surprise Jean – it's a well-thumbed anthology of poetry. For Stan is a man with a restless mind; unable to still or unthink many thoughts. So he searches for insights, explanations, and distractions; passing through the poetry, pausing when he discovers a spot of calm or a glimpse of clarity.

And though he knows little about her, Jean's past career would still surprise Stan – she was a cardiac surgeon with a string of letters after her name and a list of journals. There are a host of people grateful for the extra time her skills have given. But it's the ones she lost who she remembers, it's their operations she relives when alone.

While Jean was trying to save lives, so was Stan: collecting information and all the time knowing mistakes and ill-advised actions would lose lives, his own included.

Jean picks purple button-headed dahlias.

Stan catches the sound. He puts down his book. Listening.

He thinks back to his moving-in day when he had submitted to Jean's third series of increasingly-determined knocks on his new front door.

"Hello! And welcome, I'm Jean Berry, your nextdoor neighbour. You'll need to get a new doorbell. It's strange, it worked fine when Alice was here," she had announced. They both knew the bell had rung, loud and clear.

"Stan Charles." He still found it difficult to reveal his true name to a stranger.

Stan had seen a woman of his age. She had been watching, half behind her curtains, whilst his possessions were unloaded. Close up she seemed harmless. Possibly educated. He had noted she was nervous, that she wanted their meeting to go well. She hoped they would be friends.

He had watched her quick appraisal of him. Apparently satisfied, she continued, “Stan, lovely to meet you. Here’s some of my marmalade.” A jar of orange something, crowned with a gingham mop hat was thrust towards him.

He had taken it.

She had waited.

He saw she expected to come in. He examined the jar’s label.

A standoff; and it was Jean who had succumbed. “I hope you like it, and that you’ll be happy here,” she said as her raised right foot lowered.

“I hope you’re settling in well. Do you need anything, any help?” Her voice had shifted up a semi-tone. He almost relented, but she pressed on. “Family . . . do you have any family nearby? Mine are all over. I’ve a son in America, one daughter in London and another in Scotland.”

Silence. Then, “I’ll let you get on,” she said. “If you need anything, just wave and call from the garden. I’m all open plan, and I’ll see or hear you through my nice big patio doors.” No longer able to match his stare, she ended their encounter.

Later, from his back garden, Stan saw Jean eating beans on toast in front of her TV. He paced his garden to work out exactly how much fencing was needed. The fencing contractors arrived five days later and shut her out.

Now, Jean inspects her bunch of flowers which compare unfavourably with her recollection of last year’s abundant blooms. She shakes them at the fence and shakes then again to dislodge the squirming earwigs emerging in the petals. Some flower heads break off. She kicks them towards the fence.

Coffee and biscuits dispatched, Stan gets up and appraises his fence. He is only too aware that privacy is a diminishing concept in the world where someone is always listening, watching, spying; but at least Jean's surveillance is curtailed.

Just then Jean notices two empty knot holes in the fence, the right height for her and her eyes. She listens. She cannot hear any movement from behind the fence, and she is tempted to have a look for any changes that Stan may have made next door. She resists. She tells herself she mustn't. Well, maybe later when she knows Stan is out. Just a peep.

Stan suddenly feels sick, dizzy, sweaty. Before he can register what might be happening, think of the warning posters in his GP's waiting room, or return to his chair, a fierce sharp pain grasps his left arm.

A crumpled thud.

Jean strains to hear more. Nothing.

She hesitates. Nothing.

More hesitation. Still no sound.

So, because no matter what, she knows what it means to be a good neighbour, Jean tries out the conveniently placed knot holes. She sees in a disappointingly narrow field of view: a patch of mown grass, an empty chair, a garden shed, and another fence on the garden's opposite side.

No Stan. Nothing untoward. Maybe something has fallen in the shed, Jean thinks.

But Jean is wrong. It was the sound of a dead weight dropping.

Stan lies close by, and Jean could reach down and touch him, if the fence wasn't in the way. She could help him, if the fence wasn't in the way. She could administer cardiopulmonary resuscitation, if the fence wasn't in the way.

Jean decides she'll have a cup of tea and then find out if there are any restrictions on visiting Alice and goes into her house.

* * * *

When Stan retired all contact with his work had been severed. He was on the outside, in the real world. There are no ex-colleagues to turn up suited and solemn at his funeral. No one to speak of his years of service, his contribution and his worth. And his one relative, a niece living on the other side of the world, is too remote, detached and anyway too busy to make the journey. So it is left to the handful of neighbours, rounded up by a guilt-laden Jean, to witness his departure.

No one knows anything about Stan and it's a quick and basic service. No one knows about the poem he would have chosen to have been read at his funeral. No one knows about the poem he carried in his heart.

It is a love poem and it's neatly highlighted in his anthology, now boxed up for the charity shop. It would seem a curious choice for an old single man. It's written in memory of a lover killed in a plane crash. So not such a curious choice for a heartbroken lonely old man.

It's also the poem that he used as his first cypher to send secrets that saved lives, impacted on governments, and changed history. So not such a curious choice for a heroic old spy.

"

Mary says: I live in Somerset with my husband and have a garden full of squirrels. I love creating seemingly ordinary moments, which can explore and give voice to some of the thoughts and emotions rattling about in my head.

