

Making the First Move

By Kathy Childs

I dream of country towns and friendly meddling neighbours; of local pubs with ornery old men and gossipy women; of birds that land and sing and the only noise on a lazy afternoon is the baying of the cows.

I am empty. There is no nourishment in my inner city neighbourhood. I have dwelt here for twenty years and the names of those who live here often escape me. Gone are the days of a quiet cuppa on the front porch. We all sit out back now, hidden from the day to day, never exposing our own lives or intruding in those of others. We are a private people.

I used to stroll to the local milk bar for my paper. Twenty years the same couple have run this shop and I do not know their names. Through the plastic door strips I have watched their children grow and they now tend the till. I fear there is no money in their children's legacy; an IGA has opened up the road and the supermarket remains lit and open all night. I no longer need to visit for my paper, my phone supplies the daily update, but I buy my bread and milk there out of loyalty to the family that works long and hard to stay afloat and still I don't ask their names.

Town planning has rezoned us; history is bulldozed. We have monumental apartment buildings and townhouses stacked together where a single family home once stood.

I wake each morning to the sound of nail guns and saws. Time is of the essence. No lazy concrete mixers turning, the liquid sloshing and grinding inside. The trucks arrive, large angry tumblers with colossal pipes that funnel the wet cement into the foundations and driveways. The metal frames are erected in a day, cranes hoisting them high in the air to settle in their allotted place. The teams of tradesmen are like ants crawling over the work site – no one stops for long, they scurry in and scuttle out, ticking off this job as they are directed to the next. An independent trade must keep moving.

Sunday. No building. No school bells. Just the echo of yesterday's lawn mowers shouted down by leaf blowers, high-pressure cleaners and chain saws ridding the backyards of unsightly trees and replacing them with paving and the simulated green of plastic grass.

Our ramshackle old wooden fence has surpassed my husband's handyman skills. The slats have been nailed on so many times that there are holes in the holes and the rusted nails will no longer grip. I have three quotes and I knock on the front door to my right. He is pleasant, and cheerful and agrees that a new fence is inevitable. I remain on the front porch for the entirety of this discussion, there is no suggestion that I enter his domicile. He suggests politely at the end of our conversation that it would be easier for me to email any future questions and timelines, let him know by text when the funds are required, it will save me the trip. I no longer need to traverse the seventeen steps to the house next door - think of the time this will save me.

New neighbours. An Australian couple with a Jack Russell. Given the right owners he may grow to be a pleasant family pet. These are not the right owners. An open gate is the signal that dog walking has commenced. It does not require human intervention. The gate is shut in the evenings and the dog locked outside baying at the possums that traverse the fence line. I suggested they could bring their dog inside as a courtesy to those of us who cannot sleep due to the intermittent barking. Apparently his barking does not keep them awake. It is not their problem. So each night as the dog howls I don my dressing gown and bang on their bedroom window - just to let them know I am awake - I do like to share. Three nights later they have a change of heart. The dog now sleeps in a box in the kitchen and the night is quiet once more.

I washed my car yesterday. Stood on my driveway, dressed in shorts, t-shirt and thongs with a soapy bucket and a hose. How long since I have allowed myself this simple pleasure. Stroking and caressing my old car with a soft chamois, rinsing away the soap suds and following their journey to the storm water drain.

Seven people walked past my front gate while I soaped and rinsed. I turned and smiled at each of them, nodded, and commented on the weather. Only one elderly couple returned the greeting. In quiet moments I do sometimes wonder at the disregard and isolation and that comes with busy inner city lives. A nod and a smile and twenty years pass. I am as much to blame as they are.

One gentleman, well dressed in chinos and loafers, stood outside my house for a full five minutes talking impatiently on his phone while he waited for his dog to defecate on my nature strip. He averted his eyes when I threw a smile his way and

offered him a plastic bag. He turned his back to me, his mind obviously on more important things than cleaning up after his dog.

The new townhouses across the road have their first occupants. A couple from India and a middle aged woman from Austria. The Indian couple drops by bearing gifts and stops for a chat. I invite them in. The Austrian lady stops to admire my roses, and asks for a cutting, then smiles and invites me over for a glass of wine. Perhaps we can create our own inner city community if that is what we want. It just takes someone to make the first move.