

The Asparagus Magpie

Jeff turned off the television and pressed his fingers against his eyes.

“God damn Ned Neidler,” he thought. He’d been forced to comment on Ned no less than ten times in the last six months, and somehow the situation continued to get worse.

Jeff made a nervous lap around the kitchen. He didn’t want the toast anymore, but he ate it. He didn’t want the coffee either, but he needed something to wash the toast down. The second half of the cup he poured into the sink. While there he paused to look out the window. It faced out into the back yard and had a view of the new deck. He’d spent every weekend out there since it was finished a month ago. No matter how onerous the rest of the week was, there was going to be a steak on the grill at the end of it. He stood there for a few moments intentionally dwelling on the thought in hope that it might lift his spirit.

While he stood at the sink, he heard the front door crack open and the sound of hard shoe soles echoing down the hallway at a brisk pace. His wife entered with her coat still on and set her purse on the kitchen island between them.

“Glad you’re still here. There are six boxes in the trunk of my car. Would you put them in the front office for me?” she said.

“Six boxes of what?”

“Workbooks. For the conference next week. I picked them up at the printer on my way back this morning. The guy at the print shop loaded them up for me but I’d like a hand getting them out of the car.”

“Why not leave them there until the conference?”

“Because I’m going to be bussing a carload of girls home from a basketball game tonight and another carload home from driver’s ed tomorrow,” she said as she poured herself a cup of coffee.

He wanted to ask if the girls were going to be riding in the trunk but was disciplined enough to catch himself. He did not feel like talking to his wife. He was still hot about Ned. Jeff wished he had left the house a few minutes sooner.

In restraining his snark, he created an uncomfortable pause that stalled the conversation. His wife took note of it, put down her coffee and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Fucking Ned Neidler!” Jeff sighed.

“Jeff!”

“Nancy, I swear to God, he’s going to give me a breakdown!”

“What did he do now?”

“Turn on the local news. It’s getting airtime today.”

Her eyes widened a bit. “What do you mean?”

“The darn fool was on the radio this morning and made some very ill-advised comments directed at the minority students at Lister High,” Jeff explained.

Nancy winced a bit.

“Then he followed with some unsolicited opinions about the school superintendent’s intelligence and weight,” he added.

“He sure can get a fire going,” she said.

“I don’t need any more fires, Nancy. None of us do.”

“He is just saying what a lot of people already believe. Lister is a disgrace to public schools.”

“How does the size of Doris McMann’s backside contribute to that problem?”

Nancy exhaled heavily and gave a half shug, “The school is a tax funded disaster, you’ve said it yourself. She’s part of the problem. The woman needs to go.”

“Neidler’s mouth does not make it easier to fix that problem, dear,” he said through gritted teeth.

At that point, the conversation was over. She took her coffee into the other room. He unloaded all the boxes from her trunk and left without saying good-bye.

Jeff put the car radio onto a music station but turned the volume down low.

Ned Neidler had been under Jeff’s skin for two years. Truth told; Ned spent a lot of time under a lot of people’s skins. Unfortunately for Jeff, the two happened to be on the same side of the political aisle, which meant Jeff was too often put in the position of defending him.

If Ned were just offensive it would be one thing, but he was stupid too, and seemingly completely unaware of how much his ignorance showed. He was the kind of man that carried no inhibitions against speaking as an authority on subjects on which he knew nothing. Jeff suspected it was a narcissistic disorder of some kind. He had seen his type before. He’d seen them routinely back when he was practicing law. Ned wasn’t a lawyer himself, mind you, but Jeff had plenty of former colleagues that were cast in that same mold. Lawyers who somehow skate by with only the barest understanding of legal procedure and precedent but still have an overdeveloped confidence in their own abilities. It was nothing short of a miracle that some of them were even able to get into law school, let alone pass the bar. They get by O.K. around people who have never studied law, but when you see them in a room with a truly gifted lawyer their limitations are unmistakable. Watching someone like Ned try to tread water in a room full of good lawyers was a particular flavor of schadenfreude that Jeff relished. He found people like that were unable to keep their thoughts internal and when in the company of good lawyers, you could count on them to keep right on broadcasting how dumb they are just by letting them talk.

Jeff was neither an overconfident stooge nor a polished lawyer. He belonged to a third group. Jeff was well aware that he was a poor lawyer, but unlike the Neds of the world, he did anything he could not to showcase his shortcomings. Practicing law had been a miserable time for him. There was a grain of self-doubt that took root in law school which only flourished after he passed the bar and took a position with a small firm. He tried to work through it and hoped in time that he would evolve, develop competence,

or at least confidence, through effort. It was no good. Every day he had to face the fact that he simply was not that good at his job. It made him hate it. It made him hate that he spent so much time money to pursue it. It was an oppressive feeling that hung over him for six years.

His charisma was the only thing that kept him from being fired. He was sure of that. In fact, he began to think it was the only thing that had gotten him through law school. However, it was his charisma also that brought him into public office. For Jeff, once he won his first elected office, he never had to look back. Campaigning was the easiest thing in the world for him. He lived in a conservative state in a heavily conservative county, born and raised there. He sought his first public office as an energetic young voice opposing taxes and government regulation. Winning an election was as simple as turning on the charm and telling people what they wanted to hear.

He was happy for a while after he had established himself politically. He felt good about what he did, and he knew in his bones that he was the right man for his job. He eventually moved to his current downtown office and made a point of getting to know everyone in that neighborhood. Most mornings he started his day with a leisurely pace into the office, taking time to talk baseball with the guy at the donut shop or fishing with the dry cleaner. He went as far as inventing reasons to become a customer of as many of the local businesses as he could. Jeff could turn a lunch into an epically long affair, and often did. Starting it off with small errands such as dropping off his car at the lube shop or making a trip to the hardware store before heading to one of several eateries that he had on rotation. Then, whenever possible, he would follow lunch with an extended walk to allow opportunity for chance socialization.

He did not always encounter any acquaintances on his afternoon walks though and he was left to wander awhile alone with his thoughts from time to time. On these occasions his mind regularly drifted back to the life he had before politics. When they did, he would shudder at the thought of how much he loathed going to work every day as a lawyer. He couldn't imagine what his life would be like if he hadn't broken that cycle, a miserable worn-down old man most likely.

Ned Neidler was making him hate his job again. Every day.

He went to his office without saying much to anyone on his way in. There were three calls from local news organizations that morning. He dodged two but accepted one from Peter Rhodes from the Tribune. He had a strong history with the Tribune and Peter in particular. They certainly had butted heads in the past, but there was an underlying respect. They had so far endorsed him in every election. He always was a reliable political source for them, and they regularly had his name somewhere on the front page.

"Morning Peter," Jeff said when he picked up the desk phone.

"Morning Jeff, how are you?"

"Great thanks, what can I do for you?"

"Calling about Mr. Neidler's interview on WKRT this morning. Did you hear it?"

"I caught some of it."

There was an extended pause before Peter spoke again. "Did you hear him discussing Lister High School students?"

“I did.”

“And do you have any reaction to his statements?”

“Ned’s a grown man. He speaks for himself. But I can say that I agree that the school administrators are letting down the city as well as the students. Parent’s don’t want to send their kids there and it’s a problem. There needs to be some accountability and right now I’m not seeing any.”

“Do you believe Cloverfield Neighborhood kids should be ‘kept on leashes?’” Peter asked evenly.

“What the hell kind of question is that?! What is it you want me to say? If you want an apology or an explanation, go talk to Ned. I’m focused on budget negotiations right now not Ned’s poor choice of wording.”

There was another extended pause. “Off the record,” Peter said at last. “Why are you deflecting for him?”

“Peter, listen, Ned is an elected official. What I think about him doesn’t matter. The voters want him in. The main reason they want him in office is because he sees a need to reign in the government. So, think whatever you want about him, but when it comes to issues that are important to the people of this state, we can count on him to make the right vote.”

Peter’s groan of disgust was quiet but unmistakable. “Lie down with dogs Jeff...”

Jeff’s ears got hot, but he kept his composure. “Is there anything else you need this morning, Peter?”

There was little he could hope to accomplish after the phone call with Peter. He was distracted and Ned’s idiocy was gnawing a hole in him.

About the only thing he could accomplish was a short text message to Deborah Spence. “Don’t you dare cancel our lunch today,” it read.

A thumbs up emoji was the reply.

The restaurant they met at was walking distance from his office. It was one of several places they frequently met in the afternoons. He was there early, she was late.

“You having a rough morning, Jeff?” Deborah asked while she was still taking off her jacket.

“Heh, can you guess why?”

“I know why. We’re not responsible for Ned, Jeff.”

“No but we can’t stop him either and he’s making us all look bad.”

She sighed and shrugged.

“He’s a jackass. A complete and utter jackass,” Jeff said. “He spends so much time running his mouth that he unfailingly makes all problems worse. It’s actually amazing.”

Deborah was listening to him but not looking at him. She watched the waitress moving from table to table. She was smiling a mostly unhappy smile.

The waitress stepped to the table edge. "Menu, Mrs. Spence?" she asked Deborah.

"No."

"Iced Tea?"

"Chardonnay," Deborah said loudly and clearly. The waitress grinned her approval and Deborah added, "Half tuna. What the soup?"

"Cheddar broccoli."

"Salad with Bleu Cheese."

"Lunch for you," she said to Jeff.

"Club, fries."

"Wine in the middle of the day?" Jeff teased after the waitress had left.

"I'm done, Jeff."

"Done what?"

"I'm not running for office again."

"What?"

"I'm just done."

"No," he said adjusting himself in his seat, "no, no, no. You can't quit."

"Quit what? Having to associate myself with the yahoos. Ned's not the only one. He's not even the worst."

"So, you're just going to quit? Let the yahoos have the party?"

"They have the party already, Jeff. Their taking their lead from the damn president. I got better things to do with my time."

Jeff dropped his head into his right hand. "My God. You're serious."

"Of course, I'm serious. I'm not cut out for ugly politics. Besides, it's just a matter of time before some young little Ned Neidler clone comes out of the bushes and pushes me out for not hating liberals enough. I'd rather save myself the aggravation and humiliation."

"What are you going to do? Go back to full time accounting?"

"Why not? I like accounting. Steven's office is doing great. If I step back in now, we'll be able to expand."

"I hate you for it, but I can't blame you."

"Steven said something funny to me a couple of weeks ago. I was thinking about it on the way over. We were the state police charity dinner last month. Ned was there just being himself and gets all worked into a lather about crime rates. Well, he's carrying on and there's a small group of us listening to him.

He sees he's got an audience and he just starts rambling. Half of what he's saying either doesn't make sense or is dubious at best. But he's in a room full of law enforcement officials and his monolog is unquestionably pro-cop so no one is stopping him. Still, there are a couple of us that are side-eyeing each other. At one point, he's decrying the rise in violent crime and is presenting street sign graffiti to validate the argument. Someone finally interrupts him to politely point out to that minor vandalism is not a violent crime. Ned almost came unhinged. He loudly and passionately took the stance that any property damage was violent and that vandals should be treated as violent criminals. Anyone who says otherwise is either a fool or a crooked liberal on the take."

"On the take from whom?"

"Who knows. But he doesn't stop, of course. He just rolls out a soft-on-crime accusation list. Somewhere along the line this just turns into an account of all his personal gripes, completely unrelated to crime, and by the time he's done, he's fully launched into his old campaign pitch. It was driving Steven crazy the whole time. On the ride home he was fuming about it and trying to make sense of how anyone can listen to Ned talk and take him seriously. He just could not wrap his head around the fact that when Ned is going on, there are people who are not immediately overwhelmed by how uninformed and incompetent he is. He said says to me, 'Deb, you how some people can smell asparagus in pee and some can't? I think listening to Ned has to be like smelling asparagus pee. All I hear is ignorant rambling. He might as well be braying like an ass. But clearly, that impression is not left on everyone. I just don't get it.'"

"Maybe it's the other way around," said Jeff. "Maybe Ned's making perfect sense and we're the ones who can't smell it."

"It is not, he's a fool." Deborah declared.

They did not conduct any business over lunch. They talked about old times. They talked about retired politicians. They talked about memorable campaign events.

After lunch, Jeff let Deborah leave first. He sighed and finished his iced tea. There was a gas station on the corner outside the diner. Jeff looked to make sure Deborah's car was nowhere in sight before he went in. He came out with a pack of cigarettes. He immediately took one out of the pack, lit it and crossed over into the park and headed in a direction away from his office. There was a giant pond in the middle of the park and a paved walkway circled the pond. All around, like spokes, were paths that ran outward toward various locations downtown.

At a leisurely pace, Jeff walked to the bench on the southmost end of the pond. By the time he got there, his cigarette was done. Taking a seat on the bench, he lit another and put the pack beside him on the bench. He smoked and waited, hoping that he wouldn't be long. He would be tempted to have a third cigarette and that did not sound appealing. Fortunately, before he took his last drags, he saw a raggedy form come up the path from the direction which he just came. The bypasser was a thin graying man with a long unkempt beard and hair. He had on an old tee shirt and filthy jeans. His skin was heavily tanned and weathered. He was smiling widely as he approached the bench. Jeff didn't know the man's name, but he was familiar face to everyone who worked downtown.

"Can I, ahhhh, have a smoke?" he asked through his grin and put the whole pack in his shirt pocket.

“What are you doing today?” Jeff asked.

“Got a big surprise yesterday. Old friend of mine just got back in town.”

“Back in town? From where?”

“South somewhere. Near the coast. Haven’t seen him since he left. Been away near on four years.”

“What brought him back?”

The smiling old man said, “Had a good thing down there for a while, he says. Didn’t work out though.”

“Back to stay then?”

“Maybe. Never know. Might be gone tomorrow, just like the rest of us. Hehe.”

Jeff snorted a short laugh and reached into his front pocket. “You did some catching up then, I suppose.”

“We did some catching up. But we mostly did some drinking.”

“Where’s he at now?”

“Had some people to look in on. He’s supposed to meet me later.”

“Staying with you out past Cutler Road?” Jeff pulled out modest stack of cash and peeled off a couple of twenties.

“If he’s inclined. First things first, we got to scrape up enough scratch for a bottle or two.”

“Your friend like cigars?”

“If he don’t, I’ll smoke his,” the old man snickered. His twinkling eyes studied Jeff’s face. Jeff did not meet the gaze. He was looking at the money in his hands.

Jeff peeled off a few more bills quickly and laid them on the bench where the cigarettes had been.

“Meeting him here?” Jeff asked.

“Told him I’d be here. See if he shows. He might be passed out somewhere for all I know.”

“Weather’s nice. Maybe you’ll get a six pack go wait for him in the grass by Baker Street.”

“That does sound like a good idea, Mac. I might do just that.”

“Get a hot dog from Smitty’s, too? Hot dog with a cold beer.”

“Love me a hot dog, Mac.”

“Even if your friend don’t show, you’ll find someone to share a bottle with, right?”

“Or bottles. M’sure I will.”

“Head out toward Cutler Road later?” asked Jeff.

“Eventually, I’m not in a rush. Might just hang around downtown for a while, have a drink by the fountain and watch you good people make yourselves busy.”

“Yeah, just lounge on a bench. Smoke a cigar and watch the crowds pass.”

“As good as anything else to fill my day.”

“I think that sounds fine indeed.”

“You can join,” the old man offered.

“I can’t,” said Jeff standing up. “I got to get back.”

Jeff walked back to his office slowly. There was still a chance he might get something useful accomplished by the end of the day.