

The Porta-Potty

by Eric Barnes

We wake up on a Wednesday to find that a massive steel dumpster has been set up across the street from our house. The neighbors are remodeling their home.

“The dumpster is an eyesore,” another neighbor, Shelby, is saying with great frustration, speaking to Nora and me as the three of us stand in the street. “And obviously this is a harbinger of an extended phase of workmen, pickup trucks and discarded fast food containers.”

Nora and I nod in agreement, though my own sense of concern is, in truth, not particularly high.

“But of course,” Shelby says, “none of that is what worries me most.”

I glance toward the dumpster. I turn back to Shelby. After a moment, I offer, “Teenagers going dumpster diving?”

“No!” she says in exasperation. I find that Shelby often speaks to me in exasperation, starting her sentences to me with a short yell, shaking her head as she starts to speak, sometimes absently reaching out to slap me on the arm.

I’ve realized that the more exasperated she gets, the more obnoxious I become.

I say to her, “Nails in the street that will give you a flat tire?”

“No!” she says again. Then she pauses. “Well, actually, I hadn’t thought about that, but yes, I’m worried about that too now.” She points toward the dumpster. “What I’m really worried about, however, is that *porta-potty!*”

I look again. I hadn’t even noticed the tall plastic porta-potty that’s been dropped on the far side of the dumpster.

“Oh my,” I say.

“Exactly!” Shelby exclaims. “The smell, the sounds, just its presence!”

Shelby is one of those people whose young children wear ironed dresses. On Sunday afternoons, she herself is always dressed in a casually elegant ensemble. She says words like *ensemble*. She says words like *harbinger*. She drops Italian phrases into otherwise routine assessments of shrubbery, table settings, and Christmas light displays. She is a gourmet cook. She attended an ancient and obscure liberal arts college in upper New England and, unlike me—who also attended an obscure liberal arts college in upper New Eng-

land—she seems to have remembered everything that she learned.

Despite all this, Nora and I like her immensely. She’s a great observer of the foibles and oddities of the people on our street, a regular sidekick to the observations Nora and I are endlessly making about the comings and goings of the people around us.

Maybe more importantly, Nora and I have realized that Shelby’s perfection is porous. Mutable. And less a source of pride or arrogance, but of deep vulnerability.

“I woke up very early this morning to call my sister in Europe,” she told Nora and me not long after we all met. “But when I got back to the bedroom, I realized I couldn’t get back in bed.”

“You’re one of those people who can’t fall back to sleep?” Nora asks.

“No, not at all,” Shelby says. “It’s just that when I got back to the bedroom, David had already made the bed.”

Nora nods. I stare.

In a moment, I say, “I don’t understand.”

Nora pokes me.

Shelby stares quizzically. “Well,” she says, voice taking on a motherly, vaguely patronizing tone. “The bed was already *made*.”

I am, for the most part, without ingrained social graces. The norms and conventions of good behavior were never clearly explained to me. This can be good and this can be bad.

“Why couldn’t you get back into a made up bed?” I ask.

Nora steps on my toe.

“Well,” Shelby starts, then stops. “I don’t really know, actually.”

“I think you’re old enough that you can get back into a made up bed,” I say. “Frankly, for me, the fact that it was already made, that would only make it more attractive.”

Shelby pauses. Considering. “What does it say about me that I won’t get into a bed that’s already made?” she asks.

Nora shrugs. I squint my eyes.

“You two think I’m crazy,” she says, looking carefully from Nora to me.

“No,” Nora says with a kind voice and easy smile.

It is a moment before I say, “I think you’re completely crazy. That whole scenario you just described, it clearly speaks of some sort of childhood trauma. As a little girl, did your parents beat you?”

Shelby slaps my arm. Nora slaps the other.

I am, for the most part, without ingrained social graces. The norms and conventions of good behavior were never clearly explained to me. This can be good and it can be bad. I’m prone to making blunt declarations and unexpected announcements. I’m sure I’ve scared off any number of potential friends or acquaintances this way. But without the normal limits of social convention, I sometimes lay out a test of honesty and trust among people I meet. Can you bear to hear what I really think? Are you willing to tell me what you think too?

Shelby’s concerns about the porta-potty prove to have been understated, at best. The porta-potty becomes a de facto public restroom not only to the men working on the neighbor’s renovation, but to people from, it seems, all over the city. Workers from projects around the neighborhood, kids out playing in the street, early morning joggers hitting the mid-point of their run, homeless people passing through on the way to the church shelter half a mile away, the elderly and infirm out for life-extending walks - all have become regular users of our neighborhood porta-potty.

From my window, I see joggers, the homeless, the elderly and the infirm, all stopping by to use the porta-potty in front of the neighbors’ house.

I make sure to take pictures of each of them, then send them, individually, to Shelby.

