

1949

Death of a Neighbor

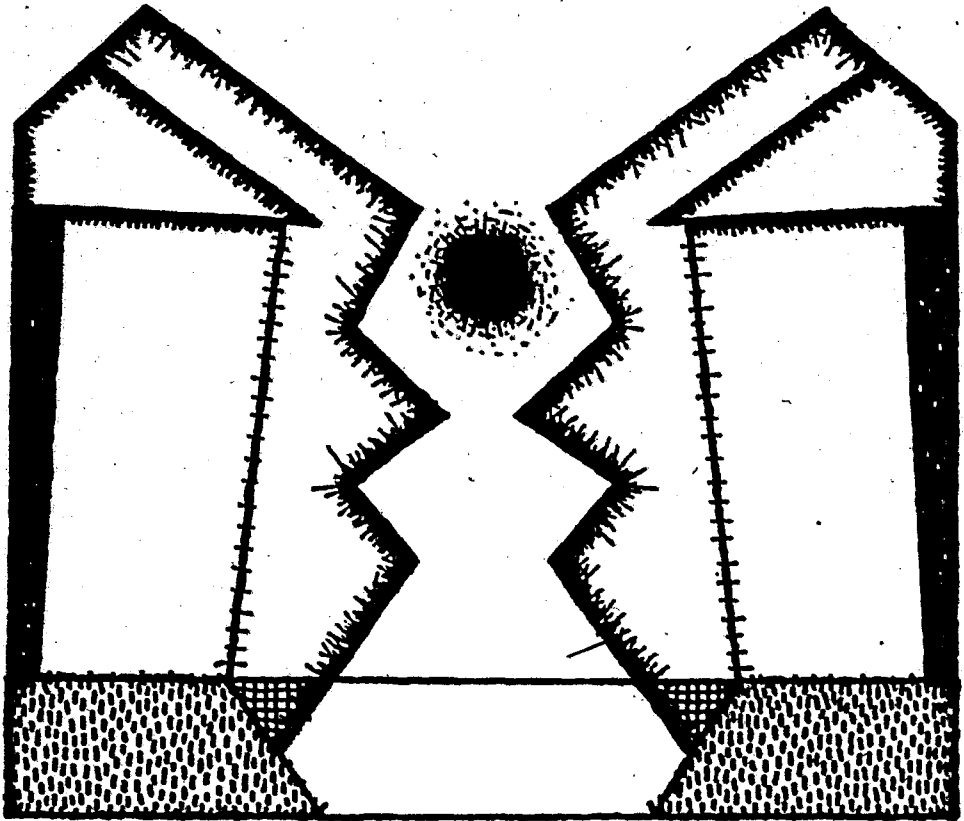
David Cornel DeJong

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

DeJong, David Cornel. "Death of a Neighbor." *New Mexico Quarterly* 19, 4 (1949). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol19/iss4/7>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.



David Cornel DeJong

DEATH OF A NEIGHBOR

HE OPENED the door and then retreated, stepping back into the dusk of the little vestibule. There coming down the walk was George Collins, and he couldn't face George. Certainly not now, with nothing but facile words of condolences on hand. They weren't right, those glib expressions, they couldn't fit this sad affair. Even so, the compulsion which had made him step back was already waning, bogging down in a morass of bewilderment and indecision.

No doubt Dot would be coming to him in a minute, asking: "Did you forget something, John? Why are you standing there?"

DEATH OF A NEIGHBOR

447

Making of everything even a greater dilemma than it was already. Perhaps she, too, had spotted George from the window, where she was posted as usual to watch him leave, to wave and throw a kiss at him, as she had done every morning of all the years of their married life. Perhaps she was already saying to herself: Why, there's George Collins, and now John simply must, must. . . .

You must. What, why or how didn't matter. As in obedience to that imagined command, as in rebound to everything assailing him there in the little vestibule, he now opened the door and strode out, meeting George directly in front of the house, with Dot very likely watching him perform his horrible duty. These demands of suburban living, these horrible expectations and decorums, he found space to fret. Of course, if he didn't face George this morning, he'd have to do so this evening, or tomorrow, perhaps even at the funeral.

George had stopped, but his face seemed closed up, and the shutters of his attention were already closing out whatever condolences might be forthcoming now . . . all those ready words of sympathy, once again hurriedly exhumed, but in this instance especially so terribly amiss. That is what he must be expecting, John thought grimly, watching George incline his head, seeing him tuck in his chin a little, while the fingers of his left hand fumbled here and there, and his right hand stayed defensively in his pocket. So it wasn't strange then, John thought bitterly, that he found himself addressing George as Mr. Collins.

After all, Mister for grief, for condolences, for formalities, perhaps even for guilt, but somehow, madly, it did seem to put Antoinette's death for that miserable moment on another plane, a more remote plane, where all the words he was saying seemed to belong. Those: "So sorry . . . so sorry . . . and, of course, all words fail now . . . they're bound to. . . . So sorry. . . ." Finding himself brushing George's sleeve now, before he hurried away, not even looking back at the window, at Dot. He

couldn't very well now blow blythe kisses, could he? Not with George still standing there, after he'd mumbled a few unrecognizable syllables; standing there as if he was allowing the hollow words of condolence to wind around him, closing him in a cocoon of helplessness.

Oh, the curse of suburban living, John fretted, striding on. Where everybody knew everybody's inmost thoughts almost, but where certainly no one called one's neighbors and acquaintances by their last names, even when . . . he continued fretting, striding faster, involuntarily ducking his own chin to his collar, as George had done, wanting now to retreat from the very words he'd spoken to George. The travesty of them, the humiliating travesty, considering what lay behind and around them, considering his guilt about Antoinette.

He had to turn then and look back. He saw George still standing there, perhaps a few paces farther away, but with ~~puzzlement~~ in his posture, gradually taking his feebly gesturing right hand from his pocket. Puzzled, maybe, because I called him Mr. Collins, John wanted to think. He would be . . . call me George, old man, even in bereavement, even in infidelity. Then in spite of the distance between them, his eyes seemed to have collided with George's. Not in puzzlement this time, but in guilt and reproach. Guiltily then too, his eyes ferreted out the slight shifting of shadow or substance at the window: Dot's face or hand drawing back. And he said to himself stridently: "All right, she knows, and George knows, and it is something now that can neither be denied or changed."

He swung around again, his footsteps angry and purposeful, his mind suddenly buoyed from guilt to defiance. "All right, all right." He heard himself muttering, "A man's a man, isn't he, and a stupid man most of the time? And you two, just try guessing, but try guessing, too, for a change, how far my own hurt goes."

DEATH OF A NEIGHBOR

449

Over him the sky seemed tremendously silent. Around him there was nothing he could fix his attentions on, nothing but a robin scolding at some hidden cat, some imagined stalker. There was nothing there to distract him, nothing to argue with him, as though he walked there alone and yet divided, shattered by an amalgamation of other people's suspicion and his own guilt, not to mention a taut denial of them all and himself.

All right. All right, when I was with Antoinette, I couldn't possibly figure she'd be dead a few weeks later, could I? And the affair really never mattered to me, did it? And I didn't seek it, not exactly, and you, George, you should have been better to her, for your own comfort even, for your own conscience now. "Stand still," he mumbled, and he stopped to blow his nose and to flick a small caterpillar off the back of his hand. Now he had to cross the square in front of the station. The train should come now, with people converging on it, before they could turn and watch him, to absorb what they could, to make their absorption fit their own suspicions, to sit in the train then, cruelly assimilating everything. I didn't murder her, did I?

The train wouldn't be there for another four minutes, the station clock told him. If on time . . . if in proportion . . . if omniscient, why, I'd have prevented all this, wouldn't I? He kept countering other fugitive accusations. He hurried into the little smoke shop beside the station to get a package of cigarettes and a morning paper. The train came hooting then, careening across the causeway. He was there in time to board it, behind the backs of all the other commuters. His eyes then searched across faces and above newspapers for a seat, alone.

He found one, and cast a glance of dismissal at the familiar gliding landscape, with May upon it, beguilingly. He fastened his eyes on the newspaper's headlines, excluding everything else. Because you're going to the office now, gratefully. Supposing this was your day off, a day dedicated to work in the garden,

with Dot helpful, helpful with all manner of feminine counterparts of tools, with drinks, with seed catalogues and gardening guides? But none of that now.

He started reading without comprehension: "Peiping Gives Up to the Reds," and continued reading more stubbornly: "Israeli-Egyptian Armistice Talks Viewed Near End," and even considerable of the text beneath the headline, until he found more formidable thoughts dictating: Yes, and supposing this was a cozy midmorning of transplanting? Clumps of lettuce plants to be separated, to be put out in rows. Clumps of guilt and apprehension, those divided into smaller components, set out in rows, to yield more, with Dot frisking back and forth saying: "Now, John, that'll really multiply them, won't it, and come next August or September. . . ."

The newspaper was no help, not even the sports and comics. Neither was the countryside, now ending and the city starting, a piling up of gray, brown, smoke, rust and grime. His thoughts were revolving around such a tight vortex now that they couldn't be unskeined. But why, he questioned himself drastically, why should George Collins be walking past my house at that time, going in the direction he was going? Of course, George's own house would be empty now, unless it still held Antoinette, in a satin casket perhaps. . . . Even so, why should the fellow be parading his banners of bereavement there, his hurt trailing behind him like the soiled wings of a turkey buzzard? Past my house, with Dot watching, with what purpose?

The train swooped into underground darkness, and around him people started folding up their newspapers, clamping on their hats, picking up bundles and briefcases. "You've got to get in the midst of them," something dictated. En masse, a mass attack on the oblivious outside world. He got up, leaving the paper on his seat. He didn't peer around him, not too diligently.

She was at his elbow before he recognized her. It could be worse, or could it? Mrs. Loftus was one of those benign souls,

DEATH OF A NEIGHBOR

451

who saw no wickedness in the world which could not be filliped away with a firm tap of duty or good will. Kindly she was, inviolable, her face brimming over with sweetness, with thoughts left mostly behind with lovely children visited, dear friends comforted, bewildered souls set straight. So, of course, Mrs. Loftus said to him, with an abruptness which voided any mean intent: "But, of course, John, you must have heard. Poor Antoinette Collins, barely three days, but pneumonia will do that. Even in summer, really almost summer."

"Yes," he said, inclining his head, because she was, of course, plump and short, squat with good-naturedness, as her kind always were. "Yes, terrible."

"It must have been a terrible shock to Dot. Must have been, John. They were such good friends, she and Antoinette."

"To Dot?" he asked puzzled, his voice lowered. "Oh yes, of course," because only then had he assimilated the second half of her remarks. Incredible, people like Mrs. Loftus were. They saw no evil, or they metamorphosed it by gentle manipulations into something innocuous or sentimental. Whoever it was, who at some time must have whispered to Mrs. Loftus about his friendship with Antoinette, had certainly cast his seed of gossip in strange soil. Mrs. Loftus had simply transposed it. She had perhaps simply decided that her informant was mistaken. He must have meant Dot, John's lovely wife, not John himself. Dot was such a lovely girl, and Antoinette had been such a dear girl, and once she'd really seen them talking together with the greatest friendliness at the station, or was it at the church? "Ah yes," he forced himself to repeat, "yes, it was a shock to Dot."

"Poor dear," Mrs. Loftus said gently, but because he had missed interim remarks, it took him some time to realize that she meant him. He was the poor dear. It didn't fit. But it didn't matter now either, because they were hustling out of the train, and Mrs. Loftus waved good-by to him on the ramp, saying something about shopping all day and nibbling here and there.

Then it seemed, after a black haze of hazardings and grim refusals at further hazardings, that he was in a crowded elevator, going up to his office.

There his work and the unsuspicious faces, there everything would envelop him. Swallow him. In the empty corridor, however, he asked himself critically, before he was ready to open the office door: "But you were never in love with Antoinette? And you stayed in love with Dot, didn't you? And it remained only an affair, even though she pretended she was in love with you, because George. . . ? But that was another question, which should not be completed, certainly not answered. He opened the office door and marched in, his face set around a formidable midmorning smile. He saw the three girls at their desks lifting their faces with similar smiles. He had arrived. To be made antiseptic, or even sane.

Fortunately it turned out to be that sort of a day. All its demands assailed private thoughts and worries and pushed them aside. Frettings remained inchoate and embryonic, even during the forty minutes of lunch, with two of his associates. Then, however, a little after two there came a call from Dot. Over the phone she suggested brightly: "Why don't I drive to the city, John? Why don't I try to get a couple of tickets to something casual and light? Why don't we have an early dinner and then go? Why not, John, it is the sort of thing both of us can stand. Besides, it has started to rain."

"Started to rain?" he asked, as if he wanted to argue that no doubt irrefutable fact.

"Yes, it's raining here, dear. You'll get it all right."

"But why?" he argued now, suspiciously. "Why come to the city on a rainy day, when even the driving is no fun?"

"Oh, John," she said maddeningly. Or was it cryptically?

Of course, that was it. She was either trying to save his face, or trying to make him forget, because. . . . So suddenly it had come, it was almost unwrapped. Dot was letting him know very

DEATH OF A NEIGHBOR

453

tenuously and obliquely that she knew what the game was, or rather what the game had been. "But," he protested, "but," again, when the rest of the words he intended to say became confused.

"Darling," she said, "don't act so hectic. In the first place, how can you work in that garden while it rains? And besides, you've been scraping and rooting in it so much, both the garden and you need some relief. Also I want to go. I want to be pampered, don't you see?"

"And in the third place?" he asked with forced jocularity, with the edge of his suspicion clearly coming through.

"In the third place, dear," Dot said firmly, "I want to be taken out to dinner and I want to go to a show with you."

That, of course, settled it, gayly and insouciantly. With relief added, he realized, as he walked to the water cooler. Still, until five-thirty when he was ready to leave the office, he kept turning that telephone conversation over in his mind. Some of her remarks now stood in his conscience like monuments. Monuments with inscriptions he'd previously failed to read. With significant facts which he should have taken cognizance of sooner. Monuments over a grave, perhaps. . . .

They had dinner, and Dot did have tickets to a second-rate musical; in which the laughs were supposed to come a mile a minute, elbowed by blushes, if some epigrammatic critic's quips were to be taken seriously. At dinner they had more cocktails than was commendable. Four were too many for any man, and two, of course, were abundant for Dot. But the rain hadn't materialized, and that seemed just cause for one drink. The second-rate show called for another. They needed a shot in the arm to enjoy it. Also Dot kept all her conversation so carefully from home and the neighbors, and after all, Antoinette's funeral was tomorrow. But she did say: "Well, even if it isn't raining, this will keep you out of the garden. So you can give roots, and worms and your worries a rest."

"What do you mean?" he asked, jovially suspicious through a cloud of martinis. "Just what do you mean?"

"Of course, dear, you do fret over that garden. Like a foster mother over somebody else's children, like. . . ." but further comparisons failed her, also because of the martinis.

"Well, supposing I do," he argued. "It's practically my first experience at real gardening, and I'm entitled to my worries."

"Oh, skip it, John," she said, "and if you must, take another cocktail for nonchalance's sake."

The show was that sort of a thing. At least as long as the glow of the drinks lasted, actually superseding the lamb chops and a nauseatingly creamy dessert. Nearly all the time he could really surrender himself to the show, from the belly-button up or down, whichever. Sore with laughter, really. Dot, though not quite as abandoned as he, was doing fine in a more refined way. The intermission seemed like a bit of a let down, but there were drinks to be had at a bar near the theater, though it took a bit of courage to suggest it, because he wasn't a drinking man, and she'd surely get suspicious. Even so he had another drink, in fact, two, and she was obviously for this occasion—whatever she intended the occasion to be—humoring him. She even said: "Well, that puts you beyond the point of driving back, so I'll drive, and you won't have to worry."

Now it was her solicitude that tried to put a damper on his hilarity. Almost succeeded, but not quite, because a complicated remnant seemed to remain, even though he didn't dare to pursue it too ardently now, without giving himself away. I'm as sober as a judge, a dour judge, a Presbyterian judge, he wanted to tell her, but naturally he had better not, not even after the show was over and they were going home, Dot at the wheel.

Now this must have added up to the whole gamut of her preparations. Now the stage was set, the mood, the decor; the time and occasion were here. Now soon she'd come out with it. She'd start edging into it casually, perhaps. She'd mention some

DEATH OF A NEIGHBOR

455

aspect of the funeral, flowers, or letters, anything, even as they sped soothingly through the night, hearing the hylas loud and insistent in the marshes. Now that your conscience lay exposed, but also your need for forgiveness and understanding. Very soon now. He held himself tense and silent, because he couldn't hold himself any other way, and his thoughts refused to evolve into small talk.

She did not say anything, however. She was silent too, but in a different fashion, humming from time to time at snatches of songs they'd heard at the show. She was allowing him to relax with a vengeance, he decided. She merely asked him once: "Now, how did that third line go, John?" after she'd hummed a bit more. "Which line?" he asked truculently. "Oh skip it, you'd never get a line straight anyway tonight," she countered, but pleasantly, nudging him with her elbow.

So he kept waiting. Nothing happened, except that the hylas became shriller, and serenaded them onto the hedges, fences and walks of Whitfield. There was very little space or time left now, for whatever she wanted him to say, or realize. Whatever! She had to drive slower through town, and they had to go past the Collins' house. It was past midnight, but lights were on in the house, and silhouetted, on the edge of the porch steps, as if he stood there teetering on the brink of something indefinite, there stood George Collins, peering out into the night, peering over or across their car as they drove by.

"Poor George," Dot said.

"Yes," he echoed.

They'd reached the house then and he jumped out to open the garage door, but just before he was out of earshot, Dot said: "An odd thing happened, John. I meant to tell you about it, but there didn't seem to be any occasion for it earlier. But whatever you said to him this morning in front of the house, whatever it was, it seems to have upset him, in a peculiar fashion."

"Just a minute, dear," he shouted, opening the garage doors, stepping aside as she drove the car inside, then turning off the light and closing the door after she had emerged, all very deliberately. While she waited now, and while she gradually continued: "You see, he came past the house again later, perhaps an hour later. And he acted as if he had intended to call, he actually came up our walk, but then he seemed to change his mind. He stood there shrugging and then he walked away."

They were standing there together in the dark, both waiting until she got through speaking, before they could turn toward the house, before they turned on any light upon themselves. "Whatever you said to him, John," she said softly, gently accusing. "Because a few minutes later he telephoned. He was abrupt about it, almost as if he had started to make a joke. And, of course, I was at a loss as to what to say, and had to keep waiting for him to get through. When he started halting, I tried condolences, in sheer desperation, but he wouldn't brook them. He then said hurriedly: 'John calling me Mister Collins this morning. That's a funny way, calling me Mister Collins, Dot.' No wonder I got confused myself then. I didn't understand. Did you call him Mister Collins, John?"

"I might have," he said gravely. "I might. I was flustered. Things like that stiffen me, make me formal."

"Darling, what a fool you were," she said. "Because it troubled him so sorely, you know. He must have brooded over it for hours. But what an odd thing to be troubled over."

She wanted him to come to George's rescue now, he decided. In his guilt to take up the cudgels for George; in that way she wanted him to say everything fully now, or not at all. Even if her voice was not that way, but soft with puzzled consternation. "I think he's bewildered. I think, perhaps, he fastened onto something irrelevant, to keep himself from realizing the other. . . ." He heard himself saying that, he was talking voluminously, and yet thinking through all his wordiness: but, of

DEATH OF A NEIGHBOR

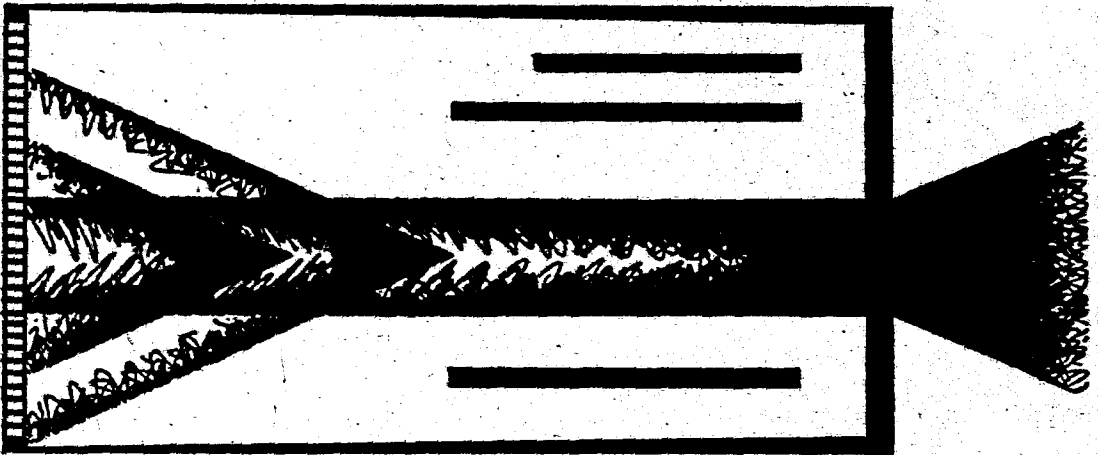
457

course, she never mentioned Antoinette's name, and I never did, not now that she is dead. But not either when she was still alive, these last few weeks, not even when she was so sick. "Don't you think that's it?" he demanded.

"I don't know, John," she answered. "I don't know. I don't know what to think on such an occasion."

"Occasion?" he asked sternly.

"Well, yes," she said, but slowly she started walking toward the house, behind the syringas, here where the hylas became very loud again, and the stars seemed to be pricking out what couldn't be said, or should never be said between them. Not



even in declaration of love or loyalty. Certainly not. But not in guilt either, he thought, following her.

Suddenly he felt he had to know what she knew about him and Antoinette. As a basis . . . to understand what she wanted him to understand, in spite of it, or because of it. "I don't know," he said succinctly. "It makes a difference. It makes a difference where we stand, on which side of it. Each on a side or. . . ." He stopped confusedly, but made himself continue then: "Where we stood even before it happened, and when it was happening, and then when she died, when she was dead."

His voice came to a sudden stop there between the dark

hedges, with all the stars over them like cold, critical witnesses. He had said the words to her back, to her shoulders perhaps held stiff now. I've gone so far, he thought. I have said "she," when "she" is dead. I have stumbled that close through the darkness. There was still a little further to go. A very little further and she must be terribly anxious to help me, but what can she do? It isn't fair to her. Because she's helpless, too, more helpless than I am, because I've made her so, and because she never did anything amiss herself, she merely waited and tried to keep her dignity. And my dignity, too, she tried to keep that intact, too.

They had reached the front door, but neither of them took out a key to open it. They looked back at the dark and sleeping town, and listened with grave attention to a cat's calling and a little after that to nothing but the hylas' throbbingly loud.

If I mentioned her name now, perhaps, he thought. If I merely said, "Antoinette." Certainly not Mrs. Collins. If I could merely make a fact a fact, a statement, a name. So that it could stand there apart in the night, and we could both look at it, soon objectively. Soon look at it as if it were a carved stone, and read the name on it together, and then later put flowers at its foot, to walk away together then, and resume gardening, and cooking, and reading to each other and calling each other's name easily.

"Dot," he said then, "but I can't. I can't put her name in my mouth, and sound it, no more than I could have called him anything but Mr. Collins this morning. Do you understand?"

She looked at him then and shook her head fondly. She reached for his hand then and put her key in it. "Open the door, darling," she said. "Go on, John, open our door."