

THE WALL

It happens overnight, or seems to.

When Packer-Shore sells our retirement community to Spetz Development, I read about the deal in our newsletter, *The Daily Sunshine*. Not two days after the hand-off is official, a man in a suit comes to our door. He has jet-black hair, a doll's head and a taped-on smile. He could be forty; he could be twenty-five.

He introduces himself as Jim Score, CEO of Spetz, says he's making the rounds of the community, meeting the residents and taking an informal survey to see if folks are satisfied with the present security in our neighborhood or if they'd welcome an adjustment on that front.

"We're testing the waters, in case we decide to go out to bid," Score says. "I'm letting everybody know that at Spetz, your safety and security are our number one priority. Can I put you down as an interested party for enhanced safety?"

"How much will this increase our association fees?" I ask.

"Oh, nothing. Absolutely nothing. This would be done on Spetz's dime, completely."

"Well, I'm not sure it's needed. Things seem pretty secure to me."

"Fair enough," Score says. "At present that may be true, but with an eye to the future, the way the population is growing over in Arbor Heights, that could change. We all might be glad we took steps sooner rather than later. An effective security team in place early would help to curb certain undesirable elements from making criminal overtures in WellSprings. I've already spoken to several of your neighbors—Candy

Dimond, Chad Blackwell and Norv Davis, and they've all signaled interest in this initiative."

To me this added security will be a waste of money, like buying a padlock you intend on keeping in a junk drawer, so I'm not inclined to "signal interest," but since it's not my money, and I have a dinner plate cooling in the dining room, I tell Score that it can't hurt, go ahead and put me down.

"Thanks, Mr. Fincher," he says, his smile growing exponentially. "Do let me know if there's anything I can do for you." He hands me his business card and bids me good day. Goes down the walk to a gleaming black Cadillac with the vanity plate **SPETZ 1** on it.

A week later I'm on the nine hole with my buddies Todd and Ollie, and we see a trio of men in mud-grey uniforms strolling along the perimeter of the course. Their aviators mirror the sun as they pause to observe our round.

Todd tees off into the brush.

"Goddamn it," he says. "I can't play with an audience watching!"

He stands pat and stares back at the men until they finally resume their walk.

"Who are those guys?" Ollie says. I'm wondering that myself, but I think I know.

"That's the new security," Todd says, taking a mulligan on the swing and grabbing another ball. "I saw them over at the gate house the other day. They had some vans there unloading equipment."

"What kind of equipment?"

"I don't know... High-tech gadgets and such. Satellite dishes... Who knows?"

"Oh yeah, I heard about that. Frieda told me a guy come to the house and surveyed

her about security,” Ollie says.

“We’re not paying for it. That’s what the paper said,” Todd says.

“So they say. But I betcha there’ll be some new fee. They’ll finance this from our pockets somehow,” I say, regretting giving Score my consent.

A couple days after our golf game, I’m going out to the Meier with Mel and we pass by the gatehouse and see some of the equipment Todd referred to. There looks to be three antenna-type things on the roof, a couple satellite dishes, a new steel door and windows replaced with tinted stuff.

We roll by slowly, our eyeballs capturing this in snapshots.

“What are they up to here?”

“That must be Kleig security,” Mel says. “Phyllis and I saw some of the men over at the Rec Center when the girls and I had sewing class.”

I stomp on the gas and take our white-fenced, curvy road at a speed not meant for it.

“Score didn’t say anything about equipment,” I say. “Or anything about outfitting our gate house to look like an Army command post.”

“Looks like they’re going to have people in it, huh?” Mel says.

“I can’t imagine why,” I said. “What were they doing over at the Rec Center?”

“I don’t know. We just saw them walking along the pool watching people swim and then later on they were talking to Kurt Winter. He was taking them around with a set of keys. Kathy mentioned seeing a bunch of the security guys over at Nikko’s having lunch. She said they looked like a sullen bunch.”

Down at the Center Bar on Sunday with Todd and Ollie, having our usual black and tans and watching the Bears lose, I notice a small black tube. It's high up in the corner and when I get up to hit the head, it follows me, or seems to.

When I finish business I ask Frenchy, the bartender what that thing is up in the corner. Frenchy frowns and squeezes a rag out in the sink.

"Camera," he says sourly. "The new security talked to Doyle, and he let them put it in. Don't know what interest it is to anyone to watch a fella pour drinks and watch others drink 'em, but then I ain't the boss..."

"That pick up sound?" Todd asks.

"Not as far as I'm aware... But you know, I didn't think to ask."

"Doyle in?" I say. I want to talk to that Irish bastard right now.

"On vacation," Frenchy says. "Wife and him on a month-long cruise."

"I'll speak to him when he gets back," I say.

"I'll come with ya," Todd says.

Ollie's got his head in the game and doesn't seem to have heard much of this. He cries out when our QB almost gets his head torn off and used as a hood ornament. I finish up my beer and try to enjoy the game, but I can't keep my eye off the eye. Frenchy seems sorry about it, but it isn't his fault. Instead of finishing out the game, when half time comes, I tell the fellas I'm out of here.

"Yeah, I think I'll do the same," Todd says.

"You guys are going?" Ollie says. "You're not gonna stay and watch the rest of the game?"

"Not when the game is watching *us*," I say, pointing to the camera.

From what Mel and I hear, people are divided over the new security. Some find comfort in those men with the mud-grey uniforms. They buy Score's theory that one day Arbor Heights population is going to overflow with gangs and then we'll see police blotters containing stories about TVs stolen in WellSprings. Others, like me, Mel and Todd are starting to feel hemmed in.

When I tell my ex-military neighbor Chad about the changes we're seeing, he agrees that it seems unnecessary, a bit overkill.

"Anybody come for my TV, they'll have to speak to my Glock or my Luger... I'm not worried about that. I may be old but I can still pull a trigger."

When I tell him about the camera in the bar, he doesn't see the harm. Says there are cameras everywhere these days.

"Yeah, but does anybody watch them? Not unless something happens. I get the feeling there's somebody *watching* us over there."

Chad shrugs and whips open a leaf bag. "I wouldn't worry about it," he says. "Probably just a deterrent."

Next weekend Mel and I go out to Prairie Forks to visit our daughter Susie's family, and we get back after nine. As we get close to the gatehouse, I see something new—a row of large cannon-shaped lights slashing down at the entrance and an actual gate blocking the way.

"What the shit is this?" I say, not believing my eyes. I pull close to the guardhouse as far as I can go and a black Plexiglas window slides to the side, revealing a young man with a severe buzz cut.

"Good evening Mr. Fincher," the young man says, looking at a monitor just out of view. "Should I check you in for the evening?"

My mouth will hardly work to form words.

“Check in? *What?* What’s this gate for?”

“It’s just for after sundown, sir,” the guard says. “Just a precaution. If we know your vehicle will be here for the night then we’ll know to question the driver should it attempt to leave later.”

Mel has the same rage going as I do. She leans over to square eyes with the kid.

“No one is going to take our car,” she says.

“Great, so I’ll just check you in for the night then.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Mel snips. “No one is going to *steal* the car.”

“No check in is needed. Put us down as ‘questionable,’” I say. “Now lift this gate!”

“Sir, the gate is just for your safety.”

“The hell it is,” I say. As soon as it ratchets up, I pull through, cursing.

“Well that’s the limit,” Mel says. “I didn’t hear anything about this... What do we need a gate for?”

“*We don’t.*”

The next morning I’m working on an email to Score, telling him what I think of this new gate, when Mel comes back from sewing class.

“Back so soon?”

“You’re not going to believe this,” Mel says. “They cancelled my class!”

“Rain check for another day?”

“No, I mean they *cancelled* it. In fact, they said that all classes are cancelled for the immediate future while they do some reorganization.”

“Getting your money back?”

“Yes, but that’s not the point... We like our instructor, Kira. We were in the middle of a project! We complained at the front desk, but the girl there didn’t know anything. She just said the only class available at this time was this.”

Mel shows me a flyer for a one day exclusive event called *Safe and Secure—Protecting Home and Family*. At the bottom there’s a photo of the doll-headed Score smiling so wide his face could split. The flyer lists things that will be covered in the session including safety in the home, at the gym, in the car, online and in the backyard. It seems like ten bags of bullshit in a two-pound bag.

“Did anyone sign up?”

“We all signed up just to see what it’s about,” Mel says.

“You did *what*?”

“We want to find out what these people are up to. We’ll meet them on their own turf if we have to.” Mel is flushed she’s so fired up.

“When is this thing?”

“Next Thursday.”

“You’re not going.”

“Why not?”

“It’s brainwashing, that’s why.”

“But all the girls are going. We want to see what it’s about.”

“No further discussion,” I say firmly. “You’re staying here.”

Thursday comes and goes and we hear from some of our friends, Ollie and his wife Frieda and Cal Johnson and his wife Tammy. They say they went in skeptical of the changes, but Score convinced them what’s going on is for everyone’s benefit. It’s just

what I thought would happen. Score is gassing everybody with his flowery talk.

At poker on Friday night, Ollie mentions the wall.

“What wall?”

“They want to put an eight foot cinder block wall around the perimeter,” he says.

“What in hell for?”

“To keep out the undesirables,” Ollie says. “Thugs. The criminal element.”

“You see any crime here?” I say, incredulous.

“We’re preparing for the future.”

“First the new security personnel, then cameras watching us, then a gate and now a wall? This is out of hand,” I say. “When’s it going to stop?”

“No, really,” Ollie says, turning the river card, a three. No help. “He showed us the stats. We don’t do this now and one day we’ll be overrun. They’re already seeing some gang graffiti on the post office wall downtown.”

Then Ollie goes on to tell us Score has another proposal in the offing to allow residents to have outside visitors on designated holidays only as well as five additional, pre-arranged days a year.

“Where did you hear about that?”

“*Daily Sunshine.*”

I realize I haven’t seen the paper lately.

I’m sending another email.

The next day the doorbell rings. It’s a man in a blue suit with a gold tag on his breast pocket that IDs him as a Spetz employee.

“Yes?”

“Good day Mr. Fincher,” the guy says, another young/old type. “I’m collecting signatures for the Community Defense Project Proposal.”

“The *what?*”

“Perhaps you’ve heard there’s an initiative to construct a barrier?”

“Yes, I did hear,” I say. “And I think it’s a bunch of horseshit.”

“It’s a *decorative* barrier,” the man says. “It serves to both protect and beautify the community as well as to reduce noise from the highway.”

“There *is* no noise from the highway,” I say. “Stand in the yard out back a minute and tell me you can hear a single car.”

“While you may not have a noise problem, sir, there are others in the community who—”

“I’m not signing it!”

“It’s for the community interest.”

I slam the door shut.

I don’t consider what effect this act of civil disobedience may have, but the following day I start to find out.

Kleig men start driving by at all hours, sometimes stopping to stare at the house.

Next thing is I get a violation notice in the mail for a tree I planted in the backyard last spring. The three foot high Kwanzan Cherry is not on the list of “approved trees” for our community. A lengthy note attached to the bill informs me that application for tree approval can be submitted, but any adjacent neighbors must agree to the planting in a sworn affidavit. Since appropriate registrations have not been met, I owe two hundred

dollars, payable in ten days or it goes up to three hundred.

Mel, already on edge with the men staring at the house, urges me to comply, but I'm not having any of it. I tear the bill in two. I do this on the doorstep in full view of the Kleig men idling on the curb.

This action perhaps causes the next—I'm cited for an "improper stone" on the front lawn. This is a flat, circular stone with our last name etched into it and is apparently not "code-approved." Another bill is attached for having an "animal-themed lawn ornament" (a tiny ceramic rabbit) on display. Both violations are for seventy-five dollars apiece.

These bills are also shredded, but this time done so on top of a Kleig vehicle.

The man drives off and nearly over my foot.

The next day I'm back from the grocery and find Mel having coffee in the breakfast nook with Jim Score. It's like discovering a rattlesnake on the linoleum. Mel rises quickly to calm me. She says she invited Mr. Score over so we might work out a reasonable agreement to the fine business.

"—and I was telling your lovely wife, Mr. Fincher, that we are certainly willing to disregard the fines in question if we could only obtain your compliance and consent on our building project."

"The wall," I say.

"An ugly term. Most ugly. I don't like *barrier* either. I prefer to call it a *separator*. Or landscape line. Much better, don't you think?"

"Eight feet of cinder block is not a line," I practically spit. "It's a *wall*. I refuse to sign any consent form and what's more, you can take your violation notices and put 'em where the sun don't shine. Now please, remove yourself, sir. You are intruding in my

home.”

This of course, upsets Mel to no end. Here she thought she was making headway with Score, and now I’ve dashed the whole thing to pieces.

“We’ll consider your offer, of course, Mr. Score,” Mel says as he rises and takes his leather trench coat off the back of the chair.

“We’ll do no such thing,” I say through my teeth.

Score leaves, careful not to brush into me on his way out. When he’s gone, Mel and I have one of the biggest arguments of our thirty-four year marriage. The upshot of it is, I won’t be blackmailed into signing something I don’t believe in.

“Well then just pay the stupid fines,” Mel says. “Honey, this is where we *live*... We can’t be at odds with the community.”

After some time and considerable back and forth, I agree to this since it’s the wall I’m really against. The fines are paid, the stone, tree and rabbit removed. The Kleig men disappear and for a little while, we’re left alone.

Then one Monday afternoon I get a call from Frenchy at Center Bar. He says I won the drawing for the free dinner for two at Nikko’s, can I come down to collect?

I say sure I’ll be right down.

But when I arrive at the bar, I have to knock on the glass since the door has a sign that says it’s closed. Frenchy opens up but doesn’t look like a guy about to give another guy a prize. In fact, it looks the opposite. He takes me into the back room where I supposedly need to sign something, and he’s pushed aside by two Kleig men who are wearing ski masks. One of the men has a German Shepard on a chain, and it doesn’t look too friendly.

When they move to restrain me, I try to get a lick in on the smaller one, but I’m

brought down by a truncheon strike to the back of my knees. My hands are wrenched behind my back and cuffed tightly. I'm blindfolded and a rag is stuck in my mouth as I'm ushered out the back way and thrust violently in a vehicle.

I'm told that sure as Christmas is December 25th, I will sign a document sanctioning the wall-building. I will start abiding by the code. I will not get in the way of the common interest.

After several dizzying turns, the cuffs are removed along with the blindfold and mouth rag, and I'm deposited roughly onto the asphalt parking lot in back of the driving range. No one is out today with the blustery weather.

Just as I'm straightening up, a Cadillac with the plate **Spetz 1** pulls up and stops.

Score's inside with an attractive, empty-eyed blonde. Both are dressed for church, or dressed up anyway. "Sort of a bad day for the range, wouldn't you say?" Score says, smiling across the blonde. "But you know, I'm glad I ran into you Mr. Fincher... I was wondering if you'd had any more thoughts about the separator?"

"Hadn't really thought of it," I say.

"That's a shame. In any case, we obtained the needed amount of signatures, so yours won't be necessary. Nonetheless, in appreciation of your input, we've decided to waive those fines we discussed earlier. Your money will be returned and your lawn offenses, well, the way we figure it, everyone's entitled to a little individuality now and then."

"So kind of you."

"I hope you come to appreciate the separator. I hope you'll find it makes a more cohesive community in the end—one big safe and happy family. Good day, Mr. Fincher. Be seeing you."

With a smile and an odd salute, Score drills up his automatic window and tears off the lot and down the curvy lane bordered by white picket fence, the same fence Mel and I dreamed of having one day. It was a factor, one of many, that convinced us that WellSprings was the place for us to live out our golden years.

But looking at the fence on this damp and windy day, I don't see the allure any more. I see something else.

On the hill are day laborers, their heads bowed to the falling rain, with pick axes and shovels going at the dirt.

Oblivious to me, they're bent in repetitive motion, standing near a battered red pickup truck beside an expressway that doesn't make a sound.