

NEIGHBORS: LOST AND FOUND

Outside it's snowing. Again. Though I have nowhere to go, I'm still restless that I'm stuck in the house. I hear a snow-blower outside, and I look out the kitchen window to see my neighbor clearing the snow on my sidewalk. I haven't asked him to do this. We've spoken maybe twice. But there he is, wearing what looks like a fur-trapper's hat, clearing not only my sidewalk, but also clearing the bottom of my driveway where the plow has effortlessly erected a blue-white mountain.

I try to thank him — he can't even hear me over the noise. He lowers the engine speed. "This is so generous of you." He shrugs. "We're neighbors," he says simply. I stand there wishing I could reciprocate his kindness, feeling hopelessly inadequate. In the end, I run back into the house and return with a bottle of wine. He doesn't want to accept it. I insist....

Later that afternoon, when the sun has reappeared, I walk downtown, ostensibly to mail some bills, but really just to get out in the world. I encounter Michael, the owner of the Boro Art Center: the antique store next to the firehouse. He has long white hair and wears a long black coat. He puts on a mask to talk to me; I do the same. He begins his narrative: "I've now been without heat for 24 days." He elaborately explains how the oil burner in his store (he lives above the store) has ceased working, and that, as a disabled veteran, he's entitled to the State subsidizing its repair. "But the problem is that you can't *talk* to the State, not a real human being, so I leave phone messages —"

"Michael, you have to have heat."

"It's 42 degrees in the store."

"You're going to get sick."

"I'm not particularly worried about myself. I'm worried about the pipes freezing."

After five minutes, I can endure Michael's Kafka-esque tale of New Jersey bureaucratic ineptitude no longer. "Look, Michael. Just call a plumber. I'll give you the name of my guy. Get the heat back on. I'll stake you for the money. You can get this thing fixed in 24 hours."

"I appreciate your offer. But the State is *obligated* to —"

I give up arguing with him. Later that evening I call to invite him to hang out in the sunroom at the back of my house — to warm up, use the Internet, watch CNN. He agrees. "I'll stay about an hour and a half," he says. "That's all I'll need." And he does exactly that. He walks to my house. It's the first time he's ever been inside. Sitting on Lynn's mother's flowered sofa, he drinks a mug of green tea. He methodically works on his laptop.

I busy myself in the house, and find myself surreptitiously checking on him with a certain pleasure. I remember Lynn once saying how exhilarating it is to help someone. Just a few weeks ago she found a wet iPod in a snow bank and insisted on bringing it home and drying it out on the radiator. I was sure it would never work again. But by the next morning, it not only worked, it displayed the name of the family across the street. Lynn was thrilled to be able to contact them and reunite their daughter, who owned the iPod, with her lost treasure. The girl painted us a thank-you note which now hangs on my refrigerator.

I decide that it doesn't matter *how* much it costs to fix Michael's furnace....

Two days later Eddie O's Plumbing calls Michael to inform him they've been contracted by the State to fix his oil burner. Michael, however, feels so much historical integrity concerning his store that he insists they *repair* not replace his ancient red-steel oil burner. Amazingly, they agree to try. They carry the dead motor out on a stretcher, take it to their hospital in Perth Amboy, and three days later return with it breathing normally.

Michael calls me that night. "The temperature in the store is 62 degrees," he says with a certain pride.

"Thank God."

"You know, I'm not sure God had anything to do with it."

I smile; he's right.

Neighbors.