

Right of Way

Reid's problem neighbor was an asshole named Frank.

What started it was Reid wanted to build a simple paddle tennis court on his property. But the setback distance wasn't quite enough, so a variance was required, which was routine as long as no neighbors within a quarter mile radius objected. This was in the Tiburon hills, above San Francisco Bay, plenty of space between houses. Everyone was fine with it except Frank.

Reid tried reasoning with the guy over the phone, but that didn't work. Frank was apparently one of those people who enjoyed telling you no. So on a Sunday afternoon Reid had them over, Frank and his wife Bridget, and he and Elena fed them tri-tip and fresh dungeness crab and cocktails, and Reid showed them where the court would be, throwing on a little video demonstration of paddle tennis to hopefully convince them it was harmless.

Frank said fine, but what about pickleball?

They were sitting by the pool with a couple of brandies. Elena and Bridget were inside, and through the glass you could see them looking at the artwork on the walls, which Elena liked to do with guests.

“Well, what about it?” Reid said. “That’s a dumb game.”

Frank wasn’t stupid unfortunately, and knew his racquet sports. “What I’m seeing through the smokescreen,” he said, “is you’re sticking in a pickleball court. You say 44 by 20, those are the same dimensions. Pickleball’s too loud.”

“No,” Reid said. “What we’re playing is technically called spec tennis . . . Different paddles, ball, scoring, everything. You saw the YouTube, it’s quiet.”

“I can’t approve a pickleball court in the neighborhood,” Frank said.

Frank had on a straw hat that pro golfers wear. It had a stitched white band with a custom logo. Reid wanted to grab the brim and angle Frank up out of the chair and toward the pool and then kick him in the ass into it.

But instead he said, “Okay then, my hole card . . . I’d like to invite you and Bridget--and your kids, whenever they’re around--to use the court any time. Even at night, since we’ll have lights.”

“My son’s in Wyoming, the daughter’s in Rhode Island,” Frank said. “But unlimited use? That’s really something.”

“It’d be my pleasure,” Reid lied. “So . . . are we good then? That alleviate your concerns?”

“Lemme sleep on it overnight,” Frank said. “And thanks for the food and drink. Everything was quality.”

When they were gone Elena said, “How did it go? You clinched it, the business with your court?”

Reid said, “Not necessarily, but he liked your cooking. And my choice in booze. What’d that thing run us, would you say?”

“Why, you didn’t enjoy yourself?” she said. “I actually found Bridget quite charming. We’re going to get together, the Zorn retrospective at the De Young, which neither of us has seen yet. He’s Swedish, one of those under-the-radar masters.”

“Well whoopee,” Reid said.

“How about this then,” Elena said. “You’re a jerk . . . And just put in a bocce court, why don’t you. No one will object to that, and it’s more fun anyway.”

When their third and final child, Sammy, went off to college, Reid decided he really didn’t like Elena. No reason to change that opinion now.

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He didn’t hear back from Frank the next day like he’d hoped, so he gave it until Tuesday afternoon and called him.

“Sorry there pal,” Frank said. “It’s not gonna fly.”

“Oh boy,” Reid said. “Bad news, to say the least . . . Is there . . . anything else, at all, I can do?”

“You tell me,” Frank said.

Reid had a safe deposit box at the Bank of Marin in town. He’d stuck a hundred grand in there when he set it up, as a rainy day fund. Things weren’t going as well lately, and it was currently at forty.

Reid let Frank’s ‘You tell me’ linger for about five minutes and then went to the bank, and then straight to the prick’s house.

Bridget opened the door. “How nice to see you again, Reid,” she said.

“Same here. I guess I missed Frank then. I thought he worked at home.”

“He went for a run,” Bridget said, “but he’ll be back within the hour. Won’t you please come in?”

Reid hadn’t focused much on Bridget until now. She was petite, and kind of perky. He thought about a movie he saw once, or maybe it was a TV show or book, but the gist of it was the main guy gets back at the other guy by making it with his wife.

Reid said fine but just for a second. Jazz music was playing, which he wasn’t sure why but kind of surprised him, and a motley looking dog came up on the couch and licked his hands. “Your decor’s all over the place,” he said.

Bridget laughed. “Which is how I like it.”

“I guess Frank does too,” Reid said. “He’s an interesting guy.”

Bridget excused herself, and a blender fired up in the kitchen and she brought out margaritas on a tray with a silver bowl of nuts.

“Do you think so?” she said. “That my husband’s an interesting guy? . . . I’m just playing, of course.”

Reid said, “Maybe you’re not. Anyhow, where’s he jog?”

“You know, the trail, the bike path. I join him occasionally and walk. I like where it opens up and you can see the sailboats.”

“Unh. And when you’re not joining him, you ever . . . stray . . . with other people? Or what.”

Bridget shifted around in her chair, but kept her cool, which Reid liked. She said, “My, we’re angry today . . . Otherwise I’d say I beg your pardon.”

“I *am* in a bad mood,” Reid said. “Separately, it’s a fair enough question.”

“My sense is, this pertains to your project, does it not?”

“Yeah. I’m planning to do almost all the work myself . . . It’s what I’d rather be doing, period. Pushing people’s money around, you want to know the truth, it’s the pits.”

“Frank can be difficult,” Bridget said. “He treats me well though.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Reid said, drinking up. “I’ve got a gift for him, which I’ll leave with you. This doesn’t work, I guess I’ll just have to kill him.”

He handed her the old briefcase he came in with, told her he didn’t need it back, and got out of there.

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Frank signed off on the project and Reid built the court. There was a party that spring to celebrate the opening of the thing, along with a little neighborhood spec tennis tournament, and Frank and Bridget were invited but didn’t come.

Everything was fine until July, when Reid came home one day and Elena told him a building inspector had stopped by and he’d left a card. Reid called the guy the next morning, he actually knew the inspector as a parent when their kids had played travel soccer together, but that didn’t matter. Frank had made a new complaint about the court, that the angle of the lights extended too far off the property, and that pickleball was indeed being played on it.

“This mope,” Reid said, “can’t even see my house from his. He’s up the hill, where it turns.”

“I hear you,” the inspector, Conrad, said. “When they file ‘em we have to address ‘em though. It’s the nature of the beast.”

“Okay fine. The lights are exactly how I submitted them. You can check the permit paperwork. On the other thing, we play spec, not pickleball, different animal . . . So that should wrap it up, no?”

“What can I say, you may have to go with dimmer bulbs,” Conrad said. “And I’ll be honest, I passed by your house on a Sunday, nothing to do with work, just coming back from dropping off the wife, and you could definitely hear the thumps.”

Reid wondered, would he have to make a return trip to the safe deposit box, and fork over another ten grand to *this* douchebag now as well?

“More like little pops,” Reid said. “Less noisy than even regular tennis, for sure.”

“Could be,” Conrad said, “but right now you have a code violation. We require that you refrain from using your facility or turning on the lights until it is resolved.”

Reid said, “Is that right.”

“Come again?”

“I said, you sorry piece of shit,” Reid said, and Conrad hung up.

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“It’s more difficult than one would think,” Bridget said. “I keep squibbing it off the end of the paddle.”

“You’re doing good,” Reid said. “Just remember, the sweet spot is closer to your body than you’re probably used to.”

They were on the court, middle of the day, and Reid was giving her a lesson. It was hot out, and he had his shirt off. Elena was in New Orleans with a girlfriend, and Frank was playing golf with a client.

They took a water break. Reid had built the courtside bench, out of old reclaimed cypress, and Brigit ran her hand over it.

“Beautiful work,” she said, “it must weigh a ton.”

“Well I like to over- rather under-build stuff,” he said. “But here’s the deal . . . how do I get him to mind his own business?”

“You’re asking me?” Bridget said. “What, is that what this lesson’s all about? The notion that I can soften him up?”

“Yeah, sell him on it, that was my thought,” Reid said. “Without necessarily having to mention this little practice session . . . Stupid idea, now that it’s unfolding.”

“I actually thought you had something else in mind, luring me over here,” she said.

“Oh. You’d be into that?”

“I don’t know . . . Just curious, you can take time off whenever you want? I thought you had an office in the city.”

“I called in sick today.”

Bridget said, “Wow, this court then, it means a lot, clearly . . . So much stress though . . . Can’t you just cool the jets for a while, and play over at the high school or something?”

Reid said, “Now that’s an idea . . . Too bad you don’t have the backbone to tell your husband to shove those same jets up his entitled gold-plated rear end.”

“Here’s your paddle back,” Bridget said. “It’s been real.”

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Reid lived his whole life in the Bay Area but had never been to downtown Brisbane, which is where

Denny said to meet him, at Strang's Bar. He and Denny knew each other since junior high school. Denny became a San Francisco fireman, didn't last long before going out on one of those bullshit disabilities that they pull, and eventually hung up a shingle as a PI. Business was supposedly good.

"I don't just want to kill the guy," Reid was saying, keeping it down, "I want to do it right, where he knows what's happening . . . Not like in the movies where someone shoots a guy in the back of the head, with no build-up."

"All right take it easy," Denny said. "This is your emotions talking, which I get. But some stupid tennis court? It ain't even close to being worth it."

"Either I have to move to Florida, start fresh, or this guy can't be walking around anymore. How it is right now, I can't get past it."

"Why Florida?"

"I don't know, I like it there, the idea."

"Y'ever been?"

"Not physically . . . but the beaches, the pace, they agree with me. You don't need a sweater."

“Florida’s way over-rated,” Denny said. “Me and a colleague, we spent three weeks there working a missing person’s. Gal from up near you in fact, Larkspur.”

“Jeez. Did you find her?”

“Oh yeah, mid-life crisis type deal, no big thing . . . Like I was saying though, I saw more Florida than I needed to.”

“Okay anyhow . . .” Reid said. “What about my thing?”

“I can have someone speak to him, is one way,” Denny said. “Could backfire on you though, this piece of scum sounding like one of those educated guys who knows his rights.”

“So what’s another way?”

“Off the record? . . . Some type accident is probably your best bet . . . Though those aren’t nearly as clean as they used to be.”

“What’s *that* mean?”

“The forensics they got now, the security cameras all over the place? Not to mention cell phones and shit? . . . You gotta be a lot more careful with accidents these days, is what I’m telling you.”

Denny ordered another beer and made a playful comment to the female bartender about her outfit, and she smiled and went along with it. Reid said he was good.

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Of the two bikes hanging in the garage the mountain bike was a no-brainer over the road bike, but Reid hated to use it since it had been expensive and it still did a nice job getting him up and down Mount Tam when he wanted a good workout.

Last time he was in L.A. it seemed half the beach boardwalk was riding these peculiar-looking, extra-fat-tire cruisers that looked like they weighed about 200 pounds, and he roamed around online. Target had two models. He liked the simple no-gear one better but decided the 7-speed version would be more effective, since you could get it going fast quicker. He drove to the San Rafael store and picked one up and it just barely fit in the back of the Suburban with the seats down.

Now the thing to do was establish Frank's running schedule. Or . . . why not check the trail on the way home? It was twenty to five, same time frame as when

he'd dropped off the ten grand and the motherfucker was out jogging, so you never know.

There were a dozen cars in the trailhead parking lot, three of them Range Rovers and Reid was pretty sure the navy blue one was Frank's. He took the bike out, adjusted the seat, and circled around the parking lot on it for a while, thinking about what to do.

Soon enough, Frank showed up, walking. He saw Reid and said, "Hey there pal."

Reid didn't say anything.

"My cool down," Frank said. "The last two hundred yards. At our age you have to pay attention to these things . . . What's that, a regular bicycle? It looks like half a motorcycle."

"I'm going to run you over with it," Reid said, "and see what happens. Since killing you is not a realistic option."

"That's funny," Frank said. "Hey listen, on your thing, I'm gonna let it go."

"You are?"

"Yeah. I called the town guy, told him we worked it out."

“Gee . . . So they’re clearing the violation?”

“He said so, yeah . . . What opened my eyes was my wife, you hitting some balls with her, she said it was fun . . . How’d that happen, anyhow?”

“Why don’t you ask *her*.”

“She can be a piece of work, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, well, so can Elena.”

“I can see that,” Frank said. “Listen, I’ll catch you later.”

Reid thought it would be prudent to get himself a good-quality helmet for a little added insurance, in case he ended up running over Frank anyway.