

# He plays the banjo.

I don't know anyone who plays the banjo anymore. Not since that awful movie — you know the one. Whenever we're out back, he comes up to us picking something old and weird like "Camptown Races." Never wears a shirt when he does this. And that voice of his — like nails on a blackboard. That's what you can expect if you buy the house next door.

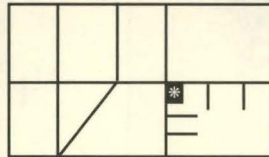
## SurDel

Michael Turner

## There's nothing right

about not having your own well. The idea of the city providing me with water makes me wanna puke. Whatever happened to digging your own? I fear I will

go insane if I have to live like this any longer. Water from a tap! Makes me wanna break something. Ha-ha-ha-ha!



We don't like him, but we thought it best not to say anything. Best just to ignore him. Last year we had the fence extended. Thought that might solve the problem of his incursions onto our property. Thing burned down while we were away. We asked him about it, and he told us lightning. Claimed he was at a friend's when it happened.



I make my living renting stuff out to the movies. DePalma's people said they'd pay me two grand a week for the spaceship I keep in my shed. Made enough on that one rental to live comfortably for the next twenty years. Didn't even make the final cut. Not that I care.



The day after we moved in he came over to introduce himself. He smelled so bad I thought I was going to vomit. Brought us a basket of root vegetables, which he claimed to have grown in his yard.

**Yams, potatoes, beets.**

We thanked him, of course. The next day I peeked over the fence. Nothing growing there but weeds, old cars, and a huge puddle of oil. The vegetables went right into the garbage. Organic my ass.

My family has been in the Lower Mainland longer than anyone except the Indians. You know that famous picture of the Vancouver fire, the one with the aldermen standing in front of a tent? That's my great-great-grandfather on the far left. He was among the first settlers. A very upright guy. But because he didn't have a drinking problem, they couldn't name anything after him.



You know, you work and you work and you work, and at the end of it you think you might find yourself a nice little place to settle down, but no—there's always some creep living next door, playing heavy metal music, laughing like a ninny every chance he gets. And there's absolutely nothing you can do about it!



I'm somewhere in my thirties.

There was a flood when I was young that soaked up all our records and my family as well. Tried looking into it once, but the government had no records of my life either. Seems strange that just because somebody's born at home they don't exist anywhere else but there. That's why I ain't moving. I don't care how much I get.



Police caught him spying in our window. I thought that was it, thought we were rid of him once and for all. They frisked him, and what should they find but my wallet! But get this: He tells them he found it in the street—and that he was only trying to return it! There was no money of course. And the cops believed him! We raised hell, but they wouldn't have it. Said we were lucky to have such an honest neighbor. Said we were lucky to get the wallet back at all.

I have two good friends who come over once or twice a week.

I'm not gonna tell you their names on account of they're private types; but one's an artist who used to take pictures, and the other works at the Co-op. Usually we just sit on the back stoop and shoot pellet guns. Once a pellet hit a trailer-hitch and the damn thing ricocheted back and took out the eye of the artist. Couldn't work after that. Squished it like a grape. I see more of him than the Co-op guy.



When we decided to renovate he caught wind of it and wanted to help. Showed up at seven the next morning with a utility belt full of the rustiest tools I've ever seen. Some of them looked like they were fashioned out of old tin cans. Guy went through the whole belt, telling us what each of them were for. Idiot. Showed up everyday after that, eager to work. Contractor had to pay him to stay away. When the bill comes, it's itemized. He's got the guy's salary under Miscellaneous. Three hundred bucks! Told him we weren't gonna pay it, and he threatens to sue.



**My training's in carpentry, but what I'm best at is social work.** I've got really good people skills. Unfortunately, what you need for that kind of work is a piece of paper, and I don't have one. So I got my artist friend to make one up for me. A Masters degree from the University of British Columbia. Looks pretty good. Looks even better photocopied. That way you don't see the white-out. Have it hanging by my front door. Any time somebody knocks, asks if I got a moment, I just point to it and smile.



## Didn't see him for a couple of months.

Thought something might have happened. So I went over and looked in his window. There he was: lying on the floor, totally out of it. He had one of his tools in his hand, and in the other what looked like an extension cord. I ran back and called 911. The ambulance shows up and I rush out and tell them I think he's electrocuted himself. They tell me to get back inside. A minute later he comes out with the attendants. Everyone's laughing. I ask if he's okay and they just look at me disgusted, like I'm nuts or something. Then the driver points at me and says if I ever pull another stunt like that they're gonna have me institutionalized.

**I like my life.** Sometimes I wish I had someone to share it with. Gets lonely in the winter, what with the days so short. Thought about getting on The Net, meet some people in those chat groups they have, but I know I'd just end up playing Battleship all day, and that's not very healthy. Every time I get lonely I just go for a walk. Better to meet somebody in the flesh than get cancer staring at a computer screen.



We can't have kids of our own, and that's a source of tension for us. So we volunteer at a couple of youth groups. I got involved with Little League because they were short of coaches and I used to play semi-pro when I was younger. Anyway, who should our first game be against but *his team*. We had no idea. But there he was, wearing an adult version of the kids' uniform, smoking and yelling at our guys, telling them they're all a bunch of assholes. I mean, they're just kids, right? But get this: In the fifth inning, with his side down a run, our best hitter comes to bat and he makes a pitching change. Only he's the replacement! He's a grown man and he's about to pitch against a twelve year old boy! He starts warming up and I run out to stop him. So what does he do? Throws the ball right at my head. And who gets

dragged off the field but me! Apparently I'd said something to provoke him, but of course I didn't. Claims he was only doing his job, doing what he called a transitional warm-up, because the next kid

pitching throws harder than most adults. Everybody but me seemed to know that.

I've never heard anything so ridiculous in my life.



My house is the oldest house in the neighbourhood. It was built in 1913, and everything else came later. The house was built by my great-grandfather; he had a dairy farm, the biggest in the valley. All this used to be his. Sometimes I climb on the roof, smoke a bomber, and squint until everything disappears. Then I let the cows out. And every cow I give a name. There's Belle and Tawney, Mr. Moo and Naveed. Some of them are Jersey cows, some of them are Holsteins. Every now and then, if I'm really into it, I have my imaginary border collie Misty run around between them. It's a great way to pass time, providing it isn't too cold or wet.

There was this girl who used to visit him. We recognized her from the Co-op. She used to sit at a card table and sell raffle tickets for one of the churches. I



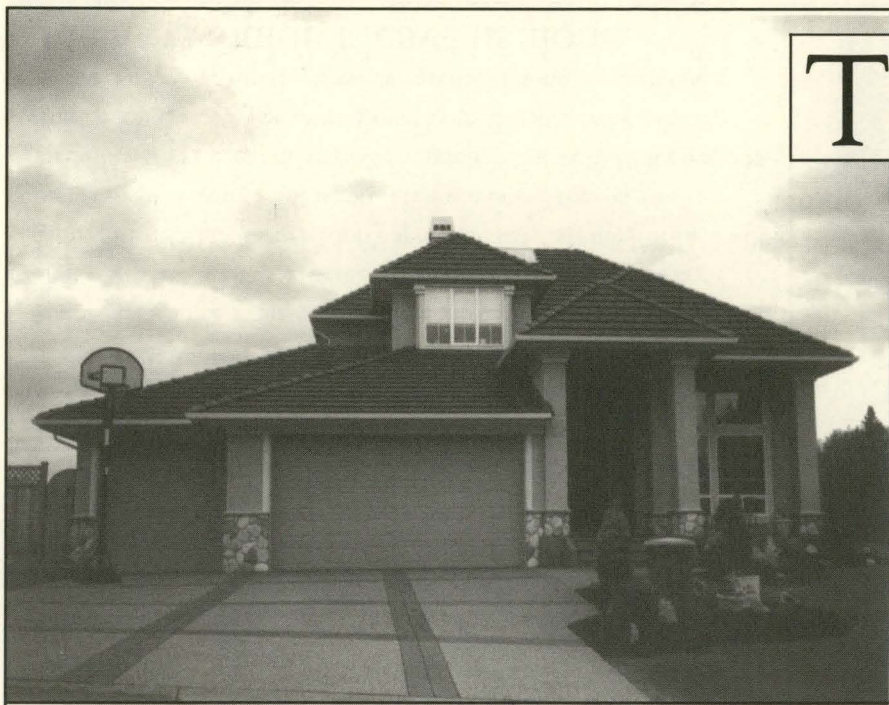
think she was developmentally delayed, although I'd hate to be wrong about that. The first time I saw her I noticed her name-tag said Charlotte. But then the next time I saw her, her name-tag said Justine. It was the second time I saw her that she asked if I'd buy a ticket. I told her I didn't feel comfortable buying something from someone named Charlotte one day and Justine the next. Because it's true—I don't. When I get home there's a note nailed to my door. It's from him. The note reads: If you don't apologize to Charlotte Justine, I will never speak to you people again. That was one of the toughest decisions we've ever had to make in our life. But we did it for her, not him. After that, he was coming over every day for a week, offering to cut our lawn, paint the house, clean the chimney—you name it.

**He just wouldn't leave us alone.**

My mother always told me the world is full of three kinds of people: the good, the bad, and the lonely.

**Most bad people are lonely, so the trick is to make them not lonely.** And once you make somebody not lonely, you make them good people. I think that's how it goes.





# There was an incident a few months back.

We were going to Hawaii for Easter and my sister was coming to town for a course. Naturally we offered her the house. A week before we were scheduled to return we get this phone message. It's from my sister. The message said there was a For Sale sign on the

house next door—*his house!* We were ecstatic, danced a little jig. When we got back, there were all these trade vans parked out front. I went over to ask who the new owners were—and who should answer the door but him! He told me he thought about moving, but that my sister convinced him to renovate instead. I phone her up, and she says she has no idea what the hell I'm talking about.