

SOME BATTLES ARE PERSONAL.
OTHERS COME WITH **BYLAWS**.

A black, arched sign with gold lettering and a gold fleur-de-lis at the top. The sign is mounted on two white wooden posts with white spherical finials. The sign is set in a garden with pink flowers on the left and tall grass on the right. In the background, there are white houses with dark shutters under a cloudy sky.

OAKRIDGE
ESTATES

HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION
EST. 1987

EVERYONETM
PAYS THEIR
DUES

A single white feather with a brown quill, lying on the dark ground to the right of the word 'DUES'.

JUSTIN CARDENAS

Tales from:



Everyone Pays Their Dues

The HOA meeting smelled like desperation and weak coffee.

Folding chairs lined the room.

A sad little table with stale cookies sat in the back.

The air buzzed with passive aggression.

Nancy stood at the front of the room clutching a clipboard like it was a weapon.

Everything about her screamed order.

Everything about the man walking through the door screamed trouble.

Mr. Grayson entered at a leisurely pace.

Jeans covered in sawdust.

Boots caked in dried mud.

Flannel halfway unbuttoned because he clearly did not care what anyone thought.

Every HOA member turned toward him like he had just walked into their sacred temple of pettiness.

Mr. Grayson took a seat in the front row.

Leaned back.

Propped his boots onto the chair beside him.

Nancy took a slow breath.

"Mr. Grayson."

Mr. Grayson smiled.

"Nancy."

"We need to discuss your latest violation."

"I've been waiting all week for this. Please. Ruin my day."

A few people snorted.

Nancy ignored them.

She slid a notice across the table.

"You need to take down your flag immediately."

Grayson blinked.

"My flag?"

"Yes."

"It's offensive, disruptive, and does not meet HOA standards."

Grayson looked genuinely confused.

"Nancy. Are you telling me to take down the American flag?"

A silence settled over the room.

Nancy immediately regretted how that sounded.

"It's not about the flag itself."

"Uh huh."

"It's about how you're displaying it."

Grayson leaned forward.

"How am I displaying it?"

"You have floodlights illuminating it at night."

Grayson stared at her.

Nancy held her ground.

"The lights are disruptive to the neighborhood aesthetic."

The corner of Grayson's mouth twitched.

Slowly.

Dangerously.

"Let me make sure I understand this."

Nancy said nothing.

"You are officially informing me that illuminating the American flag at night is a violation."

"The board has voted."

Nancy straightened her posture.

"You will remove it by the end of the week or face fines."

The grin vanished.

Not completely.

Just enough.

Grayson tapped the table once.

Twice.

Three times.

"Nancy."

"Yes?"

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

Nancy frowned.

"What?"

"Are you sure?"

His voice remained calm.

Almost gentle.

"Because once this box gets opened with me, it ain't ever closing again."

Nancy folded her arms.

"Is that supposed to be a threat?"

"No."

Grayson smiled.

"It's a warning."

The room fell silent.

Nancy's jaw tightened.

"I'm sure."

Grayson studied her for a moment.

Then nodded.

"Alright."

He leaned back in his chair.

Crossed his arms.

And smiled.

"Let's play."

Nancy looked down at her clipboard.

"Good. Next issue."

She flipped a page.

"Your truck is parked in the driveway."

Mr. Grayson frowned.

"That's what driveways are for."

"We have rules against overnight parking."

"Damn."

Nancy almost smiled.

"Guess I better move it."

A wave of relief swept across the room.

Grayson nodded thoughtfully.

"Think I'll park it in the front yard."

Nancy's eye twitched.

The woman beside her slammed a clipboard onto the table.

"Your Christmas lights are still up."

"It's called planning ahead."

"It's July."

"They're festive."

"They blink at all hours."

"They keep the riffraff away."

"They spell HOA SUCKS in red and green."

Grayson sat back.

"And the people love it."

A few board members suddenly found the floor fascinating.

Nancy slammed her gavel.

"This is not a joke, Mr. Grayson."

"That's where we disagree."

The room erupted with muffled coughs and suppressed laughter.

Nancy took another breath.

Then another.

Then another.

She turned to the final page.

"As of this moment, your accumulated violations total five hundred dollars."

Grayson nodded.

"Only five hundred?"

Nancy blinked.

"Only?"

He reached into his pocket.

Pulled out a stack of Applebee's gift cards.

And slapped them onto the table.

The room gasped.

Nancy stared.

Grayson pushed the stack toward her.

"This should cover it."

"Mr. Grayson."

"Yes?"

"We do not accept Applebee's gift cards."

"Your loss."

Nancy pushed them back.

Grayson pushed them forward.

Nancy pushed them back again.

Grayson pushed them forward again.

The room watched in silence.

Like diplomats negotiating a peace treaty.

Finally Nancy planted both hands on the table.

"No."

Silence.

Then a voice spoke from the back.

"I'll take the gift cards."

Every head turned.

Jerry.

The HOA treasurer.

Slowly raising his hand.

Nancy looked horrified.

"Jerry."

He shrugged.

"Seven hundred dollars is seven hundred dollars."

"Jerry."

"That's a lot of mozzarella sticks, Nancy."

Grayson grinned like a wolf.

And just like that—

he won.

Nancy closed her eyes.

Counted to three.

Then opened them again.

"Let's discuss the fence."

Grayson nodded.

"Let's."

"Mr. Grayson. Your fence is made of rusty barbed wire."

"Ain't illegal."

"The sign on it says Trespassers Will Be Eaten."

"And?"

Nancy stared at him.

"Your fence is an abomination."

Grayson leaned forward.

"And yet."

His smile widened.

"It still stands."

The room fell quiet.

For the first time all evening, Nancy looked at him differently.

Not as a nuisance.

Not as an idiot.

Not as a stubborn old man.

As an opponent.

Every violation was intentional.

Every argument was deliberate.

Every ridiculous stunt was calculated.

Mr. Grayson wasn't trying to live in Oakridge Estates.

He was fighting it.

And somehow—

he was winning.

Nancy looked down at her stack of violations.

Then back at the smiling man across the table.

The hearing had lasted forty-three minutes.

Nothing had been accomplished.

Not one thing.

Mr. Grayson smiled wider.

Nancy hated that smile.

The next day, Nancy's backyard was no longer a backyard. **It was a battlefield.**

The first sanctuary loomed over her roses. The second stood tall beside her koi pond. And now, standing right in the middle of her lawn, **clipboard in hand, eyes full of government-backed authority— a wildlife preservation officer.**

Nancy's fingers twitched. **This was her yard.**

Her sanctuary.

Her kingdom.

She took a sharp breath, voice tight as a tripwire. "Sir. I need you to leave."

The officer didn't look up. He jotted something down, nodded to himself, muttered, "Great bat density," and flipped a page.

Nancy's eye twitched.

Grayson leaned against the fence **like a man who already won.** One boot perched up on the lowest rung, coffee mug in hand, face smug as sin. "Nancy relax. He's with the state. He's making sure the second one gets approved."

Nancy's hands curled into fists. "The second what?"

The officer adjusted his glasses. "The second expansion."

Nancy's stomach dropped. "Expansion."

Grayson sipped his coffee slow, savoring every second of her unraveling. "Yeah. Turns out the **state** thinks your backyard is the perfect site for a long-term conservation effort."

Nancy took a step forward, words sharp as broken glass. “**This. Is. My. Yard.**”

The officer nodded. “And it’s doing wonderful things for the ecosystem.”

Nancy’s entire body locked up. “What part of ‘private property’ do you people not understand.”

The officer flipped another page. “Actually ma’am this property has **ideal conditions** for further roosting. Great shade. Nearby water sources. Plenty of food. And thanks to Mr. Grayson’s efforts the first sanctuaries have already shown signs of population growth. That’s a **huge win** for conservation.”

Nancy pointed a trembling finger. “You mean infestation.”

The officer blinked. “Well that’s a strong word.”

Nancy spun to Grayson. “**You did this.**”

Grayson tilted his head like a man admiring a job well done. “Nancy you’re fighting progress.”

Nancy’s breath hitched. “I’m fighting **you.**”

The officer crouched near her koi pond. “And see here? This water source is **perfect** for drawing in more insects which increases the food supply. With some minor habitat adjustments we could—”

Nancy’s entire body **locked up**. “If you say ‘expand’ one more time I will commit a crime.”

The officer straightened fast. “Duly noted.”

Grayson exhaled like this was exhausting for **him**. “Nancy. Be reasonable.”

Nancy's voice pitched. "**I AM REASONABLE.**"

Grayson gestured at the sanctuaries like he was showing off **a new deck he built**. "This is **good for the bats**. It's **good for nature**. It's **good for the community**."

Nancy's nails dug into her palm. "You're a menace."

Grayson smiled. "And you're a conservation hero."

The officer scribbled something down. "She's right. By allowing this space to be repurposed she's playing a key role in local wildlife preservation. It's truly inspiring."

Nancy's knees buckled.

Grayson slapped her shoulder. "See Nancy? You're making history."

Nancy stared at the officer. At the bats. At Grayson.

She let out a slow, strangled noise.

Grayson clapped his hands. "Alright then. We'll check back in next week for the **next phase**."

Nancy's entire body snapped upright. "The next **what**."

The officer smiled. "Oh right. The **state grant**."

Nancy collapsed into the patio chair.

Nancy's hands trembled as she clutched the stack of HOA violation notices. Her breath came out in short, frantic gasps. "Mr. Grayson... please. We can talk about this. I'm sure we can reach a reasonable solution."

Mr. Grayson took a slow sip from his mug, eyes twinkling over the rim. "Oh Nancy, I agree. A reasonable solution is long overdue."

Hope flickered in her eyes. "Yes! Yes, that's exactly what I—"

"That's why I built a second bat sanctuary."

The blood drained from her face.

Mr. Grayson smiled, the picture of warmth and civility. "I noticed an underutilized patch of land right beside your flower beds. You know how I feel about wasted space." Nancy clutched the violation notices so tight they crumpled in her hands. Her breath hitched. "There are—there are **three** sanctuaries in my yard."

Mr. Grayson set his mug down with a satisfied sigh. "Yes, it's wonderful, isn't it? The bats are thriving. I even spotted a few endangered ones roosting in the new sanctuary just this morning. Truly heartwarming."

Nancy's hands crumpled the stack of papers. "Mr. Grayson, be reasonable. My garden is being destroyed. My backyard is unusable. I—I can't even sit on my porch without being dive-bombed!"

Grayson nodded solemnly. "I know, Nancy. I know. It's been so hard on them."

Nancy blinked. "What?"

He gestured toward the sanctuary. “The bats. Having to adjust to new surroundings. Poor little guys. It’s a real shame they had to move in the first place.” He shook his head. “So much stress on such delicate creatures.”

“Get them out of here right now Grayson or I will fine you to hell and back!”

Mr. Grayson tilted his head, genuine sympathy laced in his voice. “Nancy, I do hear you. I truly do. Which is why I took matters into my own hands.”

She hesitated. “...What did you do?”

“I called in a wildlife expert. We can’t have these creatures endangered any further.” He gestured toward the sanctuaries with a proud gleam in his eyes. “They suggested expanding.”

Nancy staggered back. “Expanding?!”

Mr. Grayson clapped his hands together. “I know, right? I thought the same thing. But when an expert tells you that a third sanctuary would really help stabilize the local bat population, who am I to argue?”

Nancy let out a strangled noise.

“Oh don’t worry, I already started construction. Should be done by tomorrow morning. I may have used your HOA dues to fund it, but I know you’ll understand. It’s for the good of nature.”

Nancy’s soul left her body.

Somewhere high above black wings flickered.

The sun crept lazily over the rooftops, painting the sky in soft shades of orange and pink.

It should have been peaceful.

It should have been.

A low quack drifted through the morning air.

Then another.

Then another.

Nancy shot upright in bed.

"No."

She threw off her blanket and marched toward the window.

The moment she looked outside, ducks.

Ducks everywhere.

At least a dozen of them wandered through her backyard like they owned the place.

One stood proudly in her flower bed.

Another floated in her koi pond.

A third was relieving itself on her stone pathway.

Not just any stone pathway.

The good stone pathway.

Nancy stared in horror.

Then she saw the hole.

A perfectly round duck-sized opening cut into the bottom of the shared fence.

Too clean.

Too deliberate.

Too Grayson.

Nancy's eye twitched.

"Grayson."

The name escaped her lips like a curse.

As if summoned from the depths of hell itself, he appeared on the other side of the fence.

Coffee mug in hand.

Flannel shirt.

Work boots.

That infuriating smile.

The mug read:

WORLD'S BEST NEIGHBOR

Nancy was fairly certain it was evidence in a future criminal case.

"Morning, Nancy."

She pointed at the hole.

"There's a hole in my fence."

Grayson glanced down.

"Oh no."

His voice contained exactly zero concern.

"Looks like my decorative ventilation feature is working."

Nancy blinked.

"Your what?"

"Decorative ventilation feature."

Another duck waddled through the opening and immediately headed for her flower bed.

Grayson watched it proudly.

Nancy's jaw tightened.

"You did this."

"I did what?"

"You brought these ducks here."

Grayson looked genuinely offended.

"Nancy, are you accusing me of controlling wildlife?"

"Yes."

"That's incredibly flattering."

One of the ducks hopped into her koi pond.

Nancy made a noise usually reserved for medical emergencies.

"You trained them."

"Train ducks?" Grayson laughed. "Nancy, I can barely train my lawnmower."

The ducks continued their occupation.

Mud covered the patio.

Feathers floated across the water.

One particularly bold mallard climbed onto a lawn chair and stared directly at her.

Judging.

Nancy pointed at it.

"Get them out."

"No."

"What do you mean no?"

Grayson took a slow sip of coffee.

"They seem happy."

"They are destroying my yard."

"They're enjoying your yard."

"Grayson."

"Nancy."

"Get rid of the ducks."

Grayson's smile widened.

"MBTA."

Nancy stared.

"What?"

"MBTA."

He leaned casually against the fence.

"Four of the most beautiful letters in the English language."

"What does that even mean?"

"Migratory Bird Treaty Act."

Nancy frowned.

Grayson smiled wider.

"You can't touch them."

Silence.

Nancy blinked.

"What?"

"You can't harass them."

Grayson took another sip.

"You can't capture them."

Another sip.

"You can't relocate them."

Another.

"You definitely can't hurt them."

Nancy slowly turned toward the ducks.

The ducks stared back.

One quacked.

Grayson pointed at it.

"See? Protected."

Nancy looked like she was about to have an aneurysm.

Then she grabbed a broom.

Grayson immediately straightened.

"Careful now."

Nancy froze.

"Careful of what?"

Grayson pointed across the street.

A government vehicle sat parked near the curb.

Nancy's stomach dropped.

A wildlife officer sat inside.

Watching.

The officer waved.

Nancy lowered the broom.

The duck quacked.

Grayson smiled.

"Beautiful morning, isn't it?"

Nancy woke to a sound she had never heard before.

A deep, guttural honk.

Another followed.

Then three more.

Her eyes snapped open.

For a moment she lay perfectly still, staring at the ceiling.

The ducks had never sounded like that.

A cold feeling settled into her stomach.

"No."

Another honk echoed through the neighborhood.

Louder this time.

Closer.

Nancy threw aside her blankets and rushed to the window.

The blood drained from her face.

Geese.

At least ten of them.

Maybe more.

Large.

Territorial.

Mean-looking.

They strutted across her lawn with the confidence of an occupying army.

One stood in the middle of her flower bed.

Another sat beside her koi pond.

A third was already pecking at her mailbox.

Then one of them looked up.

Their eyes met.

Nancy froze.

The goose didn't blink.

It simply stared.

Judging her.

Planning.

Waiting.

"No."

The goose hissed.

Nancy stumbled backward.

"Oh, absolutely not."

She stormed outside.

The geese immediately noticed her.

Several turned.

One spread its wings.

Another lowered its head.

The largest of the group took a deliberate step forward.

Nancy stopped walking.

The goose stopped walking.

The two stared at each other.

Then she heard the familiar sound of coffee being sipped.

Slowly.

Mockingly.

Nancy closed her eyes.

"Grayson."

He was already standing on his porch.

Coffee mug in hand.

Watching the chaos unfold.

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Morning, Nancy."

Nancy pointed toward the geese.

"What did you do?"

Grayson glanced at them.

"Huh."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"Those are geese."

"I KNOW THEY'RE GEESE."

Another honk rattled the neighborhood.

Grayson winced.

"Loud little fellas."

Nancy looked moments away from committing a felony.

"You brought them here."

"That's a serious accusation."

"GRAYSON."

He took another sip.

"Nancy."

One of the geese suddenly charged.

Nancy yelped and stumbled backward as it rushed several feet before stopping.

The goose hissed.

Nancy hissed back.

The goose seemed unimpressed.

Grayson watched the exchange carefully.

"I'd be real careful around that one."

Nancy pointed at the bird.

"Why?"

"They don't forget."

The goose continued staring.

Nancy didn't like that answer.

"What do you mean they don't forget?"

Grayson leaned against the porch railing.

"You ever get on a goose's bad side?"

"No."

"Well."

He gestured toward the bird.

"You probably just did."

The goose took another step forward.

Nancy took one back.

Grayson nodded.

"Smart."

"You're enjoying this."

"A little."

Nancy glared at him.

"This is psychotic."

"No, Nancy."

Grayson looked out over the flock with something resembling pride.

"This is nature."

A long silence followed.

The geese slowly spread throughout the yard.

One claimed the flower bed.

One claimed the driveway.

One appeared to be guarding the mailbox.

Another simply stood in the middle of the lawn looking angry at existence itself.

Nancy watched in horror.

Grayson watched with appreciation.

Finally he lifted his mug.

"Besides."

Nancy already hated whatever came next.

"Geese are basically ducks with unresolved anger issues."

A powerful honk echoed across the neighborhood.

Grayson nodded.

"See?"

Nancy covered her face.

"Please tell me they're leaving."

Grayson smiled.

"Oh."

His voice somehow managed to become even more cheerful.

"I wouldn't count on that."

Nancy slowly lowered her hands.

The smile on Grayson's face widened.

Then he delivered the killing blow.

"MBTA, Nancy."

Nancy's soul left her body.

"No."

"You still can't touch them."

The lead goose let out a single triumphant honk.

Somehow it sounded smug.

Nancy stared at the flock.

The flock stared back.

For the first time in her life, she genuinely considered selling the house.