



## Neighbor Nellie

15.02.2019, Episode 11

### A Thousand Words

Hi. Welcome to the podcast, "A Thousand Words", for February 15th, 2019.

On my last podcast, I told a story about some voices I heard in the water while taking a bath. That reminded me of a very special neighbour I had back in San Francisco.

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In my life, I've had about 160 next-door neighbors. I actually took the time to calculate it. That includes every person whose walls or floors or ceilings [1] touched my walls or floors or ceilings. With so much experience living close to that many people, I think it's made me a good neighbor. I imagine lots of people think they're good neighbors. Here's why I'm a good neighbor.

I'm friendly. I say hello when I pass my neighbors. I don't vacuum my floors [2] during lunch or on Sundays. I don't use my blender [3] before seven in the morning. My music isn't loud. I don't have wind chimes [4] on my balcony. I make just enough noise myself that my neighbors feel they can make noise too. I'm flexible with laundry. I invite people for dinner more than parties. I close my windows when I have sex.

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One of my neighbors, probably around the 120th – was a woman named Nellie. I was in San Francisco then, living with my girlfriend in the middle of a three-floor apartment building. The top floor was unoccupied [5] for a while until Nellie moved in.

I didn't meet Nellie right away. I met her boyfriend first. He rolled up to my open front door on rollerblades [6] one evening. He looked like a walrus when I first saw him – thick mustache, and short, heavy body. The first couple times I saw him he was always in rollerblades; I wasn't sure he owned normal shoes.

After three weeks there was a knock on my door. The walrus stood there, the first time in shoes, next to a tall woman. She had long bright-red hair that stood like a scarecrow [7] on top of her head. She held a bottle of wine in her hand. I invited them in, opened the wine, and we all got to know one another [8]... or, she got to know us. The only thing we found out about her was that she was a student and went to bed early. Before she left that night, she asked that we exchange phone numbers just in case [9] one of us wanted to ask the other to turn down [10] their music or TV. We said goodbye and closed the door on two people we hoped would become not only good neighbors but maybe even friends.

Two evenings later, the walrus knocked on my door.

"Sorry," he said. "But do you think you could turn down your TV? Nellie's having trouble concentrating on her homework."

"Oh. Sure," I said. "I didn't realize it was so loud."

As I went back into the living room, I passed the clock on my wall and saw that it was only 7.

Two nights later, the phone rang. It was Nellie. Again, the TV was too loud.

"But the TV's not even on," I told her.

"Then it must be your radio."

"Actually, that's not on either."

"Then could you please talk a little quieter. I can't concentrate."

"I'm here alone, Nellie. But if I've been talking to myself, I'll try to keep it down [11]."

This continued almost every night. Whatever my girlfriend and I were doing, it was too loud. We closed doors too loudly. We cooked too loudly. We washed our dishes too loudly. We talked too loudly. Our bare feet walked across our floors too loudly. The only thing she didn't complain about was that we breathed too loudly.

"This is an old building," she said. "The walls are paper thin. Would it kill you to close your windows when you're at home?"

What a surprise. After so many neighbors... to suddenly hear that I lived too loudly. Both of us! At first, we questioned ourselves – were we too loud? We started tip-toeing [12] from room to room, and lowered our voices when we spoke. But the phone calls kept coming.

One night, about 1 AM, a knock on the door interrupted [13] my reading. I opened the door to a police officer.

"Good evening," he said politely. "I'm sorry to bother you [14], but I need to ask you to be a little..." he paused... "quieter."

"Quieter?" I said. "Quieter than... silent?"

"Someone complained," he said.

"Someone?" I said. "The woman upstairs?"

"I can't say," he said.

"You know, I've been reading in bed for the last hour. Am I turning the pages too loudly?"

"Someone complained," he repeated.

I didn't understand it at the time, but this was all part of Nellie's scheme [15]. By calling the police, there was now an official complaint against us on record [16]. It didn't matter [17] that what she said was false – the police came, paperwork was filled out, we were on record.

A week later, two policemen were outside the building looking up at my apartment. When they saw me in the window, they waved [18] at me to open it.

"Yes?" I asked.

"We got a call that you're growing marijuana," one said.

"Did you?" I said. "That's interesting."

"It's illegal to grow marijuana, you know."

"Yes, I know. And you're welcome to come up and see for yourselves what I'm actually growing."

"We just need to warn you," he said.

Again – police... paperwork... on record.

Two weeks later, I came home to a letter at the foot of my door – Nellie, demanding [19] I pay \$3,000 dollars because she couldn't concentrate on her studies. If we didn't pay by the end of the week, she would take us to small-claims court. Ever heard of small-claims court? It's where private people take other private people in front of a judge [20] and try to get relatively small amounts of money from them. It's like the express lane at the supermarket – if you have under ten items, you can use that lane. No lawyers. Just a judge who decides in minutes or hours at the most.

I did not give Nellie \$3,000. Instead [21], I went to a lawyer for free legal advice

[22]. He listened to me with a poker face, until I described [23] the red scarecrow hair. He went to his bookshelf and removed a book.

"A woman came to me a few weeks ago," he said, "with this under her arm." He put the book down on his desk – How to Take Someone to Small-Claims Court. "It tells you," he said, "like a cookbook, step by step, what you need to do. There are chapters on taking neighbors to court. I recommend [24] you read it."

It turned out [25] that Nellie was a professional at taking neighbors to court. I learned that we were the 4th neighbor she did this to, all in different cities over a five-year period. I don't know how many times she won, but she lost against us. The judge needed only ten minutes to say she didn't have enough proof [26]. We never even needed to open our mouths.

That was the last time I ever saw her, because she moved out of the building the very next day. We made eye-contact one final time as we were leaving court. At that moment, we both equally hated each other.

Now, I look back and feel no hate. I just shake my head [27]. One out of 160. Not bad.

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Thanks for listening.

If you liked this podcast, or others you've listened to on our website [podclub.ch](http://podclub.ch), tell a friend. You can also write us a message. As well, you can download our app if you'd like, and we have a vocabulary trainer to help you practice some of the new words you hear.

I'll be back on March 1st to talk about Elvis Presley and some of his songs.

Bye for now.



## Glossar: A Thousand Words

- [1] **a ceiling:** the floor or roof above your head when you are indoors
- [2] **to vacuum my floors:** to clean the floors with a machine that sucks up dust
- [3] **a blender:** an electric mixing machine used for making purees and cocktails
- [4] **wind chimes:** metal or wooden decorations that, when the wind blows, make noise
- [5] **unoccupied:** empty
- [6] **rollerblades:** in-line skates
- [7] **a scarecrow:** a human-looking figure used by farmers outside to frighten away birds
- [8] **to get to know one another:** to meet and learn things about the other people
- [9] **in case: if:** in that situation
- [10] **to turn down:** to lower the volume
- [11] **to keep it down:** to be quiet
- [12] **to tip-toe:** to walk quietly, as if on the tips of your toes
- [13] **to interrupt something:** to stop something before it is finished
- [14] **to bother someone:** to be a problem for someone; to disturb
- [15] **a scheme:** a plan; a strategy
- [16] **to be on record:** to document something for future use
- [17] **It didn't matter:** it was not important ; it didn't add or change anything to the situation
- [18] **to wave at:** to use your hand to get someone's attention
- [19] **to demand:** to say someone must do something
- [20] **a judge:** the person who decides the winner of a legal contest
- [21] **instead:** an alternative ; to do something else
- [22] **free legal advice:** opinions about the law without having to pay for them
- [23] **to describe:** to say what someone is like
- [24] **to recommend:** to propose ; to speak positively for something
- [25] **It turned out:** it came to be ; it was so in the end
- [26] **proof:** things used to understand the truth
- [27] **to shake your head:** move your head from side to side when you can't believe or understand something