

By RICHARD ELMAN

NEIGHBORS are a lot like relatives. You really can't wholly choose them, in most instances. Often, the only thing that defines them as neighbors, aside from proximity, is that you and they may have, as with relatives, a lot of common enemies.

A neighborhood is one big unhappy family, too often. I know much more about the lives of my neighbors than I might have wished to know: who is on the outs with his or her mate; who is making or not making a dollar; their children's performances in school and with the police; their inclinations with cuisine.

In my relatively sedate environs, a tachycardia of doors slamming, pots panning, showers and television sets wrenching on and off, and the ostinato of sustained marital disputes is the music through which one learns

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so much more than is necessary about the people in the Cape Cod. Too often, that includes what they've been doing with their charge cards.

One of my neighbors barks much louder than any dog I've ever owned at her husband and children. Needless to say, she always complains when my dog barks.

What is inappropriate behavior for a dog is surely not for a person, she would maintain. She has a difficult family. They don't seem to like listening to her. Baying at the gang from the brow of a bluff at almost any hour is necessary for the sanctity and preservation of family life.

The quietest thing that goes on is lovemaking. One never hears a peep after 10 o'clock. Shut up tight inside their nests, my neighbors whisper, I think, and save their unpleasant noises for the full decibel range.

Not all my neighbors have braided the lunatic fringe of their desires with suburban forbearance. We have some good, dear friends among our neighbors and have often been befriended in ways beyond our means to show gratitude. These are the good cousins one would consort with even if they weren't relatives. Despite such neighborliness, unfriendliness is the rule.

There's a man on my block who drives an overpowered sedan at 60 miles an hour whenever he comes or goes. He's only got 300 yards to travel either way, and the street is trafficked with children and dogs, so I assume he must be hunting fresh game.

The first time I ever said hello to any of my neighbors, it was in the middle of a snowstorm. I was grunting as I

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shoveled. My passing neighbor informed me: "You probably should have stayed in the city."

Did she mean I was one of those out-of-place New York people? Or did it seem so plainly evident that I lacked the stuff to get the job done right?

I never said I was from Manhattan. Had I been overheard nasalizing in the shower? From then on, whatever I did was compared by others to the lush life I'd led in New York, surrounded by crime and vice of every sort.

What was most clear to me was that I had more options to get acquainted or not with other people in Manhattan. There one might never know one's neighbors, or one might be having a long-term love affair with him or her, but whatever one did, it was safer: nobody had such lethal weapons as chain saws and power mowers. They didn't buy 22's and B B guns for their kids. Usually the only reason why you would want to call a cop was if you had a date to see somebody and she was D.O.A.

I lived 40 years in New York, New York, and never got robbed once. Here I had it twice. In the terrifying city, nobody I knew drove drunkenly, shot themselves in the legs or lopped off a limb with a World War II machete, which are things that have happened among my neighbors, to judge from the police blotter of the local paper.

I also had much more peace and quiet in midtown Manhattan than I do in one of the more exclusive wooded sections of Stony Brook. Nobody would dare to set up a motorcycle racing course beneath my bedroom window and rev back and forth as a neighbor's children did, with her consent, because she didn't want them getting hurt

on our thoroughfares. Most New York children lack motorcycles. Some may hold you up in the subway but, at least, they're quiet about it because they, also, don't want their mothers to worry too much.

At one point in my life I stopped talking to all my relatives. That was much less inconvenient than being uncivil to my neighbors. They are always there, whenever I turn, their windows full of rude white noises, their garbage cans stuffed with the detritus of bad meals, their lawns parked with lemon cars and bargain gardening gadgets, and their voices making twilight and homecoming a chorus of Greek tragedy and Yiddish farce.

I do not think I want to know them as well as I do by the vile things they cook up, the awful messes they confection to assail me as I go through my daily routines, but if I were to call the police, the assistance they would offer me would be of little help.

"Officer, I think I smell burning cabbage coming from the Sound . . ."

"If you wish to file a complaint, Mr. Elman, please refer to it as rutabagas . . ."

"Is that all you can tell me . . ."

"Close your windows."

There's a grouch in every family. Usually he knows what he's talking about. If the relatives don't want to listen, that's because he makes them feel as if they should be somewhere else.

I think a lot of my neighbors should be somewhere else — in the city, for example, where people are expected to act that way, even if they don't. ■