

The Rocket in the Lawn

The town of — is the kind of place people move to in order to live quiet lives: you could almost say, to be obscure. The nearest city is thirty miles away. The town is undistinguished in itself, but because it lies on the edge of a large lake, summer vacationers regard it fondly and with amusement. The residential streets are mostly asphalt with no sidewalks, the houses such as the lower middle class is glad to be able to own in these hard times. As often as not, the grass in the front yards is never cut, so in some cases it is a foot high, with bare dirt spots. A typical front path is either just packed dirt or else consists of various flat stones carelessly laid down as though someone had not had time to place them properly and arrange them attractively.

On a street not far from the pine trees that ringed the lake was a house like many others: one-story, much in need of a paint job, with a decrepti, gray wooden fence running along one side of the yard, and the usual uncut grass. (In the back were a few trees that flowered briefly in the spring.) A Mr. T — lived in the house, alone. One morning in early fall, he got up early, went out the front door to get his paper and made a strange discovery.

A few feet from his mailbox was what appeared to be a highly-polished black, conical metal object stuck in the ground. It was about six feet and had two fins on opposite sides, just above the ground, so that it resembled a fireworks rocket.

Mr. T — pushed on it but it didn't move.

Just about then, Mrs. H — who lived next door, also alone (no one knew what had become of her husband), emerged from her front door and crossed her dirt and grass front yard. "What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know. It was just here when I came out." He tried to move it again.

Mrs. H.: "You didn't hear anyone digging last night?"

"No, nothing."

She touched the sharp tip gingerly "Who would put such a thing here?"

"Beats me."

By this time a couple of neighbors from down the street arrived.

"What've you got there Bill?" said one man.

Bill just gestured with one hand.

"There's two questions", said another of the men, who was generally regarded as the intellectual in the neighborhood. "First of all, who put it there?, and second of all, What does it mean?" Everyone mumbled in agreement.

One by one they pushed on the object, tried to move it back and forth, but it was as stable as if it had been buried in concrete.

"Well, we ought to see how far down it goes," said Mr. T —. "I'll get a shovel." He came back with two of them, and a small pick. He handed the shovel to one of the men. "Easy on my lawn" he said.

Mr. T— and the other man started digging on opposite sides of the object, their shovels frequently thumping against it. But as they dug down, they saw that the circumference of the object simply grew larger.

"Christ", mumbled Mr. T —, "do you think it's some great big thing they buried? Could be a rocket or something. But who...?"

They kept digging, and the dirt piled up around the narrow trench they were creating.

And now a bunch of short, skinny, kids, each dressed in black, came sauntering up. They lived at the far end of the neighborhood. No one had ever met their parents. The neighbors called them the Rats.

One of the men turned and said, "Hey, you kids know anything about this?"

With smiles that indicated their delight in being invited to gaze on someone's act of mischief, they gathered around the object and touched it, hit against it idly with their fists.

"Wasn't us," said one. "What's it for?"

"I wish we knew," said Mr. T — . And then, half to himself, "But I'll tell you one thing: I'm not having this in my yard."

Someone said, "Maybe it's from outer space!" Mr. T — was not amused. "Who knows?" said the person. "Nowadays, Christ..."

"I'll call Chief J — ," said Mr. T — . "Maybe there have been other reports. Then the City'll have to come here and get rid of this damn thing."

Some of the Rats looked at each other with expressions that said clearly, "Let's try to figure out how they did this and try it in a couple of other neighborhoods."

It turned out that Chief J — had had no reports of such objects. The next day, the City sent a truck and a few workmen, who set to work deepening and enlarging the trench that the two men had begun. By the end of the day, they were down close to six feet, but all they accomplished was to reveal that the object grew larger and larger in circumference the deeper they dug, and that the fins likewise grew wider. The next day, the men came back, dug down to eight feet, so that they now needed ladders to climb up from the bottom. At the end of the second day, the foreman got on the phone in the truck, called his supervisor, had an animated conversation, then came out, walked up the front path and knocked on the door. When Mr. T — appeared, the foreman said he was sorry, but he couldn't afford to spend any more time, since there was no telling how deep the thing might go. He would tell his men to put a barrier around the trench, then make a few phone calls, see if he could get someone from the university to come down and at least figure out what the object was made of. Mr. T — was none too pleased, but agreed with the foreman's plan.

A professor of metallurgy and a professor of mechanical engineering agreed to take a look at the object. They brought several rectangular suitcases containing electronic measuring equipment. They pattered for a morning, then told Mr. T — that they had been unable to get material from the object itself, it was hard as diamond, but that they had taken some soil samples and would let me know what they discovered.

A week later, Mr. T — received a call from one of the professors, who said they had absolutely nothing to report. The soil was the same as other soil in the area. The professor had notified the City.

Several weeks later, the foreman was back with his men and his truck. The men filled in the trench, rolled up the protective fence, put it into the truck, and drove away.

Mr. T — had to resign himself to living with the object in his front yard. Talk about it gradually faded among the neighbors. Someone suggested he attach his mailbox to it, since it would make it easier for the mailman having to walk to Mr. T — 's front door all the time. Which he did, running a metal strap around the object and attaching it to the back of the mail box. Life returned to its nondescript routine, except that once in a while a few of the Rats would stop their bicycles and gather around the object and speculate about where it might have come from, and how deep it actually went into the ground, and what you could do if you had a bunch of these things, and the machinery to dig the holes quietly at night, all over the county.