

Nellie and June

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June Savage is happy to have her niece Nellie move in with her, although she knows that Nellie can be a bit of a handful, a woman with spirit, even at age fifty. She, June, has no other family and is not getting any younger. She's alarmed to hear Dr. Cassidy mumble something about brittle bones, and the risk of falling. Truth be told, living expenses are stretching her tiny budget. She could use Nellie's disability check and, together, they could make ends meet and have a little extra for an occasional night of bingo at the Elks.

Nellie Savage is ready to leave the high-rise and the city. She expects her new life will provide a safer neighborhood, new friends and maybe a job, once she gets settled.

"It's like living in a tall, cramped box," she tells June. "I've wanted to get out of there for years."

Nellie wears a brace because her right leg is three inches shorter than the left and there is some deformity in her spine. She walks with a lurch, and her only regret is that she can neither run nor climb. But she has a lot of energy, and as soon as she moves in with June she gets to work straightening out the clutter. June finds it difficult to bring trash and recyclables out to the curb, so things pile up. By the first of September, Nellie feels she's done as much as she can in the four small rooms. She'll strip wallpaper and paint the walls when the weather changes. Besides, she's itching to get out and do some gardening. In the high-rise, she had to make do with a potted geranium on the window sill. She had a tiny plot in the community garden, but someone picked her flowers, and the zucchini and cucumbers disappeared as soon as they ripened. After a while, Nellie gave up.

June's back yard is a tangle of weeds.

"I thought you planted some tomatoes," Nellie says.

"Well, I did, three, in fact. I was about to pick 'em when that nasty little boy next door stripped the vines and threw the tomatoes against the house." June points to the light blue siding. "Look a' that, red smears. Couldn't get it all off."

Nellie wonders if vandalism has followed her from the city. She looks around at June's neighborhood and sees that it has become rundown. It was once a tidy little street. Now all the houses show neglect: missing roof shingles, pocked siding, weeds, trash and, at the house next door, a cracked window whose frame is being held together with duct tape.

June sits down on the back steps and wipes the sweat off her face with the edge of her apron. She's no bigger than a flea and all worn out. "The kid next door, Davy Crockett, can you believe that name? What a troublemaker he is!"

Nellie sits down next to her, taking the weight off her brace. "Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier? I remember that TV program. How old is this kid?"

"Nine, ten, something like that." She glances over at the house next door. "He even wears a coonskin cap, runs around with the two Grealish boys, raisin' all kinds of hell."

"Has anyone complained to the parents?"

"Fat chance that'll change anything. The kid lives with his old man, a tough lookin' guy full of tattoos, spends his time tinkerin' with his motorcycle. I've never seen a mother, although a woman who might be the grandmother shows up once in a while."

June scratches her underarm, which has become red and blotchy.

"Let's go in, Auntie," says Nellie. "It's too hot out here. When it cools down later, I'll tackle these weeds. We can plant some lettuce seeds, and some spinach."

June pulls herself to her feet and holds on to the railing for balance. "Don't bother, Nellie. The little delinquent will just pull 'em up."

"My blood boils just thinking about this," says Nellie, as she helps her aunt into the house. "I just hate bullies! I've had my fill of them, all my life. What kind of little brat would pick on an old woman? Maybe we should put up a fence."

"Forget it," says June. "Fences cost money."

"Well, then, when I see him we'll have a little chat. By the time I get through with him he won't come near us."

As Nellie whacks away at the weeds with a rusty hoe the next morning, she spots the coon skin cap bobbing up and down behind the dilapidated shed in the Crockett's back yard. Soon little Davy appears, with two boys tagging along. Davy has a firm grip on the leg of a dead cat, which he swings back and forth like a yoyo.

Nellie loves all animals, especially cats. Using the hoe as a crutch, she springs up from her work with the weeds.

“What the hell?”

The boys pause. “Ain't never seen a dead cat before?” says Davy.

“What happened to it?” She already knows. Even from a distance, she sees that its head has been bashed in.

The boy ignores her and continues on his trek through the neighborhood, the Grealish brothers looking frightened and lagging behind.

Nellie abandons her battle in the garden and goes into the kitchen. She decides she will not mention this incident to June, who is also a lover of cats. Her aunt is already teary eyed because their fifteen-year-old dryer broke down. Stringing a clothesline off the back of the house becomes more important than whacking weeds. She goes back outside.

After lunch, Nellie limps out to the back yard to hang wet towels and discovers the clothesline has been neatly sliced in half. June comes out, and they spend a lot of time tying the two ends together with a third piece, then hang the towels on the line. They have no sooner hung the last towel when the rope breaks and the towels fall to the ground, still pegged to the line.

June sinks onto the back steps and weeps. Nellie sees the boy in the coonskin cap dash off into the trees, and she swears she hears him snicker.

Five minutes with this kid, that's all she needs. He'd shape up fast.

School begins the next day. The two women watch Davy climb onto the school bus, then Davy's father walks over to his shed with the coonskin cap in his hand. He squirts it with a bottle of dish soap, then hoses it down and props it on a bush to dry. As brownish water drips from the fur, the father gets on his motorcycle and roars off down the street.

The neighborhood is quiet.

“What happens when a king loses his crown?” asks June.

“Let’s do it!” Nellie shuffles over to the yard next door and snatches the coonskin cap off the bush. They squeeze out the extra water and put it in June’s room, in front of the window. It will take days to dry.

Little Davy comes home from school, and soon after, his father arrives. The boy meets the man out in the driveway, then they go into the back yard. June and Nellie watch from the window, hidden by a curtain. They know what will come next. The father points to the bush where he had put the wet coonskin cap, and, seeing it gone, shrugs his shoulders and disappears back into the house. Davy searches high and wide; no coonskin cap. He eventually walks back to the front of his house and looks up and down the street.

June and Nellie don’t know that the boy has spent the day searching for other things, and now he adds the coonskin cap to his list. Before school, he had searched through his father’s pockets for lunch money, and looked around the house for some clean clothes. In school, he was bullied by a bigger kid who’d made fun of him because he couldn’t hear what one of the teachers said, and threatened to beat him up. He’d been on the lookout for the bully all day. Now he searches for the Grealish brothers, but he won’t find them. His pals have found a pickup football game and won’t be tagging along after the King. They’d both had nightmares about the cat. Finally, as the day dies down, Davy looks for his grandmother. She might show up, or maybe she won’t. He never knows. He sits on the front steps, a picture of misery.

“Look a’ that poor little boy,” says June. “Ever see a more unhappy kid in your life? Maybe we outta get that cap and give it back.”

“Not on your life,” Nellie answers. “Think about your tomatoes, and the clothesline.”

October brings rain, a thin rain that drizzles down for days, finding its way into a loose shingle on the roof and leaking into the kitchen, right over the sink.

“At least it’s not drippin’ onto the stove,” June says. “Then we’d have a problem. We can let this go for a while ‘til we can afford to get someone in to fix it.”

Nellie's come to realize that a house is a lot of work. It eats up their money as fast as the two checks come in the first of the month. She makes repairs as best she can, but draws the line at scrambling up ladders, even if June had one. Her brace doesn't allow for climbing. She needs to make some money without the government taking away part or all of her disability check, something, ideally, that pays under the table. Waitressing would bring in some cash, but she could never move fast enough, not with her uneven gait and heavy brace.

There's a consignment shop a few blocks away that takes high end clothing in good condition and gives back a percentage of what they sell. The problem is that none of Nellie's clothes is high end. She buys at thrift shops or discount stores when items go on sale. June lives by the principle of 'making do' and keeps her clothes forever, until they're often little more than rags.

One morning as Nellie is eating her cereal, she spots little Davy Crockett leaving for school, and she remembers the coonskin cap. That ought to bring in a few bucks! She goes into June's room and sees that the cap is gone.

June's in the living room watching TV.

"Where's the coonskin cap?" Nellie asks.

June looks up. "That old thing? I put it in a box for the church. They came around collectin' for their rummage sale. Why? Do you think I shoulda given it back?"

"No, no, absolutely not. He hasn't bothered us since we took the cap, have you noticed? That cap was bad news. I think it gave him a sort of power, permission to raise hell."

June sighs. "I don't know about that, Nell. Seem the rain's keepin' him in. Wait til Halloween, then you'll see him up to his old tricks." She turns the channel and settles in to watch a cooking demonstration.

"Auntie, when's the church rummage sale?"

"I think it's on Saturday."

Nellie gets to the church early, but not early enough. There's quite a line, and once the doors open, everyone rushes to get in, and Nellie gets pushed aside. But soon she's in the room

that smells of dirty clothes, moth balls and the slight whiff of incense from the church next door. It's a busy place.

Through the crowd, Nellie spots the coonskin cap, just as it's being snatched up by a skinny, middle aged woman with frizzy, orange hair.

Nellie wants the hat and will pay almost anything for it, because she's sure she can make a nice profit once she unloads it at the consignment shop. She approaches the woman, and sees a dangling price tag. The hat is selling for \$2.00.

"My grandson would love that hat. I'll give you \$5.00 for it."

The woman brings the hat closer to her flat chest. "*My* grandson will love it, too." She moves off to pay for her treasure.

Nellie gives up on the hat and wanders around looking for other items suitable for the consignment shop, but this parish does not attract people who buy high end clothing. On her way out, she looks over the notices pinned to a bulletin board, a schedule for weekly masses, information about fuel assistance, a flyer announcing a Halloween party.

She also sees they're looking for someone to help out in the food pantry, part time work, good pay. Applicants call Father Bert for an interview.

Never one to put things off, Nellie fishes her cell phone out of her bag and calls Father Bert. She learns that he'll see her on Monday at ten o'clock.

If Father Bert were a few years older, he'd be a dead ringer for Santa Claus. And like Santa, he's a jolly elf and takes to Nellie right away.

"Nellie Savage? Any relation to June Savage?"

"Yes, sir, she's my auntie. I moved in with her last summer and aim to stay."

"June used to come to mass every morning. She's not well?"

"Arthritis and old age."

They talk for a while longer until Father Bert makes a decision. "Give me a couple references, Nellie, and the job is yours. You have to know, though, that this is a grant funded

position. No taxes, no Social Security deductions. We'll need you two days a week, nine to noon, when the food pantry's open. Will that suit you?"

This will suit her just fine.

As the rain continues, the leak grows. There's now a damp patch over the stove, and June knows she has to get the roof fixed, but, hopefully, not replaced. Nellie's pay from the food pantry will come in handy, especially since the new dryer she'd had to buy last month emptied out her savings.

June also admits to herself, reluctantly, that it will be a relief to have Nellie out of the house two mornings a week. Although she loves her niece like a daughter, she finds that her high energy is draining. Nellie is a fighter, lashing out at right wing commentators and politicians on TV, screaming at people who don't pick up their dogs' poop, railing at all the injustices in the world. June, however, is a tolerant woman. If a dog walker fails to pick up the poop, June will take a scrap of old newspaper and do it herself. But she realizes that a family accommodates different personalities. She hopes Father Bert will smooth out some of Nellie's rough edges.

Nellie's mornings at the food pantry pass quickly. She bags cans of vegetables, pasta, jars of peanut butter and other nonperishables, organizes the vouchers for dairy products, stacks of donated bread and rolls onto shelves. Sometimes a farmer will bring in a load of apples. A steady stream of people stop by.

At the end of the day of her second week at the food pantry, Nellie sees that the line has trickled down to two: The woman with the orange hair, and with her is little Davy Crockett, the coonskin cap clamped firmly on his head.

Now Nellie knows where she's seen this woman, right in her own neighborhood. She's the grandmother, and, with that hat, the little creep is once again king of the wild frontier, ready to terrorize them all.

As Nellie hands her a bag of food, she decides to meet the enemy head on.

"Excuse me, but I'm Nellie Savage, and I believe we live next door to this young man here."

Davy's eyes have widened and dart to Nellie's brace, and he starts to say something until his grandmother pokes him in the shoulder, a signal of some sort, Nellie suspects.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Pauline Crockett, the boy's grandmother. I'm living with Davy now."

"I think I've seen you around," Nellie answers.

"It's good to have friendly neighbors," Pauline continues. "I've noticed an older woman over there. She was putting some seeds in the bird feeder."

"That's my aunt, June Savage. She loves all living things." She risks a glare at Davy, who's pulling on Pauline's jacket.

"Let's go, Grandma."

Pauline raises her voice. "You take this bag and go on out to the sidewalk and wait for me. I'll be there in a minute."

Davy dashes off, and Pauline gathers up some apples. "That bird feeder's quite a reach for your aunt. Maybe Davy can put a ladder over and do it for her."

When it snows in hell, Nellie thinks. "Nice of you to offer."

You look familiar," Pauline adds. "Didn't I see you at the church rummage sale? Weren't you the one who wanted the coonskin cap?"

"Er, yes, I did. But I'm glad you got it for Davy."

"Well, you outta know I've moved in with Davy because his daddy, my son, Jason, went seekin' better opportunities. Don't know when he'll be back."

"Well, I suppose those things happen. Lucky the boy has you."

"Jason's a restless soul." Pauline heads for the door, toting her apples. "I thank you for this food. Money's tight, and the boy's in a growin' spurt. This'll help."

Nellie's not used to people, virtual strangers, confiding in her. She decides she likes this Pauline Crockett, a woman full of gossip and a well of information.

When Nellie arrives home, she finds June in the kitchen and tells her about their new neighbor. “One thing, Auntie. I first saw her at the rummage sale. She’s the one who bought the coonskin cap, and, well, I lied. I told her I wanted it for my grandson.”

June shakes her finger at Nellie. “Lies can come back to bite you, right in the you-know-where. But I’ll cover for you, if it comes up.” She opens a can of tuna and mixes it with mayonnaise.

“She’s a strange lookin’ woman, with that orange hair,” June adds. “It’s the same color as their new kitten, too, cutest thing you ever saw, a darlin’ little thing.”

Alarm bells ring in Nellie’s head. *A kitten?* She can either mind her own business and hope for the best, or tell Pauline Crockett that her grandson is a cat killer. She decides to wait.

There’s a rush of people at the food pantry as the weather cools, too many for Nellie to handle, so Father Bert is helping out. As they get ready to lock up and leave, he says, “I’m coming over to see June. How about tomorrow, say around two?”

“That’s fine. She’ll be happy for the company of a priest. She misses going to mass.”

The next afternoon, Father Bert is enjoying a cup of tea with the two women when they hear a commotion outside, and they rush to the window. Little Davy Crockett is standing under a tree, crying, and pointing up through the branches. They go outside, look up into the tree and see the kitten, perched on a high limb where a few brown leaves still cling. It’s making pitiful sounds, frightened at finding itself at such a great height.

“Oh, dear, another cat problem for Davy. Let’s hope this one has a better ending,” says Father Bert.

“What do you mean?” ask Nellie.

“One day last summer he and a couple of his friends arrived at the rectory with a dead cat, wanted me to conduct a Christian burial, of all things. He’d found it on the side of the road where the poor thing had met its end under the wheels of a car.”

“Did you believe him?” asks Nellie. “The kid’s a terror, if you ask me. He goes around destroying things. Ripped up June’s tomatoes, among other acts of vandalism. Maybe he killed the cat.”

“Good Lord, Nellie, I can’t believe you’d think that. No, the cat was run over. Its owner told me herself, not soon after. She was quite broken up over it. Davy had come along and picked up the body before she could, you know, dispose of it.”

He dropped his voice. “It’s his disability and parental abandonment. That’s why he acts like a little hellion. He’s looking for attention.”

Nellie points to her brace. “Disability? What disability? *This* is a disability.”

“So’s a hearing impairment,” Father Bert tells her. “The boy has lost over fifty percent of his hearing. His mother did that to him, with her fists, when he was not yet two years old. She’s been gone for years, and now the father’s gone, too.”

No wonder the boy’s so hostile, Nellie thinks.

The priest takes a handkerchief and wipes his eyes. “Thank God for Pauline. She’s his family now.”

As if on cue, Pauline races out of the house, and Davy screams at her to do something about getting the kitten down from the tree.

“I’m too old to climb, honey.”

“But Davy’s not,” says Nellie. She beckons him over, makes a sling with her strong hands, and hoists him up to the lowest branch. He scrambles to the top of the tree, scoops up the kitten, and carefully makes his way back down to where Nellie is waiting, ready to take the kitten and then catch Davy as he slides to the ground.

Later, Father Bert leaves but the others gather at June’s house for an early supper. Davy sits, wrapped in silence, contemplating Nellie.

“Now, tell me about your grandson, Nellie,” says Pauline. “Is he the same age as Davy?”

June answers quickly. “He’s seven, but you won’t see him around here. They’ve moved to California, and won’t be back anytime soon.”

She glares at Nellie while she brushes crumbs from her chin.

The clouds gather, the sky rumbles, and soon rain pours down, sending a stream of water through the ceiling and onto the stove. Nellie rushes for a bucket.

“You got a hole in your roof,” Davy tells them. “I seen it when I was up there in the tree.

I can climb up and fix it, if you want. Just get me a few shingles.”

Nellie sees they’ve turned a corner. They can both stop being angry.

Pals, finally. It’s time to be good neighbors.

END