

Dog Days

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Monday

Well, Wells Fargo finally started withdrawing regular mortgage payments again. I spent a total of over four hours on hold over the past few weeks to verify, twice, the amount that they would be withdrawing, and ensure that it corresponded to the amount they said they needed to withdraw. It's close to the amount they were withdrawing back in March, but adjusted based on the annual assessment of what had actually come out of the escrow account over the past year.

The amount they actually withdrew was not that adjusted amount, and I'm staring into space wondering if I want to spend more hours on hold, or if I should just wait for them to eventually fix their error. They withdrew about seventy dollars too much, so at least they shouldn't have any grounds to complain that I under-paid.

It continues to be hot and dry. The high temperature on Thursday is projected to reach 97 degrees. I think this is the hottest weather we've seen since the summer of 2012 in Saginaw, when the combination of highs over 100 and lows over 80 made it exhausting and dangerous for anyone without air conditioning, especially because people couldn't really cool down and recover from the heat stress during the evenings. I'm grateful again that our air conditioning is working.

Yesterday shortly after finishing last week's newsletter, Grace and I were outside in the yard sharing a rare moment of peace and quiet next to our fire pit, when the neighbor's dogs came barreling out of the trees into our yard, and the new one charged us, barking. We have had more than enough of our neighbor's dogs. He had one, and it was constantly running through our yard, occasionally charging and terrorizing the young children. He did not ever bite them, but he did knock down toddlers on at least one occasion that I know of. I have had confrontations with him several times, staring him down and shouting at him, and sometimes slapping a heavy stick on the ground to warn him that I won't hesitate to use it on him. He now tends to avoid the yard and has not been charging at us, but recently the neighbor got another dog, and this one is much more aggressive. I've had both of them charge me while I was walking down the driveway to the mailbox, and on more than one occasion I've wondered if I was

about to get mauled. I've taken to carrying a big stick and/or my pepper spray with me on these walks, but on this occasion I didn't have anything.

We've complained about the dogs many times to our neighbor. He has never taken our complaints seriously. He's always said things like "oh, he's just very friendly."

This latest confrontation with the two dogs set me off, though, and I told off our neighbor, telling him this can't keep happening and I was going to call animal control if we had another incident. I started with some four-letter words. Grace reminds me that sometimes I make poor choices, and told me that in this case starting off a conversation that way would put someone on the defensive immediately. So, yes, she's correct, but all this really proves is that given repeated provocations and threats to my family, I can become angry, so I'm not going to feel too apologetic for that.

Our neighbor began to obfuscate the issue, saying that he would install a fence, but that he didn't know exactly where the property line was. This then turned into a discussion about the property line, with him bringing out a printout of an aerial photo. He claimed that the property line description says that the line is seventy-two feet from the front of our house. So this then led to us bringing out a long tape measure and measuring out seventy-two feet. If that is true, we've been very confused about where the property line is. Our front yard consists of an open, mowed area, and an irregular, staggered tree line. We had always assumed that at least some of those trees were on, or at least near, the property line. But if the 72-foot figure is accurate, the neighbor's property starts twenty or thirty feet into the mowed area that we've always thought of as our yard. And if that's true, then we've built a couple of our garden beds on his property.

So, I told him we would get the survey done that we've been talking about for several years, since we also want to know where our property ends on the other sides, not just this side.

Although this really should not have distracted us from the issue at hand — his dogs, and their wandering and aggressive behavior towards my family.

He then started talking about how he was going to not only fence his yard, but put a gate across the driveway leading from our property out to the road. He seems to think that he owns the driveway, but that we have a legal right of way to use it, and so he'd be well within his rights to put a gate across it, and we'd just have to open and close it whenever we wanted to enter or leave our property.

I find this claim somewhat bizarre, because that's not my understanding of how the driveway works, or the utility easement, but given that I'm not an expert on property rights, let's take it at face value for a moment. This solution would actually not solve the problem, since his dogs would still be free to attack us when we walked or cycled up or down the driveway.

We've had some other issues with our neighbors. I may have written about the time that the driveway was blocked because our neighbor was having the end

of it re-paved. This forced several of us who lived further up the driveway to drive down the utility easement until we could turn out onto another driveway leading to the road. One of the neighbors who lived along the easement decided he didn't like this, and so actually stacked pine trees, stripped of their leaves so that only the spiky broken branches were left, into an impassable barricade.

Neighbors. Can't evict 'em. Gotta live with 'em. Or something. And their dogs, too, apparently.

I don't want this to get derailed again into side issues. I don't want it to degenerate into some kind of city slickers-versus-country folks situation. Aggressive, untrained, unrestrained dogs are a problem in any locale where people and dogs intersect. I don't want to harm the dogs. I don't even want to give them a crack on the head with a stick, or pepper-spray them, if I can avoid that. But if he isn't going to train them, then we may have to, and I'm not going to worry about being gentle.

So, we'll get the survey, and we'll talk to the county. If he wants to build more fencing — a section of his hard is already fenced for the dogs — that's up to him. But I don't think he should be building a gate across the driveway. And I need to speak to him about the dogs — again — when I've cooled down. I'd like to be on good terms with the neighbors, and so I don't want to just go ahead and sic animal control on him and his untrained, aggressive pets, but I don't want to find out the hard way — when one of my children, or another member of our household, is mauled — that I have let this situation go on too long.

Mad Hatterpillar

As I mentioned last week, caterpillars are unbelievable badasses and also, possibly, tools of Satan, but I try not to hold that against them.

Saturday Night

Well. A week has blown by like nothing, again. A lot has happened this week but it seems like I have to review the notes I typed into my phone in order to make sense of it.

The garage repair has been completed — the ceiling is back together, with new insulation and drywall and a new little attic access hatch. It looks to me like they did a pretty good job, so I have no complaints. The next step is to empty our things out of the pods and get them back into the garage. The restoration company may not be very eager to get that done, since they rented the pods for another month, but we'd like to get them out of our driveway, so we'll have to bug them to schedule the moving. We also have a small damage claim to file — for a leather handbag that was destroyed by the leak, and some linens that were hopeless to clean. So we might get a small reimbursement for that stuff. When the job is completely done, the insurance company is supposed to send us a bit

more money to cover the remaining cost of repairs, so when it is all done we should only be out-of-pocket for our thousand dollar deductible, plus the actual cost of repairing the condensation drain pipe, which fortunately was only four hundred-something.

Boundary Issues

The survey crew came and took measurements all over the yard and put down temporary wooden stakes, and a few steel markers, to mark our property's boundaries. Getting that done was a bit costly — over a thousand dollars — but the price made sense when we saw that it took a crew of two about six hours of work. They put down about 25 wooden stakes. Grace had asked them to put stakes down about every 50 feet on the East and South sides of the property, where we've had disputes with our neighbors, and told them we were less concerned about the boundaries on the West and North sides. So they put fewer there.

This afternoon Grace and I took a notebook, a pencil, and a 100-foot tape measure and set out to draw a rough map, measure the approximate distances between stakes, and familiarize ourselves with the exact shape and location of the boundaries. The boundary with our neighbor (the one with the dogs) is a bit contentious and not where we thought it was. The front yard is an open mowed area ending at several natural stretches of woods and trees on the East end of our front yard. The border does not, for the most part, follow that natural border. In fact it cuts off part of what looks like our front lawn. The *hügelkultur* bed we built, and corn bed we planted, near the tree line are in fact entirely in our neighbor's yard. It's a strange and stupid situation. We have no idea why the mowed grassy areas and tree lines don't follow the border at all. We think it may have to do with the fact that our lot was originally much larger, and the lots between our lot and Crane Road were carved out of that larger piece. But why the cuts were made where they were, we may never know.

The South border is buried in a downward-sloping, heavily wooded area and it goes back a surprising distance into the woods. We had thought that our neighbor was encroaching on our land with the path through the woods he has been building over the last few years, and thought he might have even built his very large backyard shed either on our property or illegally close to the boundary line. But the building is clearly far enough away from the line to make it legal. The cleared paths, though, come right up alongside the border.

Back in the woods, the Southwest corner of the property does not do what we expected. The border makes an unexpected diagonal turn. It looks like the property boundary is not a rectangle, but a rectangle with one corner cut off. From there the West boundary is a straight shot through the woods to the Southwest corner, but the woods don't cooperate with anyone trying to walk in a straight line. So it was quite time-consuming to try to follow the line with our tape measure. I was very glad that we had slathered ourselves with lemon

eucalyptus bug repellent — it worked pretty well today, although I kept finding that I was getting on spots that we had missed, like on the middle of my back (right through my shirt), and on my forehead.

When we finally found the Southwest corner, we discovered another path. Someone has done quite a bit of clearing to create a winding path through the woods. It actually crosses onto our property a bit, but we can't be too upset about that since as we have learned, it's quite difficult to visualize the precise boundaries of our lot. The surveyors pretty much punted at this point and stopped putting down stakes every fifty feet, so we couldn't use our tape measure between stakes, and it was actually very hard to figure out where the next one was. One doesn't have to wander very far in the dense woods before there are no landmarks visible at all, so I wound up slightly lost, and had to resort to calling "Marco!" while Grace answered "Polo!" until I could find her again. Then I stayed at the last stake and she tried to find the next one.

She found it eventually, probably a hundred or a hundred and fifty feet away, and very close to our neighbor Doug's garage. It turns out that the neighbor we thought was encroaching on our property wasn't really, except maybe getting too close with his trail-clearing, while Doug actually built his garage only four feet or so from the boundary line, and that's illegally close. But that building has been there for decades, so we're not going to try to fight him for it. If there was an easy way to cede him a few feet, it wouldn't be any skin off our noses to do so.

After that point, the property line actually follows the electrical wires that run right down the middle of the easement between our property and Doug's property. So that's very obvious and visible, and there's really nothing to dispute.

I had plans to put driveway marker stakes in our front yard, to make the whole East border very clear, and I will still do that. I intend to go along where the stakes are and pound short pieces of rebar into the ground, so that they can be found with a metal detector. I had also thought that I might get a couple of bundles of those little wire stake flags — ULine sells them for \$8 or \$9 per bundle of 100 — and put them up as temporary markers in the woods, between stakes. But today it became clear that it would be extremely difficult to do that. Between the sloping topography and the dense trees and underbrush, it was very difficult to plot out anything resembling a straight line between many of the stakes. I might try to put down a few, but the idea I had, of putting flags every ten feet or so along the border, just isn't practical.

Despite the mosquitoes and despite getting slightly lost in our own back yard, it was fun to follow our border markers. We learned some things about our property. For one thing, it is bigger than we thought. There are various things in our backyard that we had thought might be placed on or near the property line — dumps of concrete and construction debris, an old lean-to, piles of broken glass, the remains of an old stone wall, or cleared paths. None of these actually follow or indicate the actual boundaries.

Now that we know with more clarity where the boundary lines are, I feel more comfortable starting to clear some paths back there. I've long thought it would be nice to set up some walking paths, winding to follow the natural changes in topography, perhaps connecting some of the more open, clearing-like areas and avoiding some of the very densely overgrown areas. So maybe we can start thinking about that, as a long-term project. Our lot is only a few acres, but aside from the road noise from nearby Carpenter Road and I-94, the woods are quite deep, and a path that really winds around the property could be long enough to provide a good bit of trail-walking.

I'm also continually horrified by the trash dumps. I've observed that people who live with easy access to a lot of land often seem to feel that it is OK to use out-of-the-way parts of that land, or even someone else's adjoining land, as a trash dump. So near the South boundary we've found piles of construction debris including tarps, broken concrete blocks, and insulating foam, as well as several piles of broken glass. I've already described some of the stuff we've found dumped on the North boundary. On the West boundary there are some large piles of broken concrete. And on the utility easement, which none of us really own, we've found all kinds of trash. Eventually I would like to get the various piles of trash removed, just as we'd like to remove some of the invasive species, but in the more remote parts of our lot, it would be incredibly difficult to do this — there is no smooth topography where one might easily push wheelbarrow loads of broken concrete or glass, so things would pretty much have to be taken out by the armload.

This evening Grace and I spoke about how walking through our woods helped us to appreciate our home all over again. Despite the trash and occasional careless neighbor, and even despite the tremendous biting insect population, it's really a glorious place to be and we are lucky to have been able to move here. We just hope that Crane Road stays unpaved; if the township decides to pave it, it will probably be the beginning of the end for the quiet, isolated character of our home in the woods.

Sunday Night

It's been a very long day. Later on Saturday Grace and worked to rearrange some things in the basement so that the kids would have a spot for their virtual choir camp (a week-long series of daily lessons and activities, done via Zoom). I'm grateful for the online groups and classes while the kids can't meet with their groups in person, but there is a significant down-side, and it's the I.T. and A.V. component. The choir instructor wants the kids to be able to stand and sit and sing, and move around a bit. So we needed to set up a space, and because there will be video and not just audio, we needed to consider the laptop location and height, the lighting, and what will be behind the person on the call. The kids also need a music stand. So there's a lot to arrange. We won't have it ready to go for the first day, but we might be able to get the kids to paint some kind

of backdrop on cardboard, which should look better than the pallettes of boxes in our basement.

I looked into ordering a standalone webcam, but — go figure — webcams are sold out, just about everywhere. So that the kids can stand and sit and move around, I wanted them to be able to get a few feet away from the laptop microphone. This makes the audio problematic, especially when we have things like fans and a dehumidifier and noise from upstairs. To try to improve the audio situation (these are singing lessons we are paying for, after all, and I want the instructor to be able to hear our children), I ordered a small shotgun microphone of the type that mounts on a video camera.

The Rode VideoMic NTG

It's a Rode VideoMic NTG, which is a very cleverly designed little micropone. It has an internal rechargeable battery for use on a camera, and it charges via a USB cable. It has an output that will allow it to be plugged into a camera using a 1/8" "TRRS" cable (tip, ring, ring, sleeve — like a 1/8" headphone cable, but with an extra conductor). I think some cell phones will also accept this cable. But it is also possible to plug headphones right into the microphone, to monitor what the mic is picking up, and it can detect the difference. There's a preamplifier built in, and a level control. It has a pad, and a high-pass filter. It also operates as a USB microphone. In this mode it has a very nifty feature I haven't seen on any other USB microphone. Normally it will send the same thing to both the left and the right channel for recording. But you can activate a mode where the left channel is the normal output (and this is the audio normally used by Skype and Zoom and other programs that work with USB microphones), but the right channel is padded by 20dB. So if you are recording, the right channel then becomes a safety track — if you clip the audio because you record something that is too loud, you have another track that is (probably) not clipped and you might be able to edit in the audio from that track to get rid of the clipping.

I currently have this microphone mounted on a mic stand ready to go for tomorrow, so we'll see how it works out. I'm going to have to duck out of work to set things up for our first remote choir camp participant. If the kids were older, I would consider running their audio through my SSL mixer and giving them headphones, but I'm afraid that could lead to disaster with the younger ones, so we'll try it this way — the kids won't be tethered, so they shouldn't be able to pull the monitor on its tripod, or the laptop, or the microphone and microphone stand, over accidentally. At least I hope they won't be able to.

Initially I am going to use my laptop running Windows for this call. I have mentioned that the two HP laptops the kids are using for Khan Academy don't have working microphones under Linux. But since the outboard microphone is a pretty standard USB microphone as far as the computer is concerned, I may be able to use one of the Linux laptops, which would be nice. But I have not tested

that yet.

IKEA and the Lunch Meeting

After working on the video setup, Grace and I went to IKEA to try once again to get some bookcases. This has been a long and tedious process. I initially tried to purchase four bookcases back in May; the stores were closed, but they were shipping items directly to homes. Except that after I placed the order (and they billed me immediately), I found out that the delivery was estimated to take six weeks, and also that if I tried to cancel the order, over a month before the estimated delivery date, they would not refund the fifty dollar shipping fee.

This enraged me, and I'm still not sure it is legal, so I disputed the charge with my bank. I think I've recounted that before.

After IKEA reopened our Canton, Michigan store, they allegedly provided a curbside pickup service. Over the past several weeks I have tried repeatedly to get a time slot scheduled for curbside pickup of the bookcases we've been trying to buy. I've tried five or six times, but the web site always says that no time slots are available, and I should try back later.

So, I finally decided we would try going in person. Grace and I agreed to check out the parking lot, and if it was crowded, to go home and try on a different day. It wasn't crowded. So we went in, intending to get in and get out as quickly as possible — go directly to the self-serve furniture area, cutting through the short-cuts, pick up the items, check out, and get a few bags of KÖTBULLAR and ALLEMANSRÄTTEN to feed the kids, since we weren't going to have time to cook dinner.

It seemed fairly safe — a large, open, well-ventilated building, uncrowded, with the staff metering the number of people going in and out, and posted requirements that everyone wear a mask in the building.

It didn't feel safe, though, and the reason was the goddamn anti-maskers. Here's what I wrote on Twitter:

Went into IKEA Canton in person and it is a shit show. Everyone has to have a mask on to go in, but a disturbing number of people were taking them off immediately afterwards and strutting around without them. Young people pushing each other around on carts laughing and yelling.

I would not have gone in, in person, if I could have gotten an order delivered, but after six weeks delay for deliveries, canceled order. Then I have tried for three weeks to get a curbside pickup time slot outside of work hours. Nothing. So, went in person.

The number of young children in the store with their families, mask-less, I found especially disturbing. Our eighteen-month-old could

keep his on during an entire medical appointment and so could our three-year-old with Down Syndrome. Your six-year-old can wear a damned mask.

The politicization of mask wearing has created an army of dangerous trolls risking all our lives to own the libs or whatever the hell they think they are doing.

And we think we're re-opening schools? Damn, this fall is going to be an absolute disaster. So many deaths. So much sickness. It's going to be horrific and there will be violence everywhere.

We were able to go right to the warehouse, but found ourselves crowded multiple times by entirely unmasked people who seemed to be daring the staff, or their fellow shoppers, to complain. We needed to figure out where in the warehouse the particular HAVSTA bookcases we wanted were actually located. Product lines aren't located together; HAVSTA bookcases of various types and colors are scattered all around the enormous warehouse. Normally, there are some PCs you can use to look up where items are located. But they were all shut down for safety, so people had to wait in a long line to ask at a single operating service desk. And a lot of the people in the line had taken off their masks. It took ten or fifteen minutes in line to find the aisle and bin number where the bookcases were.

There was a similar situation in the checkout, except there were more people crammed into less space. And, also, at the food checkout. The food section was pretty empty, so it didn't seem hazardous, but the checkout wasn't. So I was crammed into a checkout line that snaked up to the counter, with unmasked people right behind me.

This is actually the least safe I've felt in a store since the pandemic began. I'm deeply disturbed by the aggressive unmaskers. It is hard to blame the IKEA staff. They aren't meant to be security guards. Are they supposed to be specially-hired guards everywhere to monitor the guests? How would that play out, exactly? Would they hire off-duty police officers? I can't see *that* working out very well. So I don't have a great solution. The solution was for Americans to not be sociopaths and to accept simple science-based precautions during a pandemic.

Anyway.

There is an anti-masker in my office, too. I was asked to go in to the office in person for a presentation and lunch. Lunch was packaged boxed lunches from the Traverse City Pie Company. Grace and I haven't been buying takeout food from any restaurants, except for occasional pizza or a hot coffee, hot enough to kill the 'rona, but this seemed like a small risk, so I was willing to accept it. I was less excited about the whole staff meeting in the same room. Granted, it's a large room — an open bullpen-like arrangement with a conference table and cubicles — but it's still one room. I actually told my boss that I wasn't

comfortable eating in a group like this. He told me that everyone would be masked and he just wanted everyone there for a presentation, then we could take our boxed lunches and eat them separately. So I planned to go in.

Meanwhile, mid-morning, shortly before leaving for the office, I got a disturbing e-mail from one of my co-workers. He had been at a meeting at a vendor in Plymouth — a physically-distanced, masked-up meeting. While he was in the building, though, apparently one of the engineers suddenly died in his cubicle.

Under different circumstances, I'd think that this was likely due to a heart attack or stroke. But under these circumstances — well, it could still could have been one of those things, but it could have been caused by an undiagnosed COVID-19 infection. The progression of this disease is often strange and many people are entirely asymptomatic, and either stay that way, or then suddenly, have symptoms. And one of the symptoms is sudden heart problems.

I had a chat with my co-worker, because he had gone back to the office, but didn't go in — he asked someone to bring his laptop out to his car, and took it home. He didn't want to go to the lunch, but our boss was asking him to come in. I told him that with no solid information on the causes of death, he really had no facts to go on, so he should go with his gut. He decided to stay home and work from home until the weekend — a brief quarantine. He had already been tested for COVID-19 twice. The second time was a couple of weeks ago, though — apparently test results are backed up for weeks in Washtenaw County.

Meanwhile, I went to the office. I got there late, because I had to squeeze my Element between two construction trucks — the restoration company was finishing up the work repairing our garage ceiling — and wished I had gotten there even later.

There were seventeen of us in the meeting. And there's always one guy. I'm not going to name him in this forum, but one of the staff members openly defied the orders from HQ and didn't wear a mask at all. (And there were a couple of people, including my boss, who seemed to forget that the mask is supposed to go over both your mouth *and* nose). But it was that one guy who made me really, really not want to be there.

After the presentation I took my sandwich, wiped it down with alcohol wipes, and retreated to the far corner of the building where my desk sits in a little alcove of its own. After eating what turned out to be a pretty tasty sandwich and piece of pie, I had a physically-distant conversation with one of my co-workers. He's talking about flying to Austin, Texas. I can only tell him "I don't think that's a good idea."

Shelving Our Books

So, anyway, we have four new bookcases. And we also have plans in progress for a custom bookcase in our family room which will hold all the children's books — it will have over 20 shelf-feet of space for books.

I spent almost the whole day working in the basement, building two of the IKEA bookcases and rearranging things. These bookcases are seven feet tall (yes, I measured the space in advance). They're a bit hard to assemble for one person, but I managed.

I don't really like assembling these things — over the years I have assembled quite a bit of IKEA furniture, including office furniture for a couple of different jobs. And so I've gotten reasonably good at it. But those little cam mechanisms are a big pain. About a third of them are drilled very precisely and fit perfectly, and so are easy to turn, and lock the bolt head into the cam just as they are meant to. The other two-thirds of them are a struggle. Often the hole for the cam isn't drilled quite deep enough, so they stick out of the hole a bit. Often the hole for the bolt wasn't drilled straight, or to the right depth, and so the cam won't lock onto the bolt. The cams are flimsy and easy to break. If I twist them a bit too hard, the cheap metal prongs can bend, and often the metal of the screwdriver socket will actually shatter. But this is what we've got. So I assembled everything as best I could and tightened them as best I could, and managed not to strip any or break them completely.

I was also very wary of the bookshelf backing pieces. They are thin, and you have to drive screws right into them, sideways. Back in January or February I built a shorter HAVSTA bookcase in my office, and despite my best efforts, I managed to split the wood on two of these backing pieces while screwing them together.

Maybe they have made the pieces thicker, because fortunately I didn't split any wood on the two bookcases I assembled today. Both these cases went into a little alcove immediately outside my office. They actually look very nice. My Orwell boxed sets from the Folio Society are on display now. So are all my Moorcock trade paperbacks, and my sixty or so beautiful trade paperback volumes from the New York Review Books Classics series, arranged in a spectrum of Pantone colors, and the nine-volume set of collected stories of Robert Silverberg, and my books on psychohistory, and by Jung, and Wilhelm Reich, and Robert Pirsig, and all of my sheet music which has been in boxes for four years — a lot of stuff that I haven't seen in a long time is now out and it looks very nice there, and I can also much more easily Marie Kondo the books, deciding which ones “spark joy.”

And they aren't even full yet! I think I can unpack my collection of the stories of Theodore Sturgeon, too, and a number of other volumes, and finally flatten those boxes and use them for garden beds.

And there are two more bookcases still to assemble and put in my office. The ones in the office are going to hold my programming books, electronic books, and Computer Science and math books. They include a collection of old *Byte* magazines, including the special annual language issues on Prolog, Smalltalk, Lisp, and C, and I will be very happy to have them out and accessible again.

Between these four bookcases and the new bookcase upstairs, we should be able

to finish up a whole palette of boxes, which means we will be able to stick the palette in the garage and free up space to move some shelves of stuff out of the room that is now a storage room, but which we want to turn into a bedroom for Joy. So maybe we can finally start sliding some blocks in the sliding-block puzzle called “figuring out how to arrange everything in our basement.”

I just hope I don’t wind up dying for the chance to unpack some of my books.

These are the dog days. Stay in your yard, and put your muzzle on.

Have a great week!

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