

A MODERN BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

WORD COUNT: 1988

By the time I got home, my cat had been killed and the golf clubs disappeared. 'Caddy', I told myself, 'it must've been her'. Caddy was what we would call a *difficult* neighbor. She sometimes pretended to be a sweet, old English lady. But she was neither English nor sweet. She could drink as much tea as she wanted, and drop as many *thank you darling* in a conversation as she had the chance, that wouldn't hide the Rambo-like woman she was. I knew she owned a rifle (*and* she even told me once—a night she had a whiskey or two—that she had been the champion of wing shooting and sporting clay shooting in junior categories in 1965 and 1966).

When I moved into this house, she came to me with a lemon pie. Just like in the movies, I thought. What a lovely neighbor. Little by little I found out the truth about her. Her family came from the deep south. They had cows and horses, and a dead confederate general as an ancestor. They aimed higher, though. They wanted to be more elegant, more educated, more Faulkner, less Twain. That's why her parents had named her Caddy, after that character in Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*. However, I bet her parents never read that book. After all, Caddy Compson, the character in the novel, was not a *lady*. My neighbor had been cursed with that name. Caddy, my Caddy, was a 100% Huck Finn and there was nothing she could do about it. She would never be a great lady from the south, so forget about Scarlett O'Hara and Tara. She kept not only a rifle, but also all of Mark Twain's beloved first editions in a vault. She had read them all, of course. The books and other stuff. She even knew Twain's famous quotes by heart. She was dangerous.

The day I gave her Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as a present for her 68th birthday I was sentenced to death. Well, I guess I should've known, but honestly, at that time I was just naïve and I didn't have a clue about Twain's hatred towards Austen. I was in

my first year at uni. Still struggling with Sir Gawain, green knights, Beowulf and all that boring stuff. Caddy thrust the book back to me and looked at me with fierce eyes. Then, she confessed she had actually visited her grave, Jane Austen's grave, and beat her tomb with a golf club. RE-PEAT-ED-LY. She was escorted out of the Cathedral of Winchester and was declared persona non grata. There was no more lemon pie at my doorstep after that day.

Her smile gradually faded away and, worst of all, she started playing 'Candle in the Wind' non-stop all-day round. It was a nightmare.

—Will you please stop it? —I shouted at her.

—Stop what? —She kindly answered while sipping some tea.

—Stop this torture. I can't stand Elton John.

—I can't stand Jane Austen, and guess what? I've had to put up with her all my life.

—That's not my fault.

—It's never anybody's fault. But there she is: the queen of English literature. She and Harriet Beecher Stowe, like cockroaches, would survive a nuclear bomb. My goodness.

—I'll call the police.

—Look at me: I am a sweet old lady. And everybody loves 'Candle in the Wind'. What's the police going to do about this?

—It's insane.

—It's revenge.

She had suddenly become a chain-smoker, within less than three minutes. I had never seen her smoke before, and there she was now, smoking one cigarette after another.

Her teeth were suddenly yellow and she had developed a cough. She had turned into an evil character, but there was no transition: we were kind of jumping into a rushed conclusion. However, I knew that if I could live with Donald Trump, I could also live with an evil neighbor. After all, she was a sweet old lady who simply happened to love Elton John. What an evil neighbor! Top three of evil neighbors: Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden, Caddy the sweet old lady. I laughed at my own stupid joke. I laughed and cried. It sometimes happens to me: I tell myself stupid jokes and my own imagination does the rest. So, in my mind I could see the three evil characters having a pajama party in the Battle of Gettysburg. Caddy kept looking at me with her fierce eyes. Her yellow teeth were too shiny. I hated her.

So, I started sending her little presents. It cost me money. And it was also time-consuming. But it was worth the effort. Or so I thought. I went to a second-hand bookstore and bought all the books by Jane Austen that I could find. Even *Lady Susan*. What a drag.

—Oooh. You really like Jane Austen —the shop assistant said while he put all the books in my recycled paper bags.

—Not really. It's a present.

—Then, that person really *loves* Jane Austen.

—Definitely.

—Some of them are repeated —he pointed out.

—Yeah, I know.

He looked at me suspiciously. I was compelled to clarify my actions.

—She is... She has Alzheimer. So, she never remembers where she puts her books —I added, rather clumsily.

—Hum. It's \$123.

—Damn it.

I went to the post office and mailed the first book: *Sense and Sensibility*. Two days later, my sweet old neighbor got mail. I watched out the window. She looked surprised. The mail carrier went back to his van. She was standing by the door. She opened the small package. She held the book in her hands and looked at it with her fierce eyes. Her fierce eyes jumped out of the sockets, then formed the Confederacy and declared war against the North. For a moment I thought she would grab her rifle and become a confederate general herself. However, unlike General Robert E. Lee, she wasn't going to surrender. A few days later, I sent a second book: *Pride and Prejudice*.

Everybody says that this is Austen's best book, but I guess it is because they are all in love with Mr Darcy —or Colin Firth. It's crap, and I really mean it. At first publication, it got three favorable reviews and none of them was mine. Now, according to a poll conducted by the BBC in 2003, it is regarded as the second best-loved book. The first is *The Lord of the Rings*. They never asked for my opinion. Or my neighbor's opinion. I guess it was a poll for British people. For the first time, I felt some kind of connection to my evil character. We both stood up by Charlotte Brontë, when she said that the book was a disappointment, 'a carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but ... no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck'¹. Nailed it.

¹ <https://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/literary-legends-jane-austen-and-the-bront%C3%AB-sisters/>

After *Pride and Prejudice*, it was time for *Mansfield Park*. Even though it was largely ignored by reviewers when it was published, the first printing sold out in six months. It should have remained ignored at all levels, and forever and ever. It wasn't. So, once again we have to put up with a novel about manners, education, marriage and money. Like if it was our first time. That was what Madonna was thinking about when she sang 'Like A Virgin'. As soon as the evil character opened the package, Elton John started singing. On the third day, Diana Spencer resurrected. She was dressed in a confederate uniform and she very much resembled the evil character's own confederate ancestor. Diana carried a rifle. Suddenly, she shot at my cat, sadly called Lincoln.

—Lincoln was a Republican. I was meant to be a queen. That cat had to die —Diana said, by way of apology.

—Don't be sad —I told her—. You were, you are, whatever, a queen. The queen of hearts. The queen of gossip. Be proud of that. And your collection of shoes.

My cat died, but also resurrected on the sixth day, three days after Diana's resurrection.

The next book was *Emma*. And it was too much. Not only it has less story than any of her previous books, but it has also been embraced as a feminist novel —simply because it addresses women's issues. Well, as far as I am concerned, feminism is a movement that aims at eradicating gender, race, class, and sexual prejudice. Austen has no subversive ideas at all. She is the queen of the status quo. An evil character too.

When the bell rang and Caddy opened the door, she was ready to beat the mail carrier with her golf clubs. By that time, Caddy was also wearing a confederate uniform, her

confederate eyes, popping out of their sockets, had annexed the Indian territories, and Diana Spencer was sipping tea while making a wig out of Boris Johnson's poor hair. She tried the wig on and it suited her. 'I'll send it over to Charles, he'll make better use of it', she said to herself. I looked out the window. Lincoln was lying at my feet, studying a map and planning a strategy for the next battle against the neighbor's popping eyes.

When it was time for *Northanger Abbey*, my cat went missing and I was almost ready for surrender. At first, I thought the cat would have left to join the Confederacy too, so I rang the Founding Fathers for advice. However, none of them answered the phone. They were all too busy updating their Facebook pages. They should have known that Facebook is for old and dead people. Instagram and TikTok rule the world now. Anyway. I went to the post office early in the morning, since I had planned to play golf before lunch. By the time I got home, my cat had been killed and the golf clubs had disappeared. 'Caddy', I told myself, 'it must've been her'. I found the cat's dead body, a mere rigid corpse in my backyard. It was dead. It had been beaten to death. The killer had probably used one of my golf clubs, which I couldn't find anywhere. There was no resurrection on the third day, nor on the sixth. I couldn't play golf after all. So, I gave up.

I knocked on my evil character's door. She was waiting for me. My evil character gave me a confederate uniform. I saw my golf clubs next to all her Jane Austen's novels, piling up with a twin-tower-like shape. One of the clubs had blood on it. 'We have a mission', she told me seriously, as in a solemn declaration. She handed me a golf club and slipped a piece of paper to me. It said:

MARK TWAIN ON JANE AUSTEN:

Every time I read 'Pride and Prejudice' I want to dig her up and beat over the skull with her own shin-bone².

—Let's make it real —she whispered.

—How? You are not welcome in Winchester.

—I was thinking about the reviewers. All people's opinions. Every single poll. School curricula. Syllabi. Syllabuses. Let's fight this battle against Jane Austen's fan club and all those Latin plurals.

And so, this is how the five of us —the evil character, her popping eyes, Diana Spencer, my dead cat, and I— fought a great battle against Jane Austen's modern reviewers. We fought and we lost. She is still the queen of English literature and we are just a bunch of sad confederate generals who enjoy playing golf while listening to Elton John. It was a stupid cause anyway. Actually —don't tell anybody—, we often sit and watch *Pride and Prejudice* on TV.

But most important, the queen of hearts is on our side, and we enjoy some privileges, such as an enormous shoe collection. Isn't that lovely?

² http://www.twainquotes.com/Austen_Jane.html