"What on God's green earth are they doing now?", my dad said as he opened the truck door. He was staring at the house up on the hill, shaking his head solemnly. I walked up beside him, leaned on our mailbox, and stared in disbelief.

Our neighbors were nailing a cow skull above their front door. The noisy pounding of the hammer echoed through the valley, and seemed to be annoying my dog. The woman hit the nail one last time, then stood back to admire her skull. It looked absolutely ridiculous. Its horns were each two feet long, and its was bleached to a bright white, making it stand out like a sore thumb against the dark log walls.

The cow skull episode described our new neighbors perfectly. The woman, who dominated her timid, mouse-like husband, was a rich little city girl whose wealthy father had built her the cozy little log mansion out in the middle of nowhere. It had a jacuzzi, a satellite dish, and custom landscaping; sure, life would be rough out in the boonies, but she could manage -- I'm sure she envisioned herself as a real survivor who could fit in easily with the natives. The cow skull was just another attempt at that rugged cowboy look she was after, but she was no cowboy, just a spoiled big city brat who didn't have any idea how to conduct herself among hicks.

Our neighbors moved in during the summer, about two years ago. My mother, being the good Christian neighbor that she was, spent all day baking a nice cake as a welcoming gift, and that evening we drove up the hill to the new house and knocked on the door. A tall but somewhat pudgy woman opened the door, and said "Hello" through her nose. She invited us into the living room, where her young daughter sat staring at the television, a big screen with cable!

"Nice T.V." I said, trying to break the ice.

"Well, it's okay, I guess," she said. "But that damn satellite dish won't pick up Gilligan's Island, and my little girl just can't live without her Gilligan's Island!" I could tell right there that this woman was obsessive, maybe even psychotic. If she got that worked up about Gilligan's Island, she was going to have big problems getting along with her new neighbors, especially the Vernons.

"Well, we just came to welcome you to the neighborhood!" my mother said in that cutesy little voice she always uses. "I baked you a little cake! Notice I left it on one of my good china plates, so you'll have to come visit us when you bring it back!"

"Oh, how clever! Well, I'll try to get it back to you in the next few days!"

We never saw that plate again -- I'm not sure why she never came to visit, she seemed pretty friendly. She had even joked about how my mom
and her would get to be real buddies, and could sit in her jacuzzi and complain about men. Well, things weren’t destined to turn out quite so rosy. One evening a few months later the phone rang, I picked up --

"Hello?"

"GET YOUR MOTHER ON THE PHONE -- NOW!"

Sure enough, it was the neighbor woman. I handed my mom the receiver and, as usual, ran upstairs to listen in through the other phone.

"Hello" she said.

"GET THESE DAMNED COWS OFF MY PROPERTY RIGHT THIS MINUTE! DON’T YOU REALIZE WHAT THEY’RE DOING TO MY LAWN! ARE THESE YOUR COWS? THEY’RE EVERYWHERE! OH, MY SHRUBS-THEY’RE, THEY’RE TRAMPLING MY SHRUBS! OH GOD, THERE’S A BIG COW PATTIE RIGHT ON MY SIDEWALK!"

The woman was hysterical, sobbing and sniffing, but obviously outraged. I glanced out my window into the pasture -- great, my grandfather had left the gate open. I put on my boots and ran downstairs.

"Now listen here," my mother said. "No one talks to me like that, Missy. I’m not responsible for those stupid cows, and besides..."

Too bad. The woman had already hung up. My mother glanced angrily at the receiver before hanging up. "Get your daddy and go round up those good-for-nothing cows! Hurry up!"

Well, to make a long story short, we rounded up the cows. My dad drove them out of the yard with the truck, and I ran on foot, hitting them with my walking stick. They were going crazy, bucking up their hind legs, mooing and snorting and bellowing. That crazy woman paced back and forth on her porch the whole time, crying and pulling on her hair. When the last cow lumbered onto the road, the carefully landscaped yard was a disaster. Muddy hoof prints, tire tracks, and cow turds covered the yard. I could tell it was the start of a long and beautiful relationship.

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The next day my dad and I drove over to the Vernon’s place to borrow a hay bailer. Although we never called them such, the Vernons were the classic definition of whitetrash. The family had lived there since the dawn of time -- the road was even named after them. As our truck entered the clearing where they lived, I read the familiar sign posted at the foot of their driveway. "Now Entering Vernon Hollow. Population 6, Pete Vernon, Mayor." My dad chuckled as we passed it -- he always got a kick out of that sign.

"Vernon Hollow" consisted of two houses, one for Pete and his wife and another for his son’s family. Alongside the houses were an uncountable number of sheds, junk piles, animal pens, and rotting automobiles and kitchen appliances. Chickens scattered left and right as
we pulled up by the shack where Pete hung out. He was sitting in his worn-out easy chair watching a Braves game on his tiny black and white T.V., his three-legged dog lying at his feet. Charlie, the dog, had got caught in a hay mower years earlier, but Pete had nursed it back to health -- nothing was more important to the Vernons than their dogs.

Three or four other fellahs sat outside on their three-wheelers chewing tobacco. "Howdy," they said as we got out of the truck. "Awful hot, ain't it?" my dad said politely; normally he wasn't such a hick, but his slight southern accent became much more severe whenever he was around the Vernons. Pete looked up, mumbled something and opened the screen door. He was a short, stocky man with a round bald head and thick glasses who always wore overalls and a baseball hat, and had a scratchy yet wheezy voice, like a worn-out piece of sandpaper with asthma.

"Hey, you boys git over dah and kill that hog," he said, gesturing towards a huge, disgusting pig wallowing in the dirt. We watched the men wander to the pig pen, one of them grabbing a large knife hanging on a fence post.

"We gotta have some barbecue tonight," Pete explained. "We gonna have us a Jam!

Great day in the morning. The Jam was tonight. Those Vernons sure knew how to throw a party. Once every summer they barbecued a hog over an open fire and invited, oh, 50 some odd of their buddies to come eat pig and dance to the loudest rock 'n roll music known to man. They played it so loud it could be heard clearly for miles around -- needless to say, no one ever slept on Big Jam Night, but no one ever objected. As I said, the Vernons had been their forever, and it was the accepted custom to let them have a little fun once a year. I wasn't so sure the new neighbors would feel quite the same about it, though.

A startling shriek ripped through the air. Moments later the men dragged the pig's bloody body out of the pen.

My dad had been reading my mind. "I sure hope that new woman don't give ya'll any trouble tonight. You better keep that music down."

"To hell with that!" Pete yelled. "We gonna have us a Big Jam tonight, and we gonna have loud music, I don't care if the Prezeedent of the U-nited States says any diff'rent!"

Pete held true to his word. By five o'clock signs were posted all up and down the road, reading "Big Jam Tonite" with arrows pointing towards Vernon Hollow. By eight the party was in full swing; dogs were barking, the speakers were blasting, and tires screeched as trucks raced down Vernon Road. My dad and I decided to show up -- as a rule, we tried to avoid the Jams, but we didn't have anything better to do.

Everything went fine until about midnight, when the sound of approaching sirens was heard, and a police car pulled into the driveway.
The sheriff stepped out opened the passenger door, and who should step out but the crazy woman! She was a total basket case; her hair was a mess and her eyes, with deep bags under them, almost popped out of her head when she got her first good look at the Jam. Pete emerged from the crowd.

“What seems to be the problem hah, sheriff?”

“Well, Pete, this here neighbor of yours cain’t sleep ‘cus o’ your music. She said she done called down here several times, but that didn’t work, so she called me.”

“Did anyone answer a call from this here woman?” Pete yelled.

There were some mumblings in the crowd. Suddenly a young man, obviously drunk, spoke up. “Yeah, she called, askin’ me to turn that damn music down, un I told her I wasn’t gonna turn the damn music down ‘cus I liked that damn music, un she told me I better do it, un I told her to go straight to Hell!” He laughed at the top of his lungs for several minutes, obviously amused by himself, then walked off.

“I insist that you arrest these hooligans, sir,” the woman shouted. “My daughter can’t get to sleep with this sickening music and all these drunk drivers speeding down the road. Just look at these people!”

All of a sudden a chicken, making racket like all hell had broken loose, came running through the crowd with its tail feathers on fire, a gang of drunk men trailing it, waving their arms in the air and making chicken sounds. The woman shook her head as they ran off into the darkness. I’m sure she had no idea people like this even existed.

The sheriff was just standing there laughing. “Aren’t you going to arrest these people, officer?” the woman asked.

He looked at her curiously for a moment. “Hell no, honey, I didn’t come here to arrest nobody, I just wanted some barbecue!” He let loose a wheezy laugh, slapped Pete on the back, and they walked off together towards the food, and everybody else followed them, laughing and shouting obscenities at the woman.

She thought the end of the world had come, all faith in the justice system lost, and decided to take the law into her own hands. She glanced down to see Charlie the three-legged dog staring back at her. The woman glanced around cautiously, grabbed the dog by the collar, and led him away towards the road.

Fifteen minutes later a shot rang out, and despite the blasting music, everyone got quiet and listened. Another shot. And another. It didn’t take everyone too long to realize where it was coming from. “Let’s go!” a man on a muddy three-wheeler yelled, and raced off towards the new neighbor’s house, the entire crowd running behind him.

Everyone was standing on the road when I arrived, huddled around something. I pushed my way to the front, and I couldn’t believe my eyes. I swear to God, that poor three-legged dog was lying stone dead in the yard.
The woman was standing on her porch, a long rifle in one hand, the only thing keeping her from getting lynched.

"You bums get that thing out of my yard. That filthy dog was pooping on my petunias. I asked him nicely to stop," she said sarcastically, "but he told me to go straight to hell so I shot him. If there's one thing I can't stand it's a dog with a dirty mouth. Go on, get that damned thing outta here."

A couple of men cautiously tiptoed out and carried the body back toward the Vernon's. Pete was almost in tears. The sheriff stood by him, his hat placed over his heart, while busily feeding on a greasy rib. "What the hell d'ya do a thing like that for, lady?" he said between bites.

"I've got every right to defend my property. Besides, somebody had to teach these people some manners, and unfortunately this was the only way to do it. Speaking of manners, wipe that grease off your face and don't talk to a lady with your mouth full."

The sheriff almost dropped dead. He quickly wiped his mouth on his collar, then turned to leave.

"Ain't ya gonna arrest her, sheriff?" Pete pleaded.

"Naw, I'm sorry Pete, I cain't. If that dog was on her place, well, she's got the right to do somethin' about it." I couldn't believe it. That woman had intimidated the hell out of a police officer.

The crowd was starting to disperse when Pete snapped, "You listen here, woman! You may not spend any time in the slammer, but you damn well gonna wish that's where you was when I get my hands on you. Pete Vernon ain't about to bow down to no big city bitch. You betah believe you gonna be sorry for this! You gonna pay, honey, and I guarantee it!" With that, he turned and left, steam blowing out his ears.

Well, the last Jam in Vernon Hollow history came to a solemn end. I sat by Pete's shack and watched sadly as the people hopped into the backs of trucks and drove off. My dad and I were the last to leave, but didn't say anything to Pete, who was sitting in the shack sharpening his knife, trying to look tough, but as we walked away, he threw the knife against the wall and buried his head in his hands.

So, that's the story of my new neighbor. Things haven't been the same since she shot the dog; the Vernon's haven't had a single Jam, which is good for the area pig population but not so good for the Vernons' frame of mind. Pete mentions her from time to time, mumbling "I'll get even with that dog-killer...", but everyone knows it's just an empty threat. She has him and the rest of the neighborhood scared to death. I haven't even seen the woman in a year. She keeps to herself, I guess she's a little frightened after those threats from the mob, and I would be too. The rest of us, we're just holding our breath, anxiously awaiting the glorious day when Pete will bravely announce the next Jam, and the white-trash army will rise up and free our neighborhood from the oppressive rule of the crazy woman.