

The Redistribution of Wealth

by [Armando Simón](#) (September 2024)



Cliff Dwellers (George Bellows, 1913)

Frank Forester turned off the main road and into the subdivision where he lived, glad to be home once more, after a much-needed three-week vacation in the Caribbean. As much fun

as he had had on his vacation, getting an enviable tan, snorkeling and parasailing in the daytime and partying at the night clubs in the evenings, he was nonetheless glad to be back home once more, in the suburbs, passing familiar landmarks. Seeing his spacious home, awaiting him, at the end of the cul de sac, was as if a real, living friend was welcoming him back. He drove up to the driveway, parked and unloaded his bags.

He carried the bags into the house and set them down. The house had a musty, warm smell due to the stagnant air, so he turned on the central air conditioner. He then went from room to room, refreshing his memory of each room's contents. It was not that he was afraid that anything was missing, rather, he was simply very glad to be back home. It was the joy of being home.

Having done the rounds, he then began the tedious process of unpacking his clothes and sorting out the various gifts and souvenirs that were his and those he would later deliver to friends and relatives.

That done, he could relax.

Homecoming is always so, so sweet.

He went to the kitchen and opened up a can of soda, pouring it over ice in a glass. He repoured, once the bubbles went down until the glass was full and he took a sip. He now took a long swallow, holding the glass with his left hand while with the right he pulled the cord that opened and closed the curtain, since he wanted to view his back yard. The curtain opened, admitting the light in and Frank choked on his soda, sending a spray against the glass sliding door.

There were people in his back yard.

Strangers! Total strangers!

And they had built a crude shack! As if . . . they lived there . . . in the shack. In his own back yard.

For two full minutes he stared motionless at the shabby apparition, stupefied, as if his brain had momentarily ceased to function.

Finally, Forester pulled himself together and marched out to his back yard. Passing the rose bushes and the pecan trees that he had planted himself, he strode over to where the squatters had put up the shack, which was at the furthestmost point of his spacious yard (he had planned to build a swimming pool next month, by the way). As he approached them, he noticed that they seemed to be a family and that all of its members were ... shabby ... grungy ... filthy. There was a knobby, lean man, a loutish young man and a very skinny, drab woman with two children. They were dark and leathery from the sun, dressed in rags and sullenly watched him with a resentful look as he approached them.

"What are you people doing here?" Forester asked them.

"What does it look like?" the youth answered right back, if you could call that an answer. He seemed desirous to beat Frank up. His father motioned him to be quiet and spoke up.

"We have no place to go to," the man simply said.

"We're homeless," the woman responded with a pitiable look to her, which seemed as if she could turn on and off at will.

Frank waited, but nothing more was forthcoming.

"So?" he finally asked.

"Whaddaya mean, 'so?'" the lout snorted. "Didn't you hear them? We're homeless. We have no place to live."

"So, what does that have to do with me? That doesn't mean that you can just make yourselves at home in my backyard."

"We have no other place to go to." The woman repeated the same formula: "We're homeless." They seemed to feel that the designation explained it all, that being homeless was a title of privilege, of nobility, and mentioning it would automatically elicit humility and obligation in others.

"We're also hungry. You got any food that you can let us have?"

Forester stared at them. He looked to one side and saw a large, rectangular patch of dirt that had been denuded of lawn grass.

"How long have you been here?" he asked them, suspecting the answer already.

"About two weeks, give or take a day," the man said with a smile. "See, you haven't even noticed our being here, you have so much land!"

"And as soon as the crop comes in, you won't have to worry about us, we'll be supporting ourselves." There was pride in the woman's voice.

"The reason that you haven't heard from me during all this time is because I haven't been here; I've been to the Caribbean on my vacation!"

The lout snorted contemptuously. "Did you get that? He's so rich he can go to the Caribbean for two weeks anytime he wants to, but he doesn't care whether human beings starve to death or not, or whether they have a place to live! That's the rich for you! Two weeks just throwing money away, with so many families *In Need!*" There was so much emphasis on the words "in need."

"For your information," Forester said slowly, "it was three weeks—"

"Three weeks! You heard it!"

“—and it’s none of your damn business what I do with my time, or with my money. I don’t have to answer to you, and I can spend three months in Thailand, if I feel like it, and as for my money, if I choose to, I can use it for toilet paper, ‘cause it’s none of your business, anyway.”

“Well, then, in that case what we do is none of your business either,” the father concluded.

“The hell it isn’t!”

“The hell it is! You said so yourself, that it’s every man for himself instead of everyone looking out for each other.”

“What I mean to say is that while you’re on my property, which is private property—”

“Selfish!” the woman accused.

“Property is theft!” the lout proclaimed at the same time.

“—it is my business. What you do once you leave is none of my business, nor do I care!”

“Heartless! Greedy!” the woman accused again.

“It’s no use, mother. It’s obvious that he doesn’t have a heart. He doesn’t care whether his fellow man lives or dies. The rich are all like that.”

“Listen. Why don’t you people go somewhere else?”

“We like this place just fine.”

“This place’s as good as any. In fact, it’s better’n most.”

“Look. I don’t care to argue any more. I just got back from my vacation, and I just want to relax. I don’t need this hassle. I just want you off my property. What you do or where you go from that point on doesn’t matter to me. If you don’t leave right away—and take all this garbage with you—I’m calling the

police to come over and arrest the lot of you.”

“Go ahead! Call the cops!” the punk challenged. “For all the good it’ll do you!”

Frank turned around and walked back to his house while the squatters hurled jeers at his back.

He called the police and explained the problem. They promised to send someone over. Nobody came. He called again. They promised to send somebody over. Nobody came. Nighttime came. No policeman in sight. Eventually, he went to sleep, occasionally waking up and nervously peeking out the window.

He called the police station at the break of dawn and insisted on their sending help to evict the squatters. Someone would be right over.

Two hours later, the doorbell rang. Forester answered it. Instead of a policeman, there was a middle-aged woman with short-cropped hair carrying a briefcase.

“Are you Mister Frank Forester?” she asked.

“That would be me.”

“You phoned a complaint to the police station about a family of Destitute Settlers, I believe.”

“‘Destitute Settlers?’ You mean the damned squatters in my back yard?”

A look of distaste flitted across the woman’s face.

“We’d prefer it if you didn’t use the term ... ‘squatters,’ Mister Forester. It’s not a term that we like to use. Frankly, it’s demeaning and carries a lot of negative connotations.”

“Oh, really? ‘Carries a lot of negative connotations,’ does it? Say, who are you? You’re not a cop.”

She handed him a card. "My name is Janet Luna and I'm a social worker. My job is to reconcile the disputing parties and attempt to arrive at a compromise."

"Compromise?"

"Yes, that's what I said. I'm very busy these days with similar cases like yours. There's so much work to be done with all the Needy Families out there ever since we've had this Economic Dislocation."

"Fine, fine, now how do I go about getting rid of the ... Destitute Settlers that I got in my back yard? I want them out! I don't want complete strangers living in my back yard. It's not that hard to understand."

"Mister Forester, I wish that you weren't so single-minded in your approach to this dispute. It's been my experience that there are usually several points of view to every problem."

"What?"

"And ... there are also several possible solutions to the problem, hidden from view, which can be usually beneficial, if all parties agree to remain flexible to possible alternatives."

"But, ma'am, I don't want to be flexible. And furthermore, I don't see any reason why I should be flexible. Those people out there have trespassed onto my property and settled down to what seems to be for the duration. They didn't even ask for permission. On top of that, they've built an eyesore and have damaged my lawn. Now, I own this house and this lawn and have paid for it by busting my back at work and I want them to get lost. I am perfectly within my rights. What could be simpler?"

The social worker looked at him, frowning. "You don't have much compassion for Poor People, do you?"

"I hate it when compassion is used as a weapon, and I

recognize it when compassion *is* being used as a weapon. And, aside from that, quite frankly, I don't give a damn for Poor People, one way or the other—" the woman gasped in shock at the blasphemy "—and I don't think The Poor should be a sacred cow to which we all have to bow down to. But my opinion isn't at issue here! We're both talking in circles. Just get 'em out!" He jerked his thumb backward towards the backyard.

The social worker sighed deeply with an annoyed look on her face, opened up her briefcase, rummaged around and took out several printed forms.

"All right. There's a four-step process involved. The first step is the Informal Resolution Stage. Now, then, can you tell me where I can find the clients?"

"The *squatters* are in my backyard," he motioned.

"Let me call them in."

"Hell, no! They're not setting foot inside my house!"

Once more she appeared annoyed. "Very well. In that case, could you accompany me? We need for all of us to talk together."

As they emerged out of the house together, Forester asked her, "Say, I called the cops. Now, don't get me wrong, but how come you're here, instead?"

"It's a new Social Services program that the new Administration put into effect as soon as they took office in order to deal with the Economic Dislocation. Hadn't you heard?"

"No, I don't keep up with politics; I hate politics. Besides, I've been out of the country these past three weeks."

"Ah. Wish I could afford to do that. Must be nice."

"It is."

He was worried about the new government, though, and made a mental note to find out more about it.

"There's so much poverty in this country," the woman commiserated, shaking her head and fishing for sympathy.

"Mmmm."

The riffraff watched them approach. She beamed at them and extended her hand.

"Hello! I'm Molly Sulzberger, I'm a social worker and I believe that you've already met Mister Forester."

It turned out that the surname of the family was Tippin, with John the father, Edna the scarecrow mother and Gerald the oldest son.

The social worker made an adequate representation of Forester's position and then asked the family for a response.

"We're Poor."

"We're Homeless."

"He's got more than enough. You can tell he's rich."

The social worker nodded, smiling, while jotting down the responses. "Good, good. I've got it all down. And do you have any complaints against Mister Forester?"

"Say what?" Frank blurted out.

"I'll say we do," chuckled the elder Tippin.

"The man's a Fascist!" Gerald the lout practically yelled out.

"Oh, don't be so hard on the poor man, Gerald," the mother urged. "I'm sure it's been a shock for him, too. But just you wait, he'll come around."

"You said that you had a complaint?" Ms. Sulzberger prompted.

"And how!" exclaimed Mister Tippin. "The man has been really rude to us from the very beginning. Very insulting, you know."

"He doesn't seem to appreciate our situation," Mrs. Tippin put in. "I don't mean to be ungrateful, but he seems to be insensitive to our Needs. And I'm sorry I called you heartless yesterday, Mister Forester. I realized right away that I shouldn't have said that. I apologize."

The social worker looked at Frank with an expression that said, "See?"

"But he's certainly made us feel unwelcome," Mister Tippin went on. "We don't like being an imposition on nobody; we got our pride too, you know. But we ain't the only people hard up. And he's got so much! You can look all around! He has so much land he can hardly keep track of it."

"The man's just a Fascist!" the lout exclaimed apropos of nothing. "I wouldn't be surprised if he was also a racist! They're all the same! Property is theft!"

"So, I guess what I hear you say," the social worker tried to sum up, "is that you find his attitude and his comments to be degrading to you and that you'd like for him to stop. You'd like for him to like you and approve of what you've done. Is that right?"

They nodded assent.

She now turned back to the landlord, smiling. "All right, Mister Forester. You heard them. They have legitimate complaints against you. The Tippin family are asking that you change your attitude towards them and stop looking down on them. Would you be willing to agree to that?"

Forester forced himself not to blurt out what was on the tip of his tongue and instead sweetly asked, "And if I stop doing

what they object to, what do I get in return? Will they be willing to move away?"

Delighted at how well The Process was unfolding, she now turned back to the Tippins. "OK. Mister and Mrs. Tippin, Mister Forester wants to know what you're willing to do in exchange for his goodwill. A legitimate question, I think." The three Tippins huddled apart, discussing alternatives with Gerald gesticulating from time to time. Finally, they returned to the waiting duo.

"We've talked it over and we've decided that it's only fair. In exchange, we promise to keep out of his way and not to be any bother to Mister Forester," the elder man assured them.

"He won't even know we're here," Mrs. Tippin nodded to emphasize her point.

Mrs. Sulzberger was almost beside herself with pride at how well The Process was developing.

"There! You see!" she told Frank. "They're willing to compromise!" *Maybe this question could be resolved at the Informal Resolution stage, after all.*

"I have a counterproposal," Forester spoke slowly and deliberately. "If they hit the road—at once—I'll be as nice as can be towards them from here on out."

The social worker was crestfallen.

"Aha!" Gerald Tippin yelled out, pointing his finger at Forester, feeling vindicated.

John Tippin shrugged his bony shoulders at the civil servant and said, "Well, we was willing to meet him halfway, ma'am, but you heard what he said. He ain't gonna change one bit. Let's face it. He's a mean man." Sulzberger sadly nodded; her vision of an agreed compromise gone up in smoke.

"Well, we did what we could. I'll see you folks later."

The duo went back into the house.

"Nice place you have here," she said. It did not sound like a compliment, more like an accusation. "Tell me something. Doesn't your conscience ever bother you? I mean, living like this when there are so many poor people with barely enough to eat?"

"Say what?" Frank could hardly believe his ears.

"Really. How can you even sleep at night? You have here a three-bedroom home with only you living in it. At the same time, there are whole families out there living under bridges, at the mercy of the rain and cold. And look at all the expensive furniture! Think how your money could be put to better use. Don't you see how wrong, how immoral, is the life you live?"

"Lady, you got some nerve. The way you and them talk, you make me out like I'm a millionaire."

"And let me tell you something else, Mister Forester. 'Private property' is a chimera, an illusion. All modern thinkers agree on that. Everything belongs to the Community of Mankind. The age of private property is dead and gone. I learned that in my sociology class in college, by the way."

"I never took a sociology course in my life," he said dryly. "Maybe that's why I can't swallow the guff you're gushing out with."

"I'm sorry. You're right, I forgot myself. I'm supposed to be impartial." She suddenly became businesslike. "Your next step is to fill out these forms for the Initial Arbitration Stage." She handed him a thick stack of forms. "In triplicate. Make sure you fill out every question, or it'll be returned to you. Particularly the Financial Statement."

"Turn in your forms at City Hall, have them notarized and a date will be set for you and the Tippin family to come together. They will be given a copy of your complaint form and will get a chance to respond. If they cannot afford legal counsel, an attorney will be appointed for them prior to the Arbitration Hearing. Since they're Poor, they're bound to be appointed one. You, on the other hand, look like you could afford to pay for your own attorney."

"I must tell you, in all honesty, that my report will emphasize the fact that they were willing to compromise and that you were adamant to have it all your way. You'll get a copy of my report by mail, as well as a form for filling out any corrections in the report that you feel needs to be made."

She paused, thinking about any possible omissions in her rote speech.

"Do you have any questions?" she asked at last.

"Just one. Why can't the cops come and evict the squatters from my back yard?"

She grimaced at the improper word. "The law that's now in effect prevents such an abuse of power. It was long overdue. The laws that were in effect before in many states for preventing the eviction of tenants from apartments, rented houses, and houses that were empty I mean, were simply strengthened and extended to other areas of jurisdiction."

"I see."

"The government is now more Socially Responsible than it has ever been. Really, for the first time, we finally have a government that is in tune with the Needs of the Poor."

"You don't say. Lucky them. You know, I've never really understood what The Poor have done to merit preferential treatment."

"One piece of advice, Mister Forester, and it's well meant: adjust with the times."

The social worker departed.

Frank Forester began to meticulously fill out the forms in triplicate. He then had them notarized and handed them in at City Hall.

The Arbitration Hearing was set for four months hence.

Then, immediately afterwards, he consulted with an attorney who assured him of inevitable success. That, more than anything, unnerved Forester, knowing (from past experience) attorneys to be pathological liars who will always tell their clients precisely what they want to hear.

He then went home and brooded, occasionally glancing out the sliding glass door at his uninvited guests.

The next day he woke up and, after peering out the window to see if they were still there, returned to his job. He distributed some presents, caught up on old news and gossip from work and told one and all about his travails since his return. They were sympathetic, but not surprised (and this, in turn, surprised him), as his circumstances had recently become commonplace, even before he had left on his trip. A couple of his coworkers even took the side of the squatters, much to his dismay. But what really shocked Forester was learning that in the states of Oregon, New York, Tennessee and Michigan, The Homeless were being billeted in private residences, as a result of state legislation, and in California, not only was billeting also taking place, but it was also being applied to the illegal aliens that were swarming over the border there from Mexico by the tens of thousands.

It was a national phenomenon and not just his personal, particular problem.

"I've been telling you for years, now, Frank," said Ed, one of his coworkers, "to snap out of your apathy towards politics and pay attention to what's going on. And here you are, you just woke up and you're clueless. Well, now you're paying the price for sticking your head in the sand." Frank was embarrassed. He realized how ignorant he was, how his deliberate apathy towards politics had eventually come around to bite him in the rear.

From work, Frank visited some of his relatives' homes in order to deliver presents and to talk. No one had any solution to his problem other than buying a gun and forcing out the squatters at gun point, which was now illegal in any case and carried a heavy penalty, including the forfeiture of one's property. One of his cousins got on a soap box and started speaking for half an hour that it was the logical conclusion to centuries of religious, political and ideological influences. Forester shrugged, not caring about whether his problem stemmed from centuries ago or three weeks ago.

Having stayed over for dinner at one of his relatives' homes, he arrived back during the night. Once inside his own home, he peered out the window and gasped.

There was another shack going up in his back yard and additional squatters had invaded his property!

He stormed out of the house to confront the newcomers. Halfway through the back yard, he heard one of the newcomers utter, "Oh, look! He's coming over to help us put it up!"

Forester stopped in his tracks; all the wind taken out of his sail by what that exclamation implied.

"Him? Not likely! He ain't the type." He recognized Gerald's voice and forced down an impulse to go smash his face in.

He turned right around and marched right back into his house. From the corner of his eye, he noticed that the pecan trees

had been picked clean of nuts. He sat by the table, drumming his fingers furiously. He felt besieged. Unsure of everything.

He did not call the police, at first. The prospect of another visit by the social worker filled him with revulsion. However, he did drive over to the police station and told his story, but the police simply confirmed what Sulzberger and his relatives had told him and he returned home.

He dreaded coming back home.

He could only fall asleep after taking sleeping pills.

Frank Forester woke up in the morning thanks to his alarm clock and the first thing that he did was to look out the window, hoping that he had dreamed the additional tenants. He saw it was no dream. He was also treated to the sight of the squatters defecating and urinating in one corner of his back yard. He groaned and collapsed back in bed, staring at the ceiling.

He arrived late for work. Work helped to distract him somewhat from his problems at home. Halfway through the day, he got an inspiration and called up one of the television stations about his problem. The first one was unsympathetic to his plight, but the second one was excited about the story and would interview him tomorrow. Forester asked for, and got, the next day off from work.

The next day, at midmorning, a news van pulled over at the kerb of his house. A reporter and a cameraman interviewed him at length for nearly an hour, filmed his home, his yard, the shacks and even talked to the squatters.

That evening, his story did come on, on the six o'clock news.

The anchorwoman began.

"The plight of the Homeless have been getting more and more attention lately, both on a national and local level. It is

estimated that up to seven million persons have no place to call their own. Many don't even have the means to put a roof over their heads to keep out the rain and snow. Many succumb to illnesses like influenza and pneumonia. Others cope with starvation every day of their waking lives."

The picture switched to the reporter talking to a microphone in front of Forester's hose. He dovetailed the anchorwoman's lead.

"Rebecca, although many relief agencies have pitched in to relieve the suffering, resources are being stretched to the breaking point. Many families fall through the cracks and make do the best they can to survive. They don't always receive a helping hand, though, from their fellow man, and often encounter outright hostility."

The picture now showed the Tippin family in front of their shack, trying hard to look a pitiable sight, soundlessly speaking, as the reporter's voice over continued. "John Tippin and his family found some land that was not being used. He thought that he'd make this his home in order to improve his family's lot. The family even planted a small garden in order to become self-sufficient." As the voice continued, a picture of the upturned ground was shown, and it then switched to the reporter listening attentively to the elder Tippin speak. "But they did not count on the hostility of Frank Forester, the man who owned the land."

Tippin's voice could now be heard. "The man basically told us to get out of his land, that he didn't give a damn what happened to any of us, and that it wasn't any of his business one way or the other, anyway. We tried to reason with him, trying to get him to see things from our point of view, but no, he didn't want to hear anything we had to say. He was very rude to us in spite of the fact that we'd try to stay out of his way."

It was Mrs. Tippin's turn next. "I told him that we hadn't much to eat in the longest time and asked him if he could share some of the food that he doesn't want. It's not for me, you know, it's for the little ones, they're just skin and bones. I stay up all night worrying what's to become of them. I don't see how he can look at himself in the mirror. We're Homeless."

Now, Gerald spoke up. "He even threatened to shoot us if we didn't get off his land! He called us all sorts of names in the process! What gets me is that he's got so much wealth and land that's just going to waste! He won't even let us have the use of his bathroom; the sanitary conditions here are inhumane. Do you think that we really want to live like animals?"

The reporter's face came back. "And what does Mister Forester have to say on all this? We interviewed him for this feature story. This is what he had to say. The camera cut to his face talking to the reporter: "I just want them to get out, that's all!" Out of an hour's worth of interviewing, Forester saw himself on television speaking that one, solitary, sentence, then "speaking" soundlessly as the reporter's voice was overheard. "The dispute was brought to the attention of Social Services, and, Mister Forester refused to compromise on any of the issues involved, insisting that the Destitute Settlers had to be evicted. The case is now awaiting arbitration."

"But Mister Forester now has more problems. Another family of Destitute Settlers," a picture of the new squatters was shown, "has moved in on unused land, right next to the Tippin family."

"And the Tippin family has made them welcomed."

John Tippin's face was seen speaking. "We don't have much to share with them, but we'll share what we can. We're all in this together. No matter how bad off you are, you can always

find somebody that's worse off than you are."

The news reporter then signed off.

Forester clicked off the television with his remote control and just stared at the blank screen. He sat motionless for a full ten minutes.

The phone rang. Moving only his arm, he brought the receiver to his ear. It was his lawyer, who assured him that with the great publicity that he had received, the case would be easily won, a shoe-in.

Forester hung up on him.

The phone rang again. It was somebody asking directions in order to bring things to help out the Tippin family.

He hung up on them, too.

The phone rang again. It was Ed from work, laughing. "Hey, buddy, they really skewered you, didn't they?"

He hung up on Ed.

One of his cousins rung up to tell him that he was in the wrong and should make amends to those people. He urged Frank to adopt Christian principles and not think of himself as better than others, that we were all equal in God's eyes. Frank hung up in mid-sentence.

He left the receiver off the hook and just sat there, immobile, staring at the silent television.

An hour later, a couple of vehicles arrived. People brought over food, blankets and clothes. They went directly to the backyard, without asking his permission, shooting evil looks at the house and its resident ogre.

"Compassionate jackasses," he muttered to himself.

Frank took an extra strength dose of sleeping pills and went to bed early. He barely spoke to anyone at work the next day. When he came home, there was now an additional Destitute Settler family, along with its decrepit shelter.

All hell broke loose the day after. Frank arrived home to find what he had been subconsciously fearing all along. The strangers had broken into his house and made themselves at home. He realized it the moment he set foot inside. It looked like a tornado had hit the place. Everything was in disarray. Trash was strewn all over the floor. There were shattered lamps, plates and glasses on the floor. The furniture had greasy food stains and some of the walls had children's handprints of ketchup and dirt. Clothes were hanging everywhere. Numerous voices filled the air, and the smell of body odor was like a sledgehammer.

There was a man, shirtless, with his scantily clad girlfriend next to him, called him from the kitchen. "Hey, Frank, don't you keep any beer in this joint?" The tone was one of incredulity.

"You brought it on yourself, buddy!" Gerald leered next to him, and Frank punched him in the face. They went to fighting, but immediately reinforcements arrived on Gerald's side and Frank lost consciousness.

When he woke up, it was later on that night. One of the squatters splashed more water on him and shook him.

"Wake up, man! They want you inside." He helped Frank up, and slowly he regained his balance. He found himself in one of the shacks. The squatter next to him grinned. "This is the way the other half lives, fella. How do you like it? Come on! John's called a meeting."

He was led back to the house, to the living room, where the others were lounging around, waiting for him to come. Gerald grinned on seeing him, as did a couple of others. One of the

girls giggled at his bruises.

"All right, Frank, glad you could come. I've called a meeting in order to plan out the next step. We've got to get organized. Now, then, sleeping arrangements."

The bedrooms and sofas were doled out. Frank was to sleep in one of the shacks or in the garage from now on since he had been living in the master bedroom for years.

"Next order of business is food..."

"And booze!" someone yelled out and everyone laughed. Except Forester.

John chuckled. "All right, I suppose a little liquor won't hurt."

"OK. The women tell me that the food supply won't last more than two, maybe three, days. Frank, I gotta tell you that we're shocked at how empty you keep your pantry. But that's neither here nor there now. The cash in your wallet won't buy many groceries—"

"Or booze!" the same man yelled out and everyone laughed once more.

"Or booze, so tomorrow, after work, stop by the bank and take some money out of the account so the girls can go to the supermarket and buy groceries." Tippin squinted at the dazed host. "You probably get paid on the fifteenth, don't you? Well, when you do, bring your paycheck home and we'll make out a budget. You've got a big responsibility, now."

"Next ... household chores. We've got to get organized. Everyone has to carry their load. It'll all be democratic. Everyone'll take turns taking out the garbage, cooking, doing the laundry, cleaning, and so on. I'll put up a roster and no one's going to be asked to do more than what's fair, not even Frank."

"He should! He deserves it!" Gerald growled.

"Ease up, Gerald!" his father chastised him. "What's past is past! Frank sees how things are now! I don't want you picking on him anymore. I mean it!"

Gerald mumbled assent.

"Have I forgotten anything? No? OK. We'll have a meeting at least once a week to iron out any problems. Meeting adjourned!"

Everyone was in a good mood, everyone, that is, except Frank, who was sure that he was in The Twilight Zone.

One of the women accosted him and held up his hand, looking at his watch.

"Say, that's a Rolex, ain't it?" He nodded, still groggy. "They're really expensive, ain't they?" She looked up at him. "What I don't understand is, why did you throw away so much money on a watch when a Timex or Seiko can tell you the very same time that a Rolex can?" Frank shrugged stupidly. "I got an idea," she went on. "Let's sell your Rolex and buy a cheap watch instead! We can sure use the money, you know." She began to unfasten his watch, but he stumbled away and out of the house before anyone caught on.

He calmly got in his car and drove away.

At the police station, he was again informed that they could not help him, since appropriations of property by Destitute Settlers came under the jurisdiction of Social Services. He nodded and left the premises.

In every city in the land, everyone knows at least one shady character. So did Forester. Persistent inquiries led him to a gang of toughs who would clear out the place for the right amount of money.

An hour later, the gang of toughs, along with their equally tough women, met Frank at his home. They began to clean house and Frank joined in. Gerald was his. Bloodied, broken and mangled bodies ran, crawled or were thrown out of the house, sometimes through the windows. It was all over in twenty minutes. The tearing down of the shacks in his back yard took a little longer.

He paid his enforcers and even gave them a tip.

After they left and he was cleaning up the debris, half a dozen policemen showed up and arrested Frank Forester.

"I thought you said that this was the jurisdiction of Social Services!" he exclaimed in anger to the same cop that he had talked to earlier.

"It is when it's the tenant making a complaint against Destitute Settlers, but not when it's the other way around. This falls under Victimizing the Poor law. When they make a complaint of force or brutality against a landowner, then it comes under the jurisdiction of the criminal courts," the policeman explained. "Hey, we're just doing our job."

The apprehended man was in a daze.

While awaiting trial in jail, the journalists did a follow-up on the earlier story, scandalized at the use of violence. The Destitute Settlers had moved back to the house, and they regaled the journalist with details of "the neo-Nazi attack" at the behest of Mister Forester.

Frank Forester was, of course, found guilty. His savings and his home were awarded to the Destitute Settlers as Compensation to the Victims. Frank himself was sentenced to three years to a Re-Education and Sensitivity Training Camp.

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Armando Simón is the author of *Very Peculiar Stories*, from where this story originates.

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