

Old Joe and the Carpenter: An Appalachian Tale of Building Bridges

“Old Joe and the Carpenter” is a story written by Pleasant L. DeSpain and first published in the Spring 1998 issue of Teaching Tolerance magazine.

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Web Version:

<https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/old-joe-and-the-carpenter-an-appalachian-tale-of-building-bridges>



This article contains a multimedia feature that is available at the web address above.

Old Joe lived way out in the countryside, and he had one good neighbor. They'd been friends all their lives. And now that their spouses were buried and their children raised, all they had left were their farms ... and each other.



But for the first time, they'd had an argument. It was over a stray calf that neither one really needed. It seemed as though the calf was found on Joe's neighbor's land and so he claimed it as his own. But Old Joe said, "No, that calf has the same markings as my favorite cow, and I recognize it as being mine."

Well, they were both a bit stubborn, so they just stopped talking to each other. It seemed that a dark cloud had settled over Old Joe ... until there came a knock on his door one week later.



He wasn't expecting anybody that morning, and as he opened the door, he saw a young woman who had a box of tools on her shoulder. She had a kind voice and dark, deep eyes, and she said, "I'm a carpenter, and I'm looking for a bit of work. Maybe you'd have some small jobs that I can help with."

Old Joe brought her into the kitchen and sat her down and gave her some stew that he had on the back of the stove. There also was home-cooked bread, fresh churned butter and homemade jam.

While they were eating and talking, Joe decided that he liked this young carpenter, and he said, "I do have a job for you. Look right there through my kitchen window. See that farm over there? That's my neighbor's place. And you see that crick [creek] running right down there between our property lines? That crick, it wasn't there last week. My neighbor did that to spite me. He took his plow up there, and he dug a big old furrow from the upper pond and flooded it.

"Well, I want you to do one better. Since he wants us divided that way, you go out there and build me a fence — a big, tall fence — so I won't even have to see his place anymore!"

And the carpenter said, "Well, if you have the lumber and the nails, I got my tools, and I'll be able to build something that you'll like."

Joe had to go to town to get some supplies, so he hitched up the wagon and showed the carpenter where everything was in the barn. The carpenter carried everything she needed down to the crick and started to work.

The carpenter's work went smooth and fast. She did her measuring and her sawing and her nailing. It was about sunset when Old Joe returned, and the carpenter had finished her work. When Old Joe pulled up in that wagon, his eyes opened wide and his mouth fell open: There wasn't a fence there at all.

It was a bridge, going from one side of the crick to the other! It had handrails and all — a fine piece of work — and his neighbor was just starting to cross the bridge with his hand

stuck out, and he was saying, “Joe, you’re quite a fellow to build this bridge. I’d never been able to do that. I’m so glad we’re going to be friends again!”

And Joe, he put his arms around his neighbor and said, “Oh, that calf is yours. I’ve known it all the time. I just want to be your friend, too.”



About that time, the carpenter started putting her tools in the box and then hoisted it onto her shoulder and started to walk away. And Joe said, “Wait, come on back, young carpenter. I want you to stay on. I got lots of projects for you.”

The carpenter just smiled and said, “I’d like to stay on, Joe, but you see, I can’t. I got more bridges to build.”

So she walked on, and there ends my tale.

Source

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TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

1. Question
Describe the setting, characters and problem.
2. Question
Who comes to Old Joe's door, and what does Old Joe ask her to do and why?
3. Question
What does the carpenter build and why?
4. Question
What do you think the carpenter means when she says, "I'd like to stay on, Joe, but you see, I can't. I got more bridges to build"?

TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Question

Describe the setting, characters and problem.

Answer

Two men, Old Joe and his neighbor, live on farms in the countryside. They both live alone since their children are grown up and their wives have died. They are good friends, but they have a disagreement over a cow. They both think the cow is theirs. They get upset with each other and stop talking. A creek is formed between their two houses, and Old Joe thinks his neighbor created it on purpose.

2. Question

Who comes to Old Joe's door, and what does Old Joe ask her to do and why?

Answer

A carpenter, someone who can build or fix things made out of wood, comes to his door and offers to work for him. Old Joe asks her to build a fence so he doesn't have to see his neighbor anymore.

3. Question

What does the carpenter build and why?

Answer

The carpenter builds a bridge because she wants Old Joe and his friend to be able to cross it and make up.

4. Question

What do you think the carpenter means when she says, "I'd like to stay on, Joe, but you see, I can't. I got more bridges to build"?

Answer

It seems like the carpenter might do the kind of work that helps people get along better. A bridge was helpful to Old Joe and his neighbor because they were able to cross it and fix their friendship. She wants to help other people in the same way.