

Riverbank Retreat

*The Story of the Water Vole*

By Sarah Hancock

Riverbank Retreat is the perfect place for pensioners to relish in retirement. With picturesque views and food supplies of plenty, it's no wonder so many elderly choose to reside here.

Across the pond at number nine lives Kevin Kingfisher. Once a famous model, appearing on the front cover of the 'RSPB's Great British Birds,' he now spends his bachelor days perching on the low-hanging branches of the retreat.

To the right of Kevin, residing at number ten, is Mervin & Meryl Swan. Having just celebrated their tenth wedding anniversary, they live a peaceful life, gliding up and down the cool waters, reminiscing as they go.

At number two, near the slow moving water, is the home of Valerie Vole. At the ripe old age of eighteen months, Valerie takes great pride in keeping her home neat and efficient. With her fifteen children now grown, her last litter leaving the burrow only a few months ago, Valerie's vision of a peaceful retirement has finally come true.

For Valerie, a place at Riverbank Retreat had only ever been a dream. Her Great Grandfather Vincent aspired to live here, followed by Grandmother Vivian and finally Mother Viola, but none were quite lucky enough to be given a blissful burrow. In fact, Valerie is the first ever Vole to live in these tranquil parts for twenty years. What makes retirement even better for Valerie, is that her best friend Vera Vole lives just next door at number three. What more could a water vole ask for?

One sunny Saturday afternoon, Valerie peeks her chestnut brown head out from the burrow. Her rounded nose briskly sniffs the air, as she clambers out of the tennis ball sized entrance and onto the green. Although the weekends should be a time for relaxing and recharging, Valerie wastes no time in getting stuck into her daily chores.

Gardening is first and foremost. Section by section, Valerie begins to mow the unkempt lawn, nibbling away on the luscious blades of grass that grow sporadically around the burrow entrance. Like a mini lawn mower, she makes her way through the blades which slowly shrink in size to reveal a rather impressive looking patch of neat and tidy grass. Mowing the lawn can not only be tiring, but rather filling work, so any sections which cannot be devoured, Valerie leaves in an orderly pile to deal with at a later date.

Valerie then makes her way to the bathroom, which rightly so is in its own sectioned off area, just a stone's throw from the water's edge. With all her cigar shaped business privately placed from other

residents, but in enough view to let other voles know that she resides at number two, she quickly deposits another, swiftly making her way back to the burrow entrance.

On the way, she collects the orderly pile of nibbled leftovers and takes them to her outdoor dining area. Valerie has always enjoyed eating alfresco style and this particular spot is a favourite. Here, Valerie can nibble on her dishes, whilst watching the slow moving waters drift by. She enjoys nothing more than dining with a view and Riverbank Retreat offers just that. As she places her lunch down at the dining spot, she quickly remembers that today is, of course, Saturday.

Each week, on this particular day, Valerie is visited by her next door neighbour and dear, dear friend, Vera Vole. The two spend most of the day reminiscing, nattering and nibbling away, not to mention a little gossip here and there about other residents at Riverbank Retreat. Most notably, they meet for their weekly neighbourhood watch updates.

Poor Vera Vole hasn't had the easiest of times. Before moving to the retirement home, Vera lived in a very unsafe area, always remaining on high alert. Her old burrow sat on the banks of a rather polluted river and vegetation was hard to come by, not to mention humans began building a little further up stream. Life was noisy, messy and above all, dangerous! With burrows exposed and having to travel further for her meals, Vera often had very close encounters with some rather unsavoury characters. Foxes, otters, buzzards and owls would often lurk around the burrow, eyeing up the vole as a tasty looking snack. However, for Vera, the mink was the most terrifying.

When meeting Vera at Riverbank Retreat, Valerie could see her new friend was rather on edge. In an attempt to make her enjoy the much safer and calmer surroundings of their new retirement home, Valerie set up the neighbourhood watch scheme, reporting and keeping track of any suspicious activity or petty crimes. Now, each Saturday, the pair meet to not only natter and nibble, but to discuss any new dodgy dealings in an attempt to keep Riverbank Retreat a peaceful place to live.

“Valerie dear, are you in?” cries an elderly Vera into the entrance of burrow number two.

“I'm over here Vera,” answers Valerie, “in the outdoor dining area.”

Vera sheepishly waddles over to Valerie's alfresco set up, taking a frantic look backwards as she goes.

“I mowed the lawn this morning and managed to stock up on some delicious lunch for us.” calls Valerie. “Can I interest you in a blade of grass Vera dear?”

“You know, you really should move your dining spot to a more secluded area Valerie,” replies Vera as she makes her way toward the luncheon table. “You don’t know who could be out here, watching you.”

“Come on now Vera,” Valerie scoffs. “How many times do I have to tell you, Riverbank Retreat is safe and pleasant. You need to learn to relax and enjoy your retired life a little more.”

Valerie notices that Vera is carrying something in her five toed paws. It’s a small cardboard box, with the words ‘Neighbourhood Watch’ sprawled across the front.

“What’s with the box?” Valerie asks.

“Well, I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of just putting together a few pieces of equipment,” explains Vera. “You know, things we may need to ensure our neighbourhood watch scheme runs efficiently and smoothly.”

Valerie sighs and smiles. She invites Vera to place the cardboard box next to her dining set up and pulls out a seat for her friend.

“Can I interest you in a herbal tea Vera? I brewed it earlier in the week. I managed to find some delicious tasting bulrushes that give it such a sweet and pleasant flavour.”

“Sounds delicious,” Vera replies, “maybe whilst we sip, we can mull over some of the reports filed this week?”

Valerie pours two cups of herbal tea for the pair and prepares to listen intently to Vera’s report notes. Like every Saturday, Valerie knows this may take some time before the more casual nattering and gossiping can begin. However, she knows it’s best to get the important business out of the way first, so Vera can feel more, well, relaxed.

“Firstly, I was out and about the other morning, just taking a nibble on some delicious berries that had fallen from the nearby fruit tree, when all of a sudden, I heard a loud, flapping sound.”

Valerie looks confused. “A flapping sound you say? And what makes you seem suspicious of that?”

“Well, isn’t it obvious,” Vera cries. “The flapping sounded like a creature who possesses long legs, a long neck, perhaps grey and white in colour, with a yellow bill!”

“You got all that from a flapping sound?” Valerie questions.

“Don’t you see Valerie! It could very well be the flap of a heron! A heron I say! So I decided to note it down.”

Valerie tries hard to reassure her friend, “Well did you actually see the heron?” she asks.

“No,” replies Vera, “but it certainly sounded like one.”

Being a water vole herself, Valerie knows that you do need to keep a watchful eye out for herons, as it has been known for them to snack on her kind.

“I understand Vera dear, I do. Being voles, we do need to be careful of herons, but as you know, if you see one in the water, you simply retreat inside the burrow and keep safe. Besides, if you didn’t actually see the heron, it could have very well been Kevin Kingfisher flapping about from number nine.”

“Yes, I do hear he’s on the lookout for a new companion. I saw him yesterday catching a fish and wrapping it up as a gift for someone,” agrees Vera. “You may very well be right dear.”

The conversation steers to more pressing matters at hand. This is the sort of nattering Valerie enjoys on a sunny Saturday afternoon, but she fears it may not be all the reports her best friend has to offer.

“Then there was another, shall we say, incident that occurred, why only yesterday evening,” Vera reveals in hushed tones. “There, I was, lying in bed, when I heard something scurrying around toward the entrance of my burrow.”

“Really?” Valerie gasps.

“Yes! I could hear sniffing and scratching!”

“Well, what did you do?”

“Well, I must admit, it was a little frightening, especially after the mink rumours flying around. I simply hid in my secret tunnel, you know the one that leads to the water!”

“I know the very one, I have one too for emergencies of course!”

“Yes, well anyway, I stayed there all night - hardly slept a wink. When I went out in the morning to take a closer look, there it was!”

“There what was,” questions Valeire, now fully invested in this story.

“Excrements. Business. You know, poop!”

“Yes, dear I know exactly what you mean,” Valerie replies, rather embarrassed that the neighbours may have heard this conversation. “Are you sure it wasn’t yours?”

“How very dare you Valerie,” an offended Vera cries. “As you well know, being a vole I take great pride in keeping my home neat and tidy, and my personal matters away from the entrance of my home.”

“Sorry Vera, I’m only trying to figure out what it could mean.”

“Well, isn’t it obvious? There’s clearly an otter trying to break into my home and gobble me up for its dinner.”

Valerie once again scoffs. “Vera, you can’t go pointing the finger at otters. I know they are partial to a vole or two, but unless you saw it with your own eyes, how would you know?”

“Well,” replies Vera, again in hushed tones. “All I’m going to say is that it smelt rather like jasmine tea - coincidence, I think not?”

Valerie nods in agreement. It has been known for otters to stalk voles in nearby waters and it is also known that their droppings do resemble the smell Vera described. Nonetheless, Valerie reassures her friend that to her knowledge, no otters have ever been spotted at Riverbank Retreat, or even moved in for that matter.

Rather put off by the herbal tea following Vera’s excrement description, Valerie offers Vera a few grass cuttings to calm her nerves which she happily nibbles on.

“Anyway, that’s the latest from this week,” Vera mumbles as she munches away. “It all seems very suspicious to me, so I have taken extra precautions to ensure we are kept safe from now on.”

Valerie peeks at the cardboard box that still sits beside the dining area. It seems to be filled with some rather unusual contraptions. Vole sized alarms with red flashing lights, vole sized binoculars and even vole sized shovels all stuffed into the box. Valerie can’t help but question where her friend found such items, but more importantly, what she plans on doing with them. Before she has time to question, conversation turns to the more recent celebrations that took place at the water’s edge.

“So, what did you think of Meryl and Mervin’s anniversary party eh?” asks Vera. “I personally thought the buffet was a little bit lacking.”

Before Valerie has a moment to reply, a rustle in the nearby bulrushes is heard, sending Vera into high alert. Like a whippet out of the start blocks, she accelerates into the cardboard box, pulling out a pair of rounded binoculars, diving onto the freshly mowed lawn.

“Get down!” she shouts as she hits the ground.

Valeire, bemused and in sheer confusion by the drama unfolding, joins Vera in a horizontal position on the floor.

“What’s happened?” questions Valerie, still lying flat next to her flustered friend.

Vera begins to commando crawl along the grassy floor, making her way closer to the water’s edge. As she moves, she peers through her binoculars, inspecting the nearby bulrushes in which the rustle sound was heard.

“Vera-” shouts a disorientated Valerie from the ground.

“Quiet!” Vera snaps back.

Vera continues her crawl closer to the bulrushes, rather stealthily for an elderly vole. Just as she reaches a spot which provides her with the perfect view, the rushes begin to shake and something shoots itself onto the water.

“Afternoon,” mutters a simple mallard, shaking its feathers, as it stares at the two water voles lying on the grassy bank. A rather embarrassed Vera quickly stands and pats herself down.

“Morning Mack,” she replies. “Lovely weather isn’t it.”

The mallard swims in the opposite direction, bemused at what he has just witnessed.

“Help me up Vera,” we hear a small voice reply from the floor.

Vera waddles her way over to Valerie and slowly assists her until she is stood in her usual position.

“What in the muddy waters was that all about?”

“I heard a noise dear! As a neighbourhood watch candidate, it’s my duty to investigate. For all you know it could have been a mink,” Vera replies.

Valerie pats herself down, still rather confused by the whole situation that has just played out. Like the heron and the otter, Valerie knows that as a vole, she must be on high alert for minks. For her great grandfather Vincent, worrying about mink wasn’t a thing. Back in those days, it was just the simple otter and heron you had to keep an eye on, but Vera does have every right to be concerned. For years, Valerie has heard terrible stories of mink breaking into burrows and feasting on whole families of voles. No matter how many secret tunnels or escape passageways they build, the mink seem clever and small enough to find their way in, taking no prisoners when they do. Valerie brushes off what just happened, as Vera being a little on edge. The pair retreat back to the dining area, Vera placing the binoculars back in the box as she goes.

Sitting back at their table and returning to nibbling the freshly mowed grass, the pair turn their attention to more juicy gossip at Riverbank Retreat.

“So, I don’t know if you also heard this, but you know that dragonfly that was hovering around number seven the other day?”

“Oh, her name was Deidre I think,” replies Valeire.

“Yes, that’s the one. Apparently, she had to leave her last pond as she was accused of partying into the early hours of the morning,” gossips Vera.

“Really? She doesn’t seem the type?” replies a shocked Valerie.

“Well, it’s always the quiet ones you have to watch,” Vera whispers with an unapproving look.

Before Valerie can ask any more questions, a small plop from the river waters ripples to the shores of the bank. Without a moment to lose, Vera once again plummets into her cardboard box, this time pulling out an unusual looking console. With no warning, apart from the frantic grabbing, Vera aggressively hits a large red button on the mysterious device, letting out an ear piercing noise! As the high pitched deafening sound echoes across the river banks, a chaotic frenzy begins. Birds fire into the sky, screeching as they let out panic-stricken flaps, insects dart into the air with hysterical buzzes and any creature residing on the water’s edge darts and dive into their hiding spots, trembling with fear.

Valerie swiftly covers her ears.

“Turn it off!” she bellows from the top of her voice.

After repeating herself several times, each time becoming increasingly louder and desperate, Vera finally hears Valerie’s plea and hits the red button to deactivate the brash noise.

With a ringing, circling around her ear drums, Valerie sternly looks at Vera.

“What?” questions Vera, unsure as to why Valerie looks so serious. “I thought it was a mink!”

One by one, the creatures that once cowered from the sound, begin to peer and peek.

“It’s okay everyone,” cries Valerie. “It’s just a new piece of equipment we’re testing for our neighbourhood watch scheme. Nothing to worry about!”

Unimpressed groans and mumbles babble around the retirement village as the birds, insects and other creatures attempt to regain some peace and tranquility.

“Vera! What are you thinking? You nearly gave everyone a heart attack,” an abrupt Valerie says, ushering Vera back to the dining area.

“Well, it’s good to know it works. Those minks won’t stick around for long when they hear this,” replies a relieved Vera.

“Where did you get all this clatter from anyway?”

“Clatter. This is life protecting equipment Valerie dear, it’s what every neighbourhood watch should have,” replies Vera, a little offended by the word clatter.

“Look Vera, I understand and I appreciate you’re doing your best to keep us voles safe, but we simply cannot be upsetting the whole neighbourhood with these precautions. As far as we know, there are no mink around these parts anyway!”

“But what if there is Valerie? What if they’re hiding in the shadows of the night?”

“Then, it’s a risk we have to take dear! Now I think it’s time, we put the box away and maybe took ourselves for a little stroll,” says Valerie, in an attempt to calm her friend, whilst also restoring some order to Riverbank Retreat.

“Yes, maybe you’re right dear,” agrees Vera. “Perhaps, I’ve been a little on edge lately.”

“Why don’t we do a lovely loop around the water? We could say hello to Kevin on the way, oh and I could deliver some of my herbal tea to Meryl and Mervin as a belated anniversary gift,” suggests Valerie.

“But there could be otters that way, or herons, or-”

Valerie stops Vera in her tracks, before she begins to panic any further. She encourages Vera to take a moment to breathe, before suggesting the brisk walk will be good for the mind and soul. After all, retirement is supposed to be a time for relaxing and Vera certainly needs to remember that.

“Now come on dear. You grab the leftover tea and we’ll take it with us. There’s no need for anything else,” instructs Valerie as she makes her way to the water’s loop.

A more relaxed and serene Vera begins to waddle her way across the mowed lawns, catching up with her dear friend. However, no matter how much this little vole tries to remain peaceful and composed, the threat of an unsavoury character following her for its next meal, remains rooted in her mind.

Vera quickly looks ahead, to check if Valerie is looking. With a brisk delve into the cardboard box, Vera pulls out another interesting contraption, this time resembling a shovel of some sort.

“Are you coming dear?” questions Valerie turning around to see her friend rummaging in the box.

“Yes dear, I was just putting the alarm system back. Just coming!”

Vera pretends to place the shovel looking item back into the box, smiling at Valerie. When the coast is clear and Valerie’s attention is turned up ahead, she quietly tucks it into her back pocket, before waddling to catch up with her friend.

As the two head off on their afternoon stroll, Valerie reminds her dear friend that Riverbank Retreat is a place to relish, relax and recharge in retirement.