

Knowing Your Neighbors

Across The Street Neighbor

Her name is Margaret. She has cumulus hair and wears patriotic sweaters made in China. Her face is ruddy. The whites of her eyes would be better described as yellows.

I haven't met her. I got all of that from looking out the window. She might have cats. She might have kids. Her kids might have kids. Her husband might have left her, or maybe she never had one, or maybe he died.

She might own two dogs. She might say that one is Maltese, and that one is American. And this claim, if she actually made it, of course, would be a joke. They're both Maltese. But Margaret, ever the creator of fools, might not crack a smile, and might just leave you standing, staring, sheepishly guessing.

Maybe she, herself, has no grandchildren. Maybe she, herself, serves as a pseudo-grandma to the neighborhood kids. They might write her cards around the holidays. She might knit sweaters in return. Ask her which yarn is her favorite to knit with, and she might reply with a pensive look to the sky before revealing her answer: red, blue, white. These colors never run, she might say, unless they're together in the wash.

Don't you mean, red, white and blue, you might ask.

But it's Margaret, ever the destroyer of fools, and she might just respond by not smiling. She might just let you choke for a moment beneath the icy block of her gaze; think for a minute as to why you'd correct an old lady; try for a second to find the nuance in her irony. And right before the moment of your untimely death due to drowning, she might lift off the block, throw you a rope, crack a smile and reply: red, blue, white; I thought that sounded funny.

Next Door Neighbor

Family of five. Always smiling. Lovely wife. Kids: one two three. Theatre. Church. Ballgames. Dad only smokes cigars at barbecues. Mom takes Zumba classes and looks as fit as a kid. Dad only smokes cigars at work. Mom makes the daughter cover up at events. Dad only smokes cigars behind the house when no one's home. Daughter says my mom's such a hypocrite. Mom says exhibition attracts perverts. Daughter says these mosquito bites concern you?

As I stand naked at the window and observe, I say to myself, today they are bites, young lady, but tomorrow they are tits.

Haven't met them. Got this off their Facebook accounts.

Kitty-Corner Neighbor

He is black. He is Muslim. This, of course, does not make him unknowable. He might practice sharia. He might murder stray westerners. He might demand the eye of a man who dared a glance at his daughter (haven't met him; learned this from the internet and non-muslim friends).

Or he might simply sit at home and stroke his beard with concern over the state of old Margaret; she who lives alone, with her yarn and her derision. He might, on moonlit nights, sneak over to Margaret's, with a pot of his favorite tea. She might oblige him. They might talk until the sun comes up, about everything and nothing. She might, with her love of the dahlias in the park, remind him of his mother, rest her soul, to Allah she went back. He might bring her gifts of bukhoor and attar. He might take her arm as she struggles down the steps.

And she, ever the lonely, might knit him a rug for prayer, so when he bows his head to Mecca, he need only open his eyes, to be reminded of moonlit nights, the dahlias, the everything, the nothing; not by a window or the screen of his computer, but by three intricately-woven, discordant stripes: one red, one blue, one white.