

NEIGHBORS

The thought of going home turned Tessa's stomach. This consumed her despite suffering through eight hours pouring old fashioned to people who didn't know what one was, or order one of the seven IPA beers on the tap list, the one with the most hops, the one most *Portland*, her fingers stained orange and calloused by glass chips (she had to drain the ice well twice this week during dinner rush to pick glass because the day bartender, Lucas, had been dunking pint glasses in the well like a goddamned fool), her feet that thrumming with a dull, aching pain that sang all the way up her calves and into her lower back...sciatica, she was too young for sciatica, she was only thirty-fucking-five and spent the better part of an hour each evening, on the cat-hair crusted throw rug doing plank and superman poses while her wide-eyed tabby did his best to distract her by lying on his belly and dancing his feet in the air while emitting a steady putt-putt of noxious flagellants.

Even so, even fucking so, she still didn't want to go home and found herself armed with a putty knife scraping at a wad of glue cemented to the floor just beneath the bar foot-rail. And she knew who did it, she called out to the cook, Leon who was on his third Hennessy, had an earbud in playing the new Black Pumas album and couldn't give a fuck less really but would listen so long as she didn't tell he had the extra Hennessy. He stayed to walk her out, but she suspected that he didn't want to go home much either. He had a roommate who lived on pizza and raspberry Mountain Dew, and played video games online like it was a religion and the unwashed laundry smell of his room and the recessed mold-funk that coalesced in the hallway outside of that room made the apartment feel like being wrapped inside of a trench-rotted sweatsock. Or, so he said.

When she was finally finished, and the gum-wad had been uprooted and discarded, she took her shift drink (hornitos, straight, with grapefruit juice and cilantro back) back to the office where she unpaused the security cam (Richard, the boss, hadn't seemed to notice that the

stream was missing a half hour or so most evenings) for Leon so that his second Hennessy might go unnoticed. Tonight, would be only one for her. She could still taste last night's booze in the back of her throat, a dull soapy taste that, no matter how much lemon water she drank, never seemed to rinse away.

The server, Rita, had gone home early. She only had two tables at close and completed her side-work so that all Tessa had to do was serve the check and take payment. But the couple who were around her same age, continued well after close well after the dining room chairs had been upturned onto tables and the whole bar dry-mopped, they remained on their laptops looking up only to drop two cards to divide an eighteen dollar tab of three beers they had nursed over the course of three hours.

Sometimes, she might have let the resentment build until she snapped at the couple and their three dollar tip but, she simply was in no hurry. By eleven o'clock, they could go to an actual bar instead of a restaurant bar, that would stay open till two-thirty or go home to the boxy, overpriced luxury apartments that had popped up all over the city in the past decade. Tonight, she understood that they didn't want to leave and go back to where they came from. Because she didn't either.

"You know," Leon said, eyeing the last swallow of honey-colored drink in his tumbler like it was a puzzle worth solving, "you let me come over, just come up for a drink, and this Wendell motherfucker might cool out. Not for nothing, but there aren't a whole lot of black people in Portland and that might twist him up even more."

She regretted telling Leon, but it really couldn't have been avoided. The subject here, Wendell, had been kicked out of their work once and then eighty-sixed another for coming in drunk, dinner rush still going, sitting at the bar and trying to, at first, make pleasantries with Tessa by talking about that goofy *Tiger King* that they had watched together after drinking far too much tequila and doing some questionable blow that he had offered to buy. But things, as they

often had, had deteriorated from there that culminated in him knocking over a woman's martini, drinking someone else's beer and then lighting a cigarette in the bathroom.

They had been on lockdown when Wendell had just moved from Philadelphia and into her neighbor's apartment who, shortly thereafter had largely moved in with his girlfriend leaving Wendell alone. He had taken a job also bartending at a dive where the awning sagged with leaf buildup and the sad, sloping brick facade was so spattered with pigeon shit it looked like a cumulus underlay for the jags and swirls of Technicolor spray paint over it. It was one of the last vestiges of such a place where he could drink shots with retired port workers and neighborhood crank dealers who hung around to tap at video poker touch screens like Pavlovian chickens. She had only been there once but that was enough. She had stopped by after visiting a friend's apartment close by, drank the Moscow Mule which he had made wrong despite her explaining the drink to him. And the soda tasted chlorinic, or maybe it is was the lime, but she held her breath and swallowed it down and maybe, maybe that was what made him think she was interested.

"Nah," Tessa said. While she liked Leon and actually wouldn't mind having a drink with him, she promised herself to be overly cautious about having coworkers over her apartment. The latest negative example of which had been an episode in which Risa and Lucas had hooked up after too much tequila at the Standard bar after work and had managed to avoid talking to one another for four solid hours of work the following day before Lucas snapped at her for the innocuous crime of overstacking cocktail orders. This might have not seemed like a big deal but it was loud enough so that the whole restaurant paused and Risa had to take ten to stanch some tears that would elevate the shame that she had already been afflicted with. Nah, Tessa liked Leon too much for that.

Tessa had been dealing with her own shame and was able to commiserate with Risa about the Lucas situation because her's was worse, far worse. The only thing worse than the regrettable fuck of a coworker was the regrettable fuck of a neighbor and, when she drank

tequila, the act came back to her as though it were a crime. The guilt had weight that bloomed and flourished in certain situations and, working with such a small crew and drinking the way they tended to drink, they all knew about this crime and, thankfully, were very sympathetic to Tessa's predicament.

"Can't this guy just take a fucking hint?" Leon had an unlit cigarette plugged into his mouth while Tessa flicked off the patio lights and stopped to hear something, a rat probably, rattle around in the recycling bins by the back door.

"I wish he could," Tessa said. "But he seems to think there's a chance..."

"Wasn't that, like, six months ago?"

"Four," Tessa said. "And a half."

"You ever think about moving?"

"You know how much my rent is? It's eight hundred dollars a month. That's what, half of the going rate? And it's right down the street from here. If I were to move, I'd have to buy a car, and get a second job." And this was the crux of the problem. She could never afford to leave her apartment. The landlord, who she only knew as Gale, had inherited the building, let it fall into passable disrepair which the tenants accepted because she hadn't raised the rent in the decade in which Tessa had lived there. The paint peeled, the plumbing moaned and sputtered with digestive blockage and the fusebox had a tendency to blow which, somehow Wendel, oddly somehow knew how to fix. But, it was better than going broke just to keep the rent paid.

Leon waited to light the cigarette until he had swallowed a mouthful of air that tasted like burning tires from a building that was smoldering down, closer to the river. "They still haven't put that shit out?"

Tessa fumbled with her keys trying to lock the deadbolt. There was a knack to it, a push-and-lift combination that reminded her of a stubborn jar of olives. "They're waiting for it to collapse." She had walked down the night before to see the fire that was just an amber glow

through empty windows of a skeletal six-story building that was once a textile warehouse. "Let's just hope there's no asbestos in there."

"Want to go look at it?" Leon stared at the plume of smoke that, like a shoelace wagging up in the air.

Tessa swallowed. It was time to step-up, take command and go home. It was her home after all. Why should she avoid it? It wasn't as if they were roommates.

When Leon pulled in front of the building, he hung out for a minute and asked her if she needed him to stay. But, she knew, he didn't want to go home either. He couldn't afford to live alone let alone save up the amount it would take for first, last and deposit. But, he would be spending far less at the bar at night, if he lived alone because he wouldn't fucking be there. Instead, he'd be plucking chords on his guitar. He had used to play jazz guitar but had somehow moved from New Orleans, all the way up to Portland to join an indie rock band who had poached him for a tour that the band dissolved before setting out for. He had already given his landlord notice and, while nothing was in writing, the band had given him two thousand dollars for his trouble which always made him laugh. "Thought they were doing me a fucking favor," he would mutter under his breath. He had spent a thousand in a motel for a week and spent the other thousand to move into the place he saw in an ad on Craigslist. It had gone downhill from there.

"Two peas in a pod," Tessa said. "You'd rather go watch a building burn down than go home and I'm thinking about joining you." She had been staring at her building for two entire minutes. There wasn't any sign of Wendel. Nothing out there at all but the air churning with that oily, burning smell. She had spent the day hoping the mist would turn to rain and douse the thing but, instead, the mist absorbed the smoke so it was just a veil of wet, soggy smoke that hung in the air like cobwebs. "Have a good night, Leon."

It was an L-shaped building where she lived in the smaller appendage. Directly, next door at the close end of the longer appendage Wendell lived alone with his old roommate paying to use his old bedroom for storage

The best she could tell, he wasn't home. There were several cars in the lot but Wendel rode a bicycle that he often had upside down in the parking lot, wrench in hand tightening or loosening lugnuts, de-tracking the chain, switching the handlebars, whatever. They all seemed like activities that could very well be accomplished inside but he chose to be outside and would manage to engage anyone about anything whether they were coming or going.

Although half the cars were gone, and no one had their lights on, she still lightened her footfalls upstairs, each stair a small hollow twang like a pluck of heavy, lead guitar strings.

When she made it to the top, fished for her keys in her purse under the brush, tampons, phone bill, makeup pouch, Altoids, Aspirin and a powder that could have been from xanax or Roloids, she cursed.

This just might have been the cause for Wendel to open his door.

"Shit, It's you," Wendel said. And there he was. His flannel shirt that was half-buttoned had blood smeared across the collar.

She stepped back and squinted. "Jesus, Wendel. Are you okay?"

He lowered his head to his chest, examined his shirt and balked. "Shit, I must look like a fucking wreck."

She was so close to unrolling these leggings, pulling on her flannel bottoms and slippers. She could taste the Stouffer's lasagna, the burnt cheese that crusted the sides that she picked off and ate with her fingers. Yet, still, she couldn't bring herself to just leave him there. What if he was seriously hurt?

"I got hit on my bike on the way home earlier," he said.

"What happened? Did you go to the hospital?"

“Fucking Tesla going the wrong way down a oneway.” He stumbled out to the landing and leaned against the metal banister but left his door open.

Inside, she could see the silver Rainier cans cluttered around a heap of mail on his kitchen table. “Where did it happen?”

“Downtown,” he said. “Went down to look at the fire and ran into this girl I used to know and she told me to go see her at her work downtown.” He went on further until he could tell she had stopped listening. He was drunk...again. He was drunk on most nights since the pandemic which was the context in which she knew him. Before, in his life in Philadelphia, she had known only that he worked as a bike messenger for years until email replaced faxes, business cratered and he started working in bars and drifting until, for some reason, like so many other people, he landed in Portland. “I’ve been hit before.” He gripped his side and coughed. “Fuck, you just got home from work. I don’t want to fuck up your whole night...”

But he was. And he knew it even if he was apologizing and went on to tell her he was good, he was alright, and still, clutched his side and coughed again as he lumbered inside to swipe a pack of American Spirit blues and a fresh can of Rainier from the counter, he left the door open and kept talking. “I really know what you mean about the way people drive here. Is it something about the water not having fluoride? Didn’t I read about that?” He winced and clutched his side.

“You should really get checked out,” Tessa said. “Internal bleeding and all that.”

He lit a cigarette and staggered away from her door. She had complained to him about smoking so close. It smelled like he was living in the apartment with her, like he was shedding atoms that slipped under her door to keep eyes on her. But, he would always move on down the building if he noticed her noticing him. “It cost so much fucking money to go to the hospital. They’ll give me a bandage, maybe a Vicodin if I’m lucky. But, you know I’m not lucky.”

If he was referring to the night they had spent together, when she caved and let him in, then she did not want to relive a moment of it. Her mom was sick with COVID seven hundred

miles away in Sacramento and she couldn't go see her and had been arguing with her about taking the vaccine that she was told my someone, somewhere, would make her sick and that Mrs Choi from the dry cleaners must have given it to her because, you know...And she wanted to yell at her mom who still, despite the fact she could barely speak and might die would refuse to listen to reason and...Wendel had listened to her. Every overblown detail and foible, he leaned into with genuine, human interest.

The fact that she hadn't seen any of her friends in weeks, since they had done that picnic at Laurelhurst Park that was just...awkward, made her feel even more isolated. Most of them had partners, people to share the misery of the past six months and undetermined more to come, while she was alone, by choice, but very much alone in her apartment that had a slight mold funk unswayed by leaving windows open and using plug-in air fresheners that left the place smelling like perfumed cat litter.

It's not that he was repulsive, at least. Or was he? He was thin, nearly too thin, wilting thin like her sick grandfather, and she remembered his chest with nipples the size of gumdrops that seemed like punctuation marks to an unwritten sentence. That was what she remembered thinking about the next morning.

These things didn't seem to matter in a moment but, when whatever neutrons and electrons that caused lust stopped fluttering, every detail became a turn of the screw that undid the attraction of the night before and bathed the morning in the spotlight glare of regret.

He coughed and clutched his chest again before taking down a shot glass full of whiskey and offering her one which she refused.

When he began to convulse, not violently but in sharp trembles, she almost thought was an emergency, her hand deftly moving into her purse ready to dial 911 before she realized that he was actually sobbing.

With hesitation, she put her hand on his shoulder. He reached back and laid his hand on top of her's which caused her to flinch.

As the sobs subsided she pulled her hand away and repeated the suggestion that he should go to the hospital.

"I wrecked my fucking bike," he said. His bike was some fixed-gear, brakeless street bicycle that surely was the most valuable thing Wendel owned. He had talked about it like it was a part of his family. "It's the only thing I have. How the fuck do I find a job now?"

Find a job? Had he lost the last one? If he had, it would've been the second since bars and restaurants had been allowed to reopen. It was a pattern with him. But, in his state, she wouldn't push the matter. "Don't worry about that now." She could have mentioned that the city has a comprehensive public transit system but she didn't want to think about the prospect of using transit herself. Sitting next to someone coughing had certainly taken on new meaning given recent events.

"You need to sit down," she told him, her voice tinged with more aggravation than she intended but the tequila was gnawing at her bladder and so she him there like a marionette at his table, set she left him half slumped over the table, let herself into her own apartment, made a dash to the toilet where she almost tripped. While her cat writhed at her feet, mewling for food, she thought about laundry, about her underwear, leggings, sweatshirts and work aprons that were inside a pillowcase by the door. But, that would mean she would have to pass by Wendell's apartment to get to the laundry room downstairs. Would that be callous?

Jesus, she regretted coming home, she texted Leon just to tell him that, adding LOL at the end to lighten the notion that she was desperate for company. She was very secure in being alone, enjoyed it even, until she had been forced to for the better part of a year.

He texted back quickly that he was home now eating day-old pizza and scrubbing the underside of the stovetop, because no, he didn't get enough of that shit at work. And, even though he was a few miles further east, out toward the numbers, he could smell that fire going. It was making it difficult for him to relax. Apparently, smells can do that.. He had Googled it.

She could smell it too, be beyond the plug-ins, the cat, mildew and the jasmine mint, chamomile tea that had been fermenting in a cup on the bathroom counter since last night when she had made it before bed, was that burning tire smell. She couldn't tell whether she was imagining it because she was aware of it, like a layer of hideous wallpaper that had been painted over, or if it was that pungent.

Shuffling through the fridge, behind the jar of yogurt so old it could have been breathing, and beyond cartons of half-eaten takeout from work or...wherever she found one can of Truly hard seltzer, snapped it open and took a drink of what was supposed to be pineapple but tasted more like drinking one of the room deodorizers..

The cat rubbed her leg and mewed again. This was something she could fix and so she did. She appreciated the low-maintenance aspect of the creature and spent a moment scratching under his chin while he spent that moment straining to get a whiff of the half-open can of Friskees she had left on the counter.

She couldn't leave Wendell like this, like her cat, her pitiful cat who she found discarded in a box, scabs around his eyes and nose. Wendell was alone, abandoned. She just...couldn't leave things like that. How bad was he anyhow? She threw open the cabinet above the stove, the one with some sort of duct and mice turds to shuffle through empty bottles of olive oil to her hidden bottle of Cazadores, that she was saving for...something. Or maybe just until the idea of drinking tequila at home inflamed the feeling of...that night that left a taste, a sad, buttery, tequila taste in the back of her throat.

She threw back one, choked it down, went into the fridge for some lime but she only had a plastic lime-shaped squirter that she hosed into the back of her mouth before pouring another which went down easier and repeated.

Certainly, the drinks helped. But, his door was still open. A CD or something playing Joy Division which she usually liked, but it was obviously to swell the sorrow. Listening to Joy Division never left anyone feeling better about things, she said to him.

Practice a calculated sort of cold, she told herself. Don't give too much. All the times he knocked on the door at night asking if she wanted a drink, did she have quarters for the laundry machine, did she have a cigarette, a lightbulb for his vanity that has burnt out, anything so that she could be in his life in some way beyond the immediate way of being just neighbors,

She called out his name again but there wasn't any answer and so she knocked on his open door and stepped inside the apartment. There was only a single couch that faced an entertainment center someone left behind, smeared with stickers and tagged with markers.

"Yo, Wendel," she called again. He hadn't even closed the door. He wanted her to come in and here she was. Taking small steps, baby steps, like he might jump out, she moved around the apartment.

Tessa closed the door and began to dump the dregs of his Rainier cans and toss them into a blue bin, hoping the racket would summon him from the bathroom or wherever and he would pop out, shake off the drink or whatever, thank her and that would be it.

Instead, there was nothing.

She debated leaving. She really did. But what if something had gone wrong? And should she be wearing a mask? Nah, she had COVID as did Wendell and everyone else in the building so far as she knew.

All the apartments were laid out the same but somehow seemed different. She expected his apartment to have an odor worse than hers but it was so sparse she could only detect the rubber fire smell. There weren't even any dishes in the sink. There was a microwave that blinked twelve and a toaster with a confetti of crumbs scattered over its opening.

The bedrooms were in the back. There were two, but the roommate, Chris, was gone, only a jumble of boxes and milk-crates remained. She found herself humming *Love Will Tear Us Apart* which was actually one of the more upbeat songs on this album which she appreciated but turned off so that she might grab his attention.

But still, nothing. She thought about leaving. He was harmless, wasn't he? He was annoying yes, drunk yes, but could she see him with a knife, doing something dramatic to someone else? No, she couldn't see that. What she could see was self-harm, and she wasn't fully sold on his injury.

In the next moment, she'd had enough. She needed this to end one way or the other and so, she stomped (final alarm for him to come to, wake up from his stupor) down the hallway to the back bedroom. The light was on. The room was sparse, a mattress, blanket neatly folded over it. A desk, empty except for a computer with porn paused on it, a woman's face, did she look like her? Maybe. Short black hair, green eyes...She stopped herself because there he was, there was Wendell on the far side of the bed, pushing himself to his feet. Down the front of his chest a streak of blood that she followed from his chin to his mouth. "I must have fallen,"punching he said.

"Jesus Christ Wendell." She had her phone in her hand and dialed the numbers which led to a beeping sound that told her all operators were busy.

"No fucking ambulance," Wendell said. "Call an Uber. I can't get billed for the ambulance."

She began to move out of the room, back to where the apartment widened to the living room so she could breathe. She just needed to breathe. "You need medical help."

"I know," he said. "I agree with you now." He held up his phone as if to prove he was in fact, calling an Uber. "Twelve dollars." He pointed to the phone. "Raul is on his way."

She convinced him to clean himself up. "You look like a fucking vampire," she said. "And not in any sort of good way."

Even in this state, he still tried to put his hands on her as if they were more than neighbors, more than people who had just spent one unfortunate, lonely night together, as she assumed many people had during that period of time. "Does this shirt look okay?" It was a

sun-bleached Ramones shirt. But he wanted her to care and it was easier to and so she said it looked great.

“This isn’t a date, you know, Wendel.”

He straightened himself anyway. “You know, I thought persistence would prove myself.”

“It’s not you, Wendell. It’s just...”

He turned to her and tried to smile. She could see the blood in his gums and on his tongue. “What is it?” He said. “What could I do to make you love me?”

She almost dropped her phone. “You’re standing there bleeding and...”

“I’m bleeding because of you,” he pleaded.

“What could you possibly be talking about? We haven’t even talked in a month, since I gave you quarters for laundry.”

“And I had a date but all I could think of was you.” He coughed and a hairball of blood seemed to come from his mouth and into his hand. He stumbled past her to the kitchen to rinse it down the sink. “I was out with this girl and I kept talking about you so much she fucking left me there. Do you believe that? I was so upset I hit a car riding home.”

“You did what?”

“I mean, the car hit me. Fucking drivers, going the wrong way.” His phone chirped. The Uber must have been outside.

“I’m leaving now Wendel,” she said. “Your ride is here.”

“You won’t even come to the hospital with me?”

“No, I can’t. And please don’t...” She stood there, phone in her hand unsure of what to say. He was hurt, badly hurt maybe and so, she thought it might be better to leave things where they lie. For a brief, shining moment, she imagined internal bleeding, complications, hospital stays, a move back home, a deep and thorough bout of introspection. Yet, in the end, she knew that wouldn’t happen. Tomorrow would come and she would hope to avoid him again. The incident would be fuel for more interactions. The cycle would go on. “Just please...don’t.”

With that, she removed herself from his apartment and watched from the kitchen window as he loaded himself into the black Mazda that drove off with him in the backseat.

When he was finally gone. She sat down in her kitchen, poured herself a drink and began to text Leon. Yes, she was going to tell him, please come and pick me up. Yes, please, let's go have a drink and watch the fire burn.