

Kindly Neighbors

On a particularly hotter-than-usual evening in the summer, Rita McCready was sitting on her couch reading a book that she had read before when, coming from the apartment across the hall, she heard the loud screams of her neighbor, Michael, and his girlfriend fighting. The volume of their fighting made everything that they said clear to Rita. They were saying awful things, calling each other awful names that no decent person would want to hear, let alone be called. After twenty minutes of listening to them and debating whether or not to call the police, the door to Michael's apartment opened and then was quickly slammed shut. Rita pushed her cat, Samson, off of her lap and rushed to her door. She made it to her door just in time to hear the trailing sounds of footsteps and tears. Rita was relieved that she no longer had to hear them. She would never have imagined that her sweet Michael was capable of spewing the bile that came out of his mouth.

A synapse exploded in Rita's head. The perfect opportunity to approach Michael had presented itself. He was now in a position of vulnerability, in need of comforting from a woman with the emotional experience to provide it for him. First, though, she needed a reason to approach him. A friendly but seemingly inauspicious gesture.

Rita went to her kitchen and gathered everything that she needed to begin baking. As the eggs, sugar, and flour commingled in the electric mixing bowl, she set the oven temperature and coated the baking pan with a thin layer of butter. In sixty-five minutes she would have a pound cake.

No suitable single man ever interested Rita. Most of the men she interacted with at work, a flower shop nine blocks south, were either gay or married or gay and soon to

be married. The only man that made her swoon, complete with fluttering heartbeats and warm sensations, lived across the hall. She was forty-nine years old, still attractive, but now going after someone who was twenty-five.

The mirror in her bathroom laid bare the truth but Rita chose to ignore it. After teasing out her hair, blending in the grey hairs with the black ones, she applied a shade of lipstick that she had not worn in months. Her one eyeliner pencil, unused until now, was a gift from Susan, a former co-worker. It was a gift made in hopes of becoming friends, not just strangers who worked together. When Susan's husband got transferred because of his job, she had to leave the flower shop after working there for only nine weeks.

The harsh buzzing sound from the kitchen startled Rita, but it did not put a stop to her transformation. She made sure to finish the last bit of tracing around her eye.

When the cake was ready, Rita placed it perfectly in the center of her blue and yellow cake dish. This cake dish: an inheritance from Rita's mother, a prized possession used on special occasions, attached with memories from Rita's childhood. She made the four steps to Michael's door with her hands gently under the cake dish. She took a deep, confident breath before she knocked.

Michael peered through the slightly open door. His soulful brown eyes looked over the connected chain. Even though he had never seen her wearing makeup before, he recognized his neighbor. Such a change in detail never registered with him. He undid the chain and opened the door to reveal the rest of himself. His hair was perfectly styled in such a way that made him look nearly two inches taller. He was shirtless, but he never concerned himself with casual immodesty.

Rita had never seen this much of Michael's bare skin before. She was dumfounded, unable to speak. She tried not to look directly at his fit chest and lean stomach. The cake in her hands kept inching towards Michael as if it were being pulled in by gravity.

"How's it going, Rita?" There was no way that Michael could avoid the cake. He leaned in slightly and inhaled. He welcomed the warm sweetness. "That smells great."

Rita snapped out of her admiring haze. "Hi, Michael. I...I made this cake," she said, still a bit flustered. She smiled at him as she lifted up the cake like a subservient offering. "Would you like some?"

Michael kept his position between the open door and the doorframe. He looked at the cake. Despite his compliment, he was beyond wanting or not wanting anything at this time. Still, he was polite, gracious to be offered something by a woman who had always been cheery, sometimes a little too cheery, to see him. He waved his hand for Rita to follow him inside.

The smell inside Michael's apartment, dry and dusty with a lingering tinge of smokiness, surprised Rita. The color scheme of his furniture and the lack of elegant decor on the wall — old posters of movies and bands — combined with the lack of available natural light made the apartment uninviting. Yet Rita was invited and eagerly went inside the dark dwelling.

A torn t-shirt that had been thrown on the floor now fit snugly over Michael's torso. They sat at the wooden dining table, bought last year at a garage sale at the insistence of Michael's girlfriend. Was she now Michael's ex-girlfriend? Rita was desperately curious to know for sure but she restrained herself. It was too soon for her to

ask him outright. There were still noticeable traces of her around the apartment, pictures of her and Michael as well as other things that a young woman would want to have around her home. They had been a more serious couple than Rita realized.

Low moans escaped from Michael as he enjoyed the fresh cake. Otherwise, they ate for some time in silence with Rita eating slower than Michael. She had never cared much for eating her own desserts, just eating now to prevent herself from pestering him. Self-gratification never came naturally. The joy of baking was always in the process, not the product.

The silence was finally broken by Michael. “So...how’s your daughter?” he asked.

“She’s fine. I talk to her every week. Half the time I forget about the three hour time difference.”

“She’s how old?”

There was no lie to tell. “A little bit older than you,” Rita said. Although they had a close relationship, Rita had not seen her daughter in two years.

Rita had been divorced the last ten years. The twenty years before she had been married to her high school sweetheart. It was this act of youth that, in spite of the dissolution of her marriage, still influenced her belief in the existence of a One True Love.

“Michael, do you...do you want to talk about what happened?” Rita asked.

Michael finished his piece. His fork fell on the plate. For the longest time he stared at her with a vacant expression. “You heard us fighting?” he asked flatly. There was no anger, not even a tone of surprise.

“It was... Yes, there was no way I couldn't hear you.”

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bother you.”

“Oh my goodness, you aren't any bother at all, Michael.” Every time she said his name she felt her toes curl. “I just want you to know I'd be happy to help you anyway I can.” Rita embarked on this mission without considering any reasonable expectations. Everything she had done — her beautified appearance, her timely offer of support, the cake that he had enjoyed — was done so that it might somehow favor her in Michael's eyes. She never considered what he might actually want or need. He needed to be rescued and she was the only one who could do it.

“I mean, it was just a stupid fight. All couples fight, you know?” She knew all too well but said nothing. He continued, “Things will cool over and we'll probably get back together.”

Rita's body tensed, unable to bear the possibility of their reconciliation. “But suppose you don't?”

Michael shrugged his broad shoulders. “We'll see,” he said.

The hour was late. Michael, tired, politely told Rita that he needed to get some sleep. She understood and reassured him that if he needed anything he could ask her.

Along with what was left of the cake, Rita left her prized cake dish with Michael as well. It was left as an excuse for him to deliver the cake dish back to her. When he did return the cake dish he would finally see her apartment. Once inside her sanctum, Michael would know what his life was missing. He would have color, light, and most of all Rita.

In Rita's mind, her relationship with Michael was moving in a positive direction. The evening had been an absolute success.

Every day as she moved among the rows of arrangements the colors and fragrances of the flowers taunted Rita. She could never bring flowers home because of Samson. He never made any discerning decisions. If any flower was in range he would eat it. Later on, he would vomit at odd places around the apartment. Rita had learned this lesson several times. She had to make do with enjoying the flowers for a limited time.

Rita had already been working at Faye's Flowers for three months when Connie, not even thirty, was hired on a part-time basis to replace Susan. Rita liked Connie immediately. She wanted to be a mentor to her new co-worker.

Nine days into her new job, Connie met her husband. Freddie had stopped in on an impulse to buy roses for his girlfriend. Connie suggested that he purchase a more elaborate bouquet than the one he was considering. "A woman would appreciate the effort," she said to him. Convinced, he let her design the perfect arrangement. Nine months later Connie was his bride.

As a wedding gift, Freddie bought the flower shop and put Connie in charge of running it. Faye, the recently widowed namesake owner, was ecstatic to sell to Freddie and Connie. Glad to have the flower shop kept, as she considered, in the family.

To make the flower shop feel like her own, Connie had the walls repainted and the tile replaced with hardwood floors. She also convinced her husband to purchase the unit next door in order to knock down the adjoining walls to double the size of the business.

Naturally, she retained Rita as her most trusted employee.

It was never money that kept Rita working; her salary was adequate. Between the divorce and a substantial inheritance from being an only child, she was comfortable enough to have the lifestyle that she wanted. Days of easy work followed by quiet nights in a small apartment.

While in the midst of arranging some roses, Rita heard Connie's voice behind her. "Freddie and I want to have you over for dinner Friday."

Rita turned from the roses. "Oh, that's nice. Thank you."

"We want to introduce you to someone."

"What do you mean?"

"Freddie has this friend he thinks you'd like."

"You mean a set up. Like a date."

"If you want to put it that way..."

"I don't see how I could 'put it' any other way."

"You sound upset."

"No. I'm surprised. Flattered too. But there's a problem."

"What's that?"

"I'm already seeing someone."

"You are?"

"Is that so hard to believe?"

"Of course not! You just never said anything to me."

"I didn't think my personal life would interest you."

"Don't be so silly, Rita. You're practically family."

Rita smiled. She did not reciprocate because she did not feel the same.

“Come to dinner on Friday night anyway. You can bring — what’s his name?”

“Michael.”

“Bring Michael with you.”

“You know, I would like to, but I can’t. I just remembered that he has something planned for us Friday night.”

“Oh, damn. Well another time then, yes?”

“When the time is right. Yes.”

“Good. Freddie and I would love to meet him sometime.”

“And I’d love to introduce you.” Rita resumed her work. She smiled as she worked, masking her dread. Lost in thought over the potential mess she just made, Rita pricked her finger on a thorn then wiped it on her apron. The smear made a red comet above her left breast.

Two weeks passed from the night of the breakup and the cake. Michael had not returned the cake dish and, therefore, had not been inside Rita’s apartment. In fact, Michael had rarely been home. At times would Rita stand outside in the hallway with her ear pressed against his door hoping to hear any sounds coming from his apartment. She never heard any music playing, nor voices, nor any sounds of movement that would make Michael’s presence known. Even if for selfish reasons, she became frustrated and worried for his well-being.

“Where could he possibly be?” she asked Samson as she cuddled with her cat in bed on a night when Michael's absence felt the most crushing. Samson could not offer an answer.

During those two weeks there were, however, two brief encounters between Rita and Michael. One encounter was by the mailboxes where it was obvious that he had not gathered his mail in several days. He left in a hurry, not saying much to Rita other than that he was sorry for being in a hurry. The other encounter was out in the hallway between their apartments. In this rare instance when Michael was actually going to be in his apartment, Rita caught him coming home drunk. She offered to help him inside. She also offered him any other kind of help if he needed it, but Michael, who simply smiled in his oblivious way, declined. Then he stumbled into his apartment, shutting his door and leaving Rita alone again, feeling small and lonely.

On the eighteenth day after the breakup and the cake, the superintendent's cell phone rang. "This is Bill," he answered with a voice like an overfilled ashtray.

"Hi, Bill. This is Rita McCready calling. From 9C."

"Everything ok, Rita?"

"Everything's fine with me. It's just that..." She trailed off, not knowing that she did it, the words not yet catching up to her thoughts.

"Rita?"

"I think I smell gas from the apartment across the hall. Michael must have left the gas on his stove. Can you please come let me in so I can check on it?"

Rita felt victory in her grasp but then had it quickly snatched from her when Bill said, "Rita, all the stoves in the building are electric. Everything's fine."

She hung up the phone knowing with full conviction that Bill was wrong. Everything was not fine.

Why was she back? Had Michael been tricked? Does he have such a forgiving spirit that he is willing to take back someone who is clearly wrong for him? Rita's thoughts flooded her as Michael's girlfriend stood in the doorway, at the exact spot where Michael had stood shirtless three weeks earlier.

Rita had only seen Michael's girlfriend a handful of times, just in passing, quick glances before focusing on Michael. Seeing her up close, taking in her beauty, Rita hated her more than she had previously. Before, the hatred was simply as a concept; she was an obstacle in Rita's path to Michael. Now Rita could hate her for who she really was, a siren that made men weak in the knees and hard in more intimate places.

"Where is Michael?"

"Honestly. I don't know."

"What do you mean 'I don't know'?"

"Well...I'm trying to take this new approach. I have this issue with being possessive. So I'm turning over a new leaf. Let him have some guy time on his own. Not be" — she finger-quoted Rita — "that girl. You know?"

"No. I don't."

"Did you need him for something? Maybe I can help you?" She genuinely wanted to help. "You're Rita, right? Michael has told me how nice you've been to him." Rita's face contorted in small little pockets on her cheeks.

"What's your name?"

"Heather."

“No, thank you, Heather. Just please ask Michael to return my cake dish when he can.”

“Oh! I can help you. Wait just a second.” Heather went back into Michael’s apartment. Apparently it was her apartment too, again. She returned with the blue and yellow cake dish. “Don’t worry, I hand-washed it myself.”

Rita took back her cake dish. She looked at the empty platform. Too angry to scream or glare at Heather, waves of numbness fell over her, but somehow she managed to say, “He shared my cake with you.”

“It was delicious.”

“I made that cake for him.”

“I’m really sorry it took so long to get your dish back to you. It’s been a crazy few days — ”

“I made that cake after you were screaming at each other and you left in tears.”

“Oh, shit. I had no idea. That was a bad fight. I hope you won’t let that sour what you think of Michael and me.”

“I know Michael. He is a sweetheart. And you are a...” Rita stopped herself even though “cunt” was present on her tongue.

Her posture had been relaxed, but now Heather stood upright. Looking down at Rita, Heather lightly flipped her long brown hair off of her shoulders. She smiled at Rita. It was a soft, relaxed smile from someone who was victorious in a game that, until now, she had no idea she was playing. And yet, fully realizing how adrift in love her neighbor was, Heather mostly felt sorry for Rita. “I’ll tell Michael you stopped by. I’m sure he’d

want me to tell you how much he enjoyed the cake. And that you're welcome over here anytime."

Rita could sense Heather's pity. That infuriated her more.

Work at the flower shop had been slow all week. Rita spent her time experimenting with new arrangements. Connie was consumed with administrative tasks that had been put off for far too long. The sound of music playing from a used radio kept the day moving.

Rita took a long lunch on Friday. Connie hummed along to a bouncy song on the radio when the bell above the flower shop door chimed, indicating the arrival of their first customer in two days. From behind the cash register, Connie looked up. Michael entered. He looked lost. "Is Rita in today?" he asked.

"She's out to lunch. Can I help you find something?"

"I need something nice to give to my girlfriend."

"That's right in my wheelhouse!" Connie navigated around the counter and approached Michael. "I'm Connie. Pleasure to meet you. How do you know Rita?"

In the middle of the day the unobstructed sun bounced its light off of the windows. At certain angles, if someone was walking down the street past the flower shop that person could not see inside. The clouds had gathered to block the sunlight as Rita walked back from having lunch at her favorite deli located two blocks west. Through the window, Rita clearly saw Connie and Michael talking. Although scared, her stride never broke.

Connie and Michael turned simultaneously when they heard the bell above the door chime for Rita's entrance. The look on Connie's face, though unnoticed by Michael, was all Rita needed to know. Her lie remained hidden no longer.

"Rita. Your neighbor stopped by. He needs your help picking out an arrangement for his girlfriend." Every word cut into Rita.

"But you were going to help me," Michael said to Connie.

"Nonsense. You came for Rita's help. Now she's here to help. Rita, could you please help Michael?" Connie left no room for Rita to protest. She quickly disappeared to her office in the back, abandoning her employee and the customer among the flowers.

Michael turned to Rita. "Sorry to just drop in. I figured you'd know exactly what to give Heather."

Through a slightly clenched jaw Rita said, "It's so good of you to stop by. Of course I know what to give her."

At first all Rita saw were the flowers, the same flowers that she had arranged for Michael the previous day. Peering up from the flowers, Rita came face to face with the last visitor she expected or wanted. "May I come in?" Heather asked.

"What for?"

"I'd like to talk to you."

"Can't it wait?"

"Not really."

"I suppose you should come in then. I was just making some tea."

"Thank you. I'd love some."

Rita went to the kitchen, cursing Heather under her breath for presuming that was going to be offered any tea. Heather sat down on the sofa in the living room. The flowers, on the coffee table, fit the room perfectly.

Samson entered the living room. He spotted the flowers immediately. He moved towards them, but then stopped when he noticed Heather. He stared at her. Unfazed, she met Samson's gaze, his yellow eyes trying to determine if she was a friend or foe. He scratched his head a few times on the corner of the coffee table before he approached her. She smiled at him and uncrossed her legs. He hopped on her lap and curled himself into a black ball. His tail swayed from side to side as she slowly stroked his back.

Rita had never seen Samson take to a stranger the way he took to Heather. His loud purring made her jealous. Still, she kept her composure and set down the silver tray. Rita took her teacup and pushed the other one in Heather's direction.

"Afraid I can't reach it since I have a furry friend on my lap."

"I see that," Rita said. She refused to offer any help. "So, what's so important?"

"First, thank you for the flowers. They're lovely."

"Michael told you where he got them?"

"It wasn't hard to figure out."

"Okay. So why did you bring them over and set them on my table?"

"I feel like you should have them."

"I can't have flowers around. Samson will eat them."

"That's a great name. He's really sweet."

"As I said, I can't have them here. Why are you giving them to me?"

"Because I think you'd like to have something thoughtful from Michael."

Rita had not yet taken a drink of her tea. She raised her teacup to her lips, thinking. Then she said, "I really don't know what you're getting at. He bought them for you."

"Yes. He did. It was thoughtful of him. But it must've been agonizing for you."

"I think it might be best if you left right now, please."

"What if I left and never came back?"

"Excuse me?"

"I could leave and you can have Michael all to yourself." Rita took another drink. Heather continued, "Let me be more direct. I'll leave Michael. I'll leave within the next two days. You can be there for him in his time of need just like last time. But this time you won't have to worry about me coming back. But in return I want something."

"What do you want?"

"Ten-thousand dollars."

"You want me to give you ten-thousand dollars?"

"Not give. Pay."

"You're serious?"

"You bet your ass I'm serious."

"But Michael..."

"Michael's great. He's cute and kind. Wants to be a good boyfriend. But there's just no spark."

"If you're not happy, why are you toying with him? Why don't you just go?"

"Look, if I stay with him I'd be mildly happy. But I'd also be bored. And you'd be miserable. But if you pay me to leave it's a win-win for everybody."

“Except Michael.”

“What are you talking about? Michael will have you.”

Rita set down her teacup and left the living room. Her expression was hard to gauge. Was Heather supposed to show herself out? She decided to wait, continually petting Samson. Samson had been perfectly happy during their entire conversation. He never stopped purring.

Heather had made a huge gamble that Rita would agree to her terms. As confident as she appeared, she was uncertain up until the moment it was in her hand, a small piece of paper to jumpstart her next adventure. Heather had never seen that much money on a check before.

“Thank you,” Heather said. Rita nodded.

Heather lifted Samson off of her lap. He meowed longingly as she plopped him on the far side of the couch. Heather left Rita’s apartment, assuring Rita that they would never see each other again.

Rita stood completely still in front of her closed door — overwhelmed with relief, torn between smiling and crying. She would try again with Michael very soon. This time she would approach him using something other than a cake. All Rita ever wanted was for Michael to look at her as someone other than the older woman who lived across the hall.

When she returned to the living room, Samson was perched on the back of the couch. All of the flowers had been bitten off at the receptacles. Rita went over and scratched behind Samson’s ears. She prepared herself for the inevitable vomit.