

"Neighbors"

Life in an apartment means freedom. You don't have to worry about repairs. You're not tied to a mortgage for 30 years. Sure, a home provides more space and fences, but is that really a good thing? We're alienated enough from one another in this society. Better to be close to your fellow human being. Love thy neighbor -- I read that somewhere. Of course, if the neighbor is a laid-back guy or a good-looking woman, it's easier to stick to that rule. Right now, "Tolerate thy neighbor" is the best I can do, because the lovebirds in the flat beneath me are anything but laid-back.

Conservatives would see my current situation as the liberal's inevitable dilemma. "You're too broke to pay rent yourself," they'd say. "But you want the couple downstairs to move out?" In fairness, it's more complicated than that. The city's compassionate laws regarding tenants' rights benefit all of society, not just me. If I'm allowed a grace period of several months while I seek new employment, I pay it all back in taxes. But what's the net gain from a couple that's always fighting? They put the entire block in a cloud of negativity. The damage to society at large is incalculable.

How it usually happens is that a few minutes after he comes home, the yelling will start. It's muffled, from where I sit, though I can pick out broken phrases of quarreling. It goes on for hours. I'll turn up the TV, and that helps a little bit, unless it's a bad night. Then I'm in for the sound of dishes breaking and lots of stomping off.

Don't they know that people can hear them? I've thought about walking down there and asking them to be quiet. I did as much with the last person who lived there, some college kid and his video games that were louder than anything legal should be. I'll give him credit, though, he always turned it down. We even hung out sometimes, and he threw a couple of parties that I

attended. See, that's the kind of noise that's good for society. There were some really cute chicks there, too. It made me feel good to know that I lived next to reasonable people. I wish he hadn't graduated so soon. Domestic squabbles are the last thing you want in the building.

Once, on the bus, two teenagers barked at one another in whispers that evolved into screams. It was "bitch" this and "asshole" that, then some references to an unpaid phone bill that seemed to be the root of the fight. Then the girl mentioned another guy and that's when her boyfriend grabbed her wrist. Some retiree sitting across from them spoke up: "Let her go, you little punk!" And what do you think happened? The girl reached into her purse and chucked a container full of face powder at the guy who'd tried to intervene on her behalf. Pink dust flew everywhere! It was like a clown exploded. That was lesson enough for me on the dangers of getting between a couple.

But now it wasn't as easy as hopping off a bus. There was no escape. If I had a job, I would be even more upset. Imagine, coming home from a day's hard labor and instead of relaxation, cacophony bombards you. One day, I had grown so flustered by the situation that I decided to look for jobs with night shifts. Let the two wolverines have the whole building to themselves to squabble -- I would find work with an opposite schedule from theirs. I woke up at 11 a.m. sharp, ready to impress employers with my resume. There was a mild setback when I made the bed and sent flying an ashtray full of Parliament butts that was on my night table, but I recovered after having my coffee. I was going to walk right into a place -- which place, and on what part of town, and of what sort of business, I had yet to decide -- and leave them begging for me to sign paperwork right then and there.

After descending the stairs, I saw Gus, the husband, washing his car. "Hiya there, Pete," he said, cocking his head to the side while he sprayed some foamy substance on the tires. He had a

big, angular jaw that was handsome in profile. Head on, though, his small black eyes were too close together, and the widow's peak of his brown hair seemed too pronounced for a man his age.

"Mornin, Gus. Taking the day off? Can't say I blame you. Beautiful out."

"It's Saturday, Pete." Gus turned his attention back to his vehicle. "I don't work Saturdays." The front door to his apartment flew open, and there stood Mika in cutoff shorts and half a teshirt. She had straight black hair and eyebrows sharper than a capital A.

Her husband stood, and I found myself looking up at his powerful shoulders. His back was as broad as two of mine. No, there would be no confrontation regarding the noise today. He looked at his wife and brought his hands apart in a gesture that said: What is it this time? Mika pressed her lips together and slammed the door. She never even glanced at me.

"Can you decipher that?" Gus ambled to the faucet and turned it on. "How hard is it? You do the kitchen, I'll clean the car. What's unfair here?"

"The car looks great," I said.

"I'll tell you what, bud." He affected a wise, experienced tone, even though we were the same age. "Don't get married. It's a good way to ruin a relationship."

"Ha! That's a good one! Now that is a good one." When Gus frowned, I feared I'd gone too far by agreeing so vehemently, but it was a kink in the hose that had his attention now.

I walked to the bus stop because it was something to do, but where would I go now? There weren't any jobs I could apply for on the weekend. When did my calendar get skewed? The trash pickup was Thursday, which I thought was the previous day. (Of course I hadn't paid that bill in forever, so what I mean is that one night a week, I sneak my garbage into a bin down the street.) I must have miscalculated. A confession: this happens often with me. Chalk it up to my artistic

temperament. Society wants to cage people like me with deadlines and schedules. You can't tame creativity! No one bugged Michelangelo every 15 minutes when he was painting. Nobody asked Einstein if he had his formula ready yet.

Unfortunately, my last job was not in art or physics but in flooring. Tile, vinyl, carpet, wood, I did it all, or more accurately, I helped my boss while he did it all. I thought of myself as the face man: networking for contacts, charming the housewives. But I labored hard, too. Did you know that concrete has to be swept to the point of being smooth as glass before you can apply vinyl? Were you aware of the fact that the diamond-tip blade of a masonry saw has to be continuously wetted, or else it will overheat and smoke? And tools, dear lord the tools. Such a menagerie of doohickeys that it would tax your brain to memorize them all. Seam rollers, kickers, napping shears, driving bars. I had to have any of them ready at a moment's notice for the boss. His name was on the business cards, but I played my part, believe me.

He knew it, too. Which is why he was quite upset when I slept in one day and didn't show up. It might not have been so bad had I not also missed the previous day, but that was for a different reason (I'd drunk too much the night before.) So shouldn't that count as two distinct forms of demerit? Yet that was it for me. No more chances. I got fired, and by lovely coincidence, Mr. and Mrs. Sunshine moved in the next day.

I didn't want to waste my trip downtown, so I perused a few shops near the plaza. There was a pizza parlor, but that wouldn't do because I lacked the coordination to spin dough. There were clothing stores, but I didn't think I could lie when people asked my opinion on their outfits. A grocery store looked promising, and I even chatted with the manager a bit. I didn't ask about a job, but I did make a mental note to consider asking about one in the future. Since I figured that I

would be employed there one day, and that they would exploit me and cheat me of wages, I helped myself to an apple and a pre-packaged sandwich on the way out.

It was almost dark by the time I got back to the house. The hose was still laying on the ground. I would have coiled it back up for Gus, but what kind of message would that send? I decided to stand up for myself. If they got into it that night, they would hear some heavy footsteps above them. One person's passive aggressiveness is another's subtle rejoinder.

I walked up the stairs, ears cocked for disturbance. All I heard was the hum of electric appliances. Perhaps an afternoon truce had been called. Maybe I'd even hear a different variety of noise at some point, that of a bed creaking and passionate moaning. Such sounds had been quite rare since they'd moved in. It might cheer them up. As the evening went on, though, there was not even that. Even on the nights that they weren't fighting, there was always SOME sort of noise. Dishes rattling. Obnoxious laughter at some stupid TV show. Telephone calls. I decided to investigate and pressed my ear to the floor.

Crying. Very soft, punctuated by sniffles and then low murmurs. There was the honk of a nose being blown, and then I realized it was Gus who was crying. It sounded like Mika was trying to comfort him, and I could make out one distinct word from her sobbing husband: "Why?" This question made Mika change her tone, and she answered him in a blount, rushed voice. I wasn't sure what she said, but Gus's reaction was louder. The sadness mixed in with anger, and I heard the two of them move.

Now it was resembling the pattern I'd become familiar with. He barked some harsh epithet. She overlapped him with high-pitched cursing. She stormed off to the opposite side of the apartment. He followed, then it was he who stormed off and she who followed. Back and forth,

back and forth, their insults interrupting one another. At one point, though, she yelled something with a voice like metal in a blender. There was abrupt silence after that.

I heard a thump. Did he punch a wall? She shrieked, and a door slammed. Now he was yanking on a doorknob and shouting. She yelled back but it was meager and pathetic. Her voice had something in it, something that despite their battles had never before entered into their amalgam of emotions: fear. She was afraid of him, and he was close to breaking the door down.

What changes a person? Is it epiphany or necessity that makes someone act where he'd never act before? There were several ways of looking at the situation. If Gus hurt her, the cops would come. He'd go to jail and things would be quiet for a change. Am I a bastard for considering this a valid point against intervening? And what about the couple on the bus? What if I ran down there, and instead of being a savior I got two sets of fists wailing on me? But if he REALLY hurt her, I'd have to sit in this room every day, thinking about how I listened to it unfold and did nothing....

Deep breaths. I scripted what I wanted to say, how I wanted to step into this mess. If things went badly, I planned on a quick kick to the nuts. After that, let the landlord have his place back. I'd mail him the back rent, some day. I gave myself a quick look in the mirror. "Time to stop coasting," I told myself. I opened my closet and pulled out a screwdriver that I'd inherited from my short time in construction and tucked it into my waistband. Just in case.

Gus gave up on the doorknob. Muffled "mother fuckers" rose up through the floor. On the side of the house where Mika had been, I heard the back door open. She was outside, standing in the tall grass that hadn't been cut in months. I could see her from the kitchen window. She was leaning against a rusty, broke-down car and trying to light her cigarette. A Parliament. Her hands were so shaky that the match kept going out. She looked up and her eyes met mine. "He knows."

Downstairs, the front door crashed against the interior wall. The steps across the porch probably landed with much force, but in my head, filled as it was with adrenaline, they sounded distant. The wooden steps yawned under stress. I looked outside again. She had her cigarette lit now. Her make-up was a mess. Her eyes were red. "Sorry," she mouthed. She was still so damn beautiful.

He knocked on my door.