Good Neighbors, words= 4,998

It's difficult to reconstruct the events that led up to the moment a neighbor almost bludgeoned me to death with a yellow Le Creuset casserole dish. My intentions were good. I know that without having to analyze the situation further. My intentions were good, but my reasoning was off. Since good thought processes lead to good outcomes in the best of all possible worlds, as everyone can agree, obviously my thinking was not so good.

I'll start at the beginning.

That last summer I began to avoid 5-- 1st Street, because it smelled. It stank strongly of mildew mixed with other mysterious, noxious odors reminiscent of open coffins, although as a Jew I've never been to a funeral with an open coffin and can only approximate in my imagination what the smell reminded me of.

Even though the moldy air felt degrees cooler on that nearly always shadowy side of the street, I went out of my way to avoid the brownstone and its smells as if I were a kid again afraid of a haunted house. I pushed my stroller and my little blonde shiksa baby the long way home, up 2nd Street, turning back to 1st Street at Eighth Avenue.

I didn't know it then, but I found out later that I knew the owner of this deranged domicile. Or we had a passing acquaintance, that is to say we had Starbucks in common. She and I arrived at Starbucks at the same times in the mornings and again in the evenings.

I hate admitting it was Starbucks. True it was convenient, the closest café to my apartment. More important, required by corporate law, its barristas were the friendliest in that stolidly bourgeois barrio where a cold formality ruled. I even liked the old lady's brownstone with its spunky air of decrepitude; at least I did before it began to smell of death that summer.

Wedged between two prosperous, snug facades, her place appeared even more derelict and strange, like a shipwrecked vessel washed-up on the calm shores of this well-to-do, little bourg in Brooklyn. Rows upon rows of identically smug, well-kept, century-old homes, and lo, there she was: defiantly snaggle-toothed with broken windows and a variegated collection of pure junk on the stoop.

Trash and more unabashed trash there was in the dooryard, the box garden where other neighbors planted their imported, stunted decorative trees. Trees that I strangely pitied, as if nature, too, was only palatable when it bent and twisted to our fancy, like beckoning houris frozen forever in pathetically pleasing poses.

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Later that summer, on a hot evening when even the sidewalks seemed to emanate heat as if they'd become shoe-baking ovens, I was trying to explain to my irritable, sweating husband why we should take the long way around back home.

We had gone to get pizza in a little pizzeria tucked away on 7th Avenue, the one with a gorgeous view of the big, Brooklyn sky and a less gorgeous view of the public school's basketball court. But if you squinted your eyes and only paid attention to the hanging vines of the community garden and the pale, rosy tinctures

of the sky, you could almost pretend you were in Italy. My husband had refused to even try. Subsequently, I wasn't in a very good mood either.

"At least let's cross the street. Don't you smell it? I know you can, can't you?" I peppered my husband with these questions in that cross voice that I reserve for him alone. I'm always embarrassed when strangers overhear me speak in these shrill tones, and then it's almost as if my embarrassment is an apology, although I'm not sure to whom.

It's as if that voice is another self, the cross, harassed housewife, and me, I'm someone else entirely. Someone much kinder, much more reasonable. Then behind me as my voice became too shrill, too nagging even to my own ears, I could sense as much as hear a movement, someone crossing the path very close upon where our footsteps might have left the uneven paving stones warmer still.

When I turned around, embarrassed, I saw it was the neat-figured, little, silver-haired lady from the Starbucks. Absurdly, I tried to smile at her the way I smiled at her every morning and evening as we stood in the long line, waiting to rev our engines like cars at a gas station during a gasoline shortage.

Perhaps she simply didn't recognize me outside our usual interactions. Perhaps she'd overheard me and was angry. Only she didn't seem angry. She held her head in an eminently normal way, not lofty or bowed, not proud or penitent. What was most striking about her was how neat and dignified she looked, opening the creaking gate and sailing up the steps treacherously loaded with broken mirrors and jagged strips of rusty metal.

Most of all, she didn't look anything like I'd imagined the owner of such a witchy residence would look. She didn't so much as look like an aging baby boomer, an ex-hippy making a political stand or an artist making another kind of stand. She looked like the eternal grandmother, living in the house of the eternal witch.

I remembered her then as well, a moment too late, from our Starbucks encounters. The impression I had of her became even stranger, because she had seemed so ordinary in the café, although she never smiled back. Still, I was used to that from ¾ of the neighborhood.

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I don't know why Brooklyn still has a reputation as a neighborhoody place. Either I was misinformed or it's an old custom that's fading away now that it's become a suburb of Manhattan. Why, once in a raw food restaurant, when I was merely being polite to a waitress, she asked me if I was *Canadian*.

"No," I said, thinking she meant my odd accent, which many New Yorkers frequently remark on.

"It's just that you're so *nice*," she replied with a shrug of her shoulders. This shrug had the effect of making me feel supremely sad although I still left her a big tip, trapped as I felt by this meaningless word, one that was once so precise: "nice".

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I didn't go to Starbucks again for several weeks, but not because I was avoiding the lady who lived at 5-- 1st Street, but only because life can interrupt our most entrenched routines sometimes. A few weeks later, I had occasion to think of the little silver-haired lady again, although I hadn't completely forgotten her in the meanwhile.

It was as if in overhearing the short, bitter exchange meant only for my husband's ears she'd fixed me as that person permanently—the person I only was with my husband when I was annoyed. And even worse, in overhearing me, I'd become as well the cruel person who'd taunt a crazy old lady outside her abode instead of, for example, the doting mother of a young child who was polite to waitresses. Worse, my husband teased me about it every time we took the long way around her residence, and I couldn't get the incident out of my mind.

However, I really began to think of her, after I witnessed a very different kind of calamity from the ancient shipwreck that was her crumbling home.

It was really as if she alone lived on the edge of the wide sea and all the detritus of the world washed up on her shores. She seemed incapable somehow, or perhaps merely unwilling, of clearing it off on her own.

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Compared to this long, drawn-out process of ruin, this other calamity was quick and brutal, an accident no one could have prevented. I was walking the dog, when I heard the screams, a great wave of screams coming from all sides with crests and troughs.

Half a block away, a little boy tripped at the very edge of the park and fell into traffic. At first there were only the screams and then worse, there was a spreading, rippling silence that came just as the gloom of evening made a figurative death of the day.

There were confused whispers that he'd been chasing his ball across the street. We tried to piece together in the darkness the chain of events leading to the calamity, as if, in piecing it together, we could prevent the initial mistake.

Horns shrieked as the cops closed off the intersection. A bottleneck quickly formed on either side of the roped-off scene.

"What kind of parents wouldn't teach their child not to chase a ball into the street?" Those were words I remember someone uttering, perhaps it was me? Kind as I am, I could have easily said these sharp words as I've demonstrated. It was difficult in that moment to separate what was mine and what was another's. We were all neighbors suddenly, hundreds of us, old-time neighbors, old-time Brooklyn neighbors just like in the stories.

A great groan went up from us when the EMTs lifted his little body from the street. I remember the great quantity of vibrant-looking hair springing up in a halo of black curls around his wan, pale face.

There were dark pools of blood all over the intersection as if, like a ball, he had been rolled first one place and then another before coming to rest forever.
All of us had become part of this accident as much as the little boy and the driver, who sat in a police cruiser looking stunned but not at all unhappy, his van parked on the opposite side of the street. He was a Latino man, hard to say from where exactly

without speaking to him, not young or old. I remember most he didn't look afraid or unhappy but not in a disrespectful way, more like an actor who didn't know how to play the scene and wasn't giving it enough emotion.

Perhaps I was simply not equipped to pass those judgments. I tugged on the leash, and I walked home. It was night now. A moment later a pitbull lunged at my dog. I shook myself awake, shocked by another near calamity.

I knew better than to let my guard down in the New York City streets, sudden neighborhood feelings or not.

I was no child.

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Later it came out that the boy hadn't been chasing his ball into the street. He'd simply tripped on his cleats and tumbled over, crushed by a speeding van. He died.

The entire neighborhood united in palpable grief for this one boy. The next day I saw on Twitter that another person, probably grown, was crushed by another speeding van only blocks away, but this incident passed away unnoticed.

I've always been fascinated by why certain tragedies engage our imaginations and others don't, others simply don't count at all. Possibly, we were all so horrified because the boy was so young and sweet. We all read his Bar Mitzvah statement online, and many of us attended his funeral, strangers until then, mourning together with a grief that felt unquenchable as if we'd known him before he'd become nothing more than the unfortunate consequence of a too lax police

system, allowing cars to treat the streets of New York like a drag race. He was buried at Greenwood Cemetery only two days after his death, the Jews do these things very quickly.

Later that fall, I attended a Hallowe'en writing class in the cemetery, forgetting its connection to the boy until the last minute, and thought of looking for his grave to pay further respects. We were meant to roam around the cemetery, recording names for characters. Our teacher joked she was from Salem and consequently grew up loving cemeteries.

"Cemeteries are a great resource for writers," she told us as if they didn't exist for other purposes. She wore a hideously ornate cross on a black ribbon, which I hoped she'd only donned for class. I never thought cemeteries were gruesome before, but remembering the boy was there, her glee made the exercise ghoulish.

I left early much to her displeasure. It felt contrived on my part, going to weep at his fresh grave, so I didn't go looking. I also must admit the death of this boy felt similar to reading about a death in a brilliant story.

Afterwards, after reading a book like *The Mill on the Floss*, I might cry that a character died, but I'd quickly forget. In this same way, this unknown boy was only a character to me, but it was a story life had told me with certain details that I couldn't forget.

For some reason, as I left the cemetery, I felt comforted a little when I saw the improbably green parrots that made their nest in the gate's towers. I hoped the boy's mother had seen them and been comforted, too.

Most of all, I was reminded that life could be very beautiful and very strange.

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All this is to say, I was stunned by the outpouring of affection and help from the people in the neighborhood towards the boy's parents and wanted to encourage such a feeling in myself, ashamed that leaving food or flowers hadn't occurred to me. It was a side of the neighborhood that I had either never seen, leftover from the rumored, good old days despite the neighborhood's growing reputation for being a place where wealthy people lived selfish lives.

Although my husband and I might have been considered wealthy elsewhere in America, because of his steady paycheck in uncertain times, here we rented a 1.5 bedroom, unable to afford a two bedroom. We'd wanted the apartment for the sake of the child, for the benefits of living near the park, but the paradise rubbed off the park with the death of the boy. Every time I passed the spot, I thought of the boy's death agony. We decided to move away.

Before we moved, I thought again of how the neighbors had come together to support the boy's parents. Hordes of strangers and friends alike left flowers, food, cards, letters. Someone in the dark of that first night built a shrine against the moveable police barricade that blocked traffic from entering the park, twining the metal with flowers and signs, pictures of the dead boy's bright face, cards and teddy bears.

It was an awful, heart-rending metal and paper thing. The leaves piled up against it; the rain quickly turned the signs to tatters, but they were replaced. If it comforted the mother, I'm glad. It was an ugly wreck, but evidently it comforted

someone, because it was tended by an invisible hand, kept neat and clean as a grave, but it was a tawdry thing.

I couldn't forget the mother's grief at the funeral either, so sharp and raw. She was stooped and gray-haired as if she had greatly aged since his death, but it had only been two days. She gave the impression her hair had turned ashen gray with grief. From the pictures, you could see the boy resembled his father, dark and lean.

Coincidentally, that morning, my own sweet, gurgling baby finally learned to wave hello after months of encouragement; she was stunned when none of the mourners waved back. I could see her baby confusion. I wanted to shout at these people, who were never my neighbors. It was as if I was always invisible, never belonging, always on the move.

I wanted to say, "Just wave at the damn baby! It's not her fault!" Then I had to leave the funeral when the baby began to yip with frustration. Her yips removed me enough that I felt the shame of being only a spectator, as if the family—the bitter grandmother, the calm, capable uncles, the grief-stunned parents— were all characters I was watching in a play.

I did cry when the mother made her confession to us, speaking from her heart as if to herself alone. How often in life do we hear these confessions of the heart, when we are not a priest or a therapist? Not often.

"Life seems very long," she said. "And I want to go into the night with you. I want to die, too."

I wept with her, but I was ashamed of myself somehow. I knew that my tears were just as profuse when a character died in a play. I had wanted to care, and I did, but I began to see I was engineering my own involvement, and that I had my own baby to tend to and my own tragedies that would surely come one day, if only the tragedy of her growing up and no longer reaching for me first.

We left, and a pallbearer helped me carry her pink umbrella stroller with its pattern of ice cream cones down the steps. And then we walked away from the funeral to Starbucks, because I needed someone to smile at me and someone to wave at the baby even if they were only paid to.

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Still, I was ashamed that I couldn't care more, care in a way that was deeper than caring about the horrible ending of *The Mill on the Floss* or Princess Diana's tragic death. I think that's why it occurred to me that I should try to make it up to the old woman who lived at 5-- 1st Street.

I did care that I'd hurt her feelings, and after that summer when I broke my routine, I didn't see her in Starbucks any longer. Perhaps she was sick? Lonely?

I could feel I was engineering my involvement again, but it also felt right, neighborly. I wondered how many of the neighbors who left food or cards for the boy's parents had done it out of duty and how many had genuinely cared. I cared about the boy's death, but… Even now thinking about it, I can drum up tears. At the same time, it remains in my memory the same as when Bambi's mother died—unspeakably sad but not real somehow.

So I decided to visit the old lady. The gate was rusted, so naturally it creaked loudly, protesting my actions like some horro movie cliché. I laughed at my sudden disquiet. I'd left my baby behind with my husband and my friendly, little dog, too, in case the woman was a cat-person; she decidedly had the quiet, self-contained ways of a cat-person.

It was a Saturday. There were a lot of people about, going to the farmer's market, the flea market, strolling up and down 7th Avenue, lunching at tables set up outside by the restaurants. It was very fine weather for November.

Soon it would be cold in the city. We all looked like Frederick the mouse, a look of desperate concentration on our faces, gathering up color while we may. Even though the wind was blowing, I couldn't smell the fetid, mildew smell I had smelled that summer in the evenings after the long, hot days.

My heart was beating. I had a new, yellow Le Creuset casserole dish in my hands. I'd made banana walnut muffins, the only pastry I can bake, and I'd also brought chocolate chip cookies, the kind you resurrect in the oven from the dough. I remembered from Starbucks the woman always bought a pastry, but I didn't remember the name they asked for, though if I heard it I would know it: Serena? Sylvia? Shelley? Some strange, sybillant name from another era.

Generally, amidst her collection of glass and steel on the stoop, there was always a wooden sign with different slogans written with the kind of chalk children use on the sidewalks. Only I hadn't seen a sign for weeks.

The signs would generally read obscure sayings like, "The constitution is a great thing. Support the 1st Amendment."

She was clearly referring to the zoning laws that kept the other houses trim and neat forcibly by fines, although the infractions were usually of a much smaller kind—a garbage can left out or an unsorted bag of recycling.

My landlady had warned me what would happen if we so much as put a trashbag out at the wrong hour, but here in this dooryard, trash abounded, covering every inch of the steps. In order to climb the steps, I had to tiptoe over 2x4s. Scrambling like that, towards rather than away from that door, I began to feel even more unreal than I'd felt in the synagogue.

Little piles of loose nails, jagged mirrors, splinters of wood, rusted buckets: it looked like the detritus of a mad inventor or a modern artist. I couldn't imagine what use she made of it. My plan was to leave the casserole dish with a card at the top of the steps. Suddenly, that seemed cowardly, and I slipped the card in the pocket of my husband's North Face fleece. I pressed a finger to the doorbell. I heard a dissonant crackle as if it needed a good cough first, jumping back when the door was immediately opened, nearly tripping over a plank of wood laid across the top of the steps like a very low barrier to keep strangers out or to keep the woman in.

"Yes," the old lady said, standing back in the shadows at the far edge of the door, looking as mild as ever, her gray hair neatly pinned up, wearing the brown cardigan, knee-length skirt, and orthopedic shoes you might imagine on a tidy librarian.

I guessed, in order to have opened the door so swiftly, she must have been watching me from the window. If she had in any way resembled her house, this

might have caused me apprehension. Instead she looked so ordinary, I felt I was the strange one.

"I don't know if you remember me, but I'm a neighbor… I haven't seen you at the café in a while."

The café!

"And I just wanted to… I made these. For you. I'm Emily. From up the road."

"Yes, I remember," she said in the same mild tone, reassuring me she didn't connect me with the incident outside her house. She didn't tell me her own name. "That's very nice of you. Would you like a cup of tea, coffee?"

She smiled politely, but I hesitated. Then she plucked my casserole dish from my hands. I felt as if I were finally penetrating a mystery, a twofold one. The mystery of the house and the mystery of Brooklyn, as if, in having tea with a neighbor, I was participating in some ancient rite, a rite that ought to exist between neighbors.

I followed her stooped, retreating back down a hallway, filled with an unimaginable pile of coats and clocks, shoes, papers tied up with string, bundles rolled up alongside rugs and posters. The kitchen was like a splotch of brightness at the end of a dark tunnel. As I made to go around a heap of rugs, she turned with a warning look.

I watched in horror as two things happened. The more remarkable was how her blank, neat face transformed. She began to scream. She was livid. Her air of mildness vanished.

Why had I ever thought she looked grandmotherly? Her eyes bulged; they were a washed-out blue, and my own grandmother's eyes had been very blue until

the end. I looked into her eyes where she stood over me, outlined against the brightness of the kitchen.

And then, for what felt like a good, long moment, I thought she was going to swing the casserole dish over my head and kill me. But why was I suddenly so much lower than she that she could bludgeon me?

All these impressions took only seconds naturally, but fear has a way of making the senses piquant, and I noticed the menace of the woman before I realized the reason for it.

My feet had smashed through her floor, collapsing along with the rugs, much like Tom Hanks in *The Money Pit* when he sinks through the floor, although the analogy to a movie didn't occur to me at the time. It was too real for thought, only for breath and action. My hands were free; only my feet had sunk a few inches, and I fell to my knees.

Now I was Joan of Arc in a play; now I was a man kneeling to his betrothed. Now I was begging for my life.

"I'm very, very sorry," I kept repeating and then I didn't say anything more but only looked into her vacant eyes. I would usually have begun to cry. I cry very easily at the ends of books and about Princess Diana's tragic death and about the dead boy I never knew until the last excruciating minutes of his short life.

Only in this case, when the horror was happening to me, I felt like the man in the back of the police cruiser, the man who had killed the boy only moments before. Like him, I felt curiously calm and a little tired under my alertness. My eyes felt very tired and very old as they looked into her eyes.

Perhaps it was because I was so calm, that she didn't bring the dish down over my head. If I had screamed or flinched or shouted at her, she would have brought the dish down and caved my skull in. It's difficult to explain to an outside observer how this works, but there is an awful moment when the veil is drawn back a little and you can see the manner of your death, the possibility of it sharpens the senses and also brings a resigned sadness.

Perhaps others have experienced it differently, but that has been my experience in those moments when I've courted death: once when I crossed paths with a bear on a hiking trail, and I simply turned my back and held very still. And then, the time a homeless man mugged me in the laundromat in the middle of the day.

On all those occasions, I became as I was then, stuck in the old woman's floor, half-kneeling and penitent. I became very still and sad and very quiet, scarcely breathing. Each time my attacker let me go.

I could feel my heart beating very loudly and steadily in my ears as if someone were playing a drum inside of me. The air was bright with refracted beams of light in that dusty space. Eventually, she dropped my gaze and simply walked away muttering. I could hear her in the kitchen, putting the dish that she almost killed me with on the counter with a clanging sound that made me wince.

Then I extricated myself a little too quickly, scraping my leg again. It was cut and bleeding. It was warm enough that fall day that, unfortunately, I'd been wearing capri leggings and my ankle had sustained a jagged cut that later left a scar.

Of course I shared this strange story with my family immediately. My excitable, Jewish mother wanted me to call the police, but I remembered what had happened when, at the insistence of pedestrians, I tried to report the mugging in the laundromat. When I had tried to convey the menace, they'd laughed at me.

"At first he held me down in the chair. He held the arms of the chair actually, and he bent down over me as if he was going to kiss me. He had a red pencil skirt someone had left behind and he used it to pin my lap. Then—"

"I wish a girl would try to force me to kiss *he*r," one cop interrupted. I kept reciting the facts, but his grin threw me off. I felt as if I was gossiping with my girlfriends about boys.

"I jumped up and he grabbed me by my ponytail. Very hard. It still hurts." I rubbed my head. No sympathy. "Then we stared at each other and… Well, and then he let me go. "

It sounded so lame suddenly. The younger cop was still smiling as if he wanted to kiss me, too. The older cop asked me to describe the man; he was black, about my height, 40 or 45, hopped up on drugs, wearing blue jeans and a green army jacket.

"Well, we're never going to find him," he said, snapping shut his notebook. He told me I could fill out a report, but there was no point.

I wanted to say to them what if he's lingering, watching us. And then I realized that was nonsense. The whole story, the whole thing had vanished into air. *Into thin air* as Shakespeare says of a play when the action's done. The menace had

vanished, and without it the story was too thin, meaningless. They had better things to do.

In that story in the laundromat, I imagine I am much like the other pedestrian struck and killed by the car a few days after the boy; I could not get anyone to care, because after a few minutes the horror had faded and the essential details weren't enough.

How could I explain to any officer that the woman had meant to kill me and had changed her mind? My husband didn't even believe me, although he clucked over my wounded ankle like a mother hen. He insisted on taking me to the emergency room for stitches when we couldn't staunch the blood, and I couldn't quite remember the last time I'd had a tetanus shot.

Later it healed, and we moved soon after to a new neighborhood.

I didn't go back for the dish. For all I know, it's still there, atop a bucket in that little dooryard kept up in its state of total, artistic decrepitude like some memorial to the days of Brooklyn neighbors.