

Neighbors

Melanie Datz

You were a good neighbor, nodding politely and saying “hi” when we bumped into each other by the garbage cans. You didn’t steal our paper, have loud parties on weeknights, or listen to thumping dance music. You didn’t intrude, and isn’t that the most you can ask of neighbors in Chicago, where everyone is stacked on top of each other? We were good neighbors, too; We never stole the umbrella off your back porch, even in a downpour.

Then, one sunny Saturday morning, about ten, Kristi was in the back room, doing yoga. That back room was her pure space; it had nothing but a yoga mat and a fig tree. There she was, leaning back in a twisting, complicated pose, arms over her head, right foot balanced on her left thigh, and this horrible noise sliced through the apartment. It was like long, rusty nails being pulled from a board, and it went on, and on, and on. I came out of the bedroom, knotting my tie, and saw Kristi wobble and fall, her arms scrabbling for something.

“What the hell is that?” I asked, but she crouched on the floor, arms wrapped around her head, screaming, “Make it stop. Make it stop.”

I looked out the window: nothing but cement, a squirrel sitting on a Dumpster and the L-shaped building next door. The alley, too, was quiet and peaceful. But that rusty shrieking continued. Then I realized the noise was rising through the pipes, clanging through the radiator, from your apartment.

When it stopped, I held Kristi until she quit shaking. I was supposed to work, but I called and said we’d had an emergency. Despite the yoga, Kristi is nervous as a cat. “Don’t worry, baby,” I said, putting her to bed. I made herbal tea, and put a cold washcloth on her forehead. “I’m sure it won’t happen again.”

The following Tuesday we were having dinner, with candles, smooth jazz and sushi. Nothing gets Kristi hotter than salmon rolls, and I needed some nookie. There I was, salmon roll clasped between a pair of chopsticks, about to pop it into Kristi’s bright pink mouth, when that shrieking noise started

again. My arm twitched, and I stabbed Kristi in the cheek. I spent the night on the couch, and I blame you.

Sometime later, I saw you come home carrying a violin case. I was sitting on the back porch, smoking, because Kristi wouldn’t let me smoke in the house. She said it contaminated her pure space, but I think she just didn’t want to start smoking again. You came home with that black violin case hanging from your shoulder, and I was stunned. I didn’t realize it was possible to make such horrible noises with a musical instrument. At least we know what the noises are, I told myself, but knowing didn’t help when you played the next day. It still sounded like cats fighting, or metal dragged across concrete.

You turned our lives upside down. Kristi bought white furry rugs and covered the floor and walls of her pure space, but it didn’t dampen your noise. Her thick blonde hair started falling out. We’d watch a movie, and the shrieks from your violin drowned the dialogue. We’d sleep late on Sundays, and rusty twangs and squeals slithered under the covers. There was no escape, and we suffered. Kristi quivered and quaked at the slightest sound, we didn’t have sex for weeks, and I became nervous and twitchy. The fig tree lost all its leaves.

Then Kristi left. “It’s not you, Bob, it’s that thing downstairs,” she said, rolling up her furry rugs, her yoga mat, packing her things. She’d wrapped a pink bandana around her head to hide the bald spots. She left me the bare twigs of the fig tree, a desolate apartment and your scrapes and twangs echoing in half-empty rooms. I wanted revenge.

So when I came home and saw you step onto the porch, black case in hand, I lit a cigarette and stayed where I was. You set the case down, dug for your keys, and then, just as you pulled the door closed, you pushed it open and ran back inside. Your phone was ringing. In seconds I was on your porch, unzipping the case, stuffing my lit cigarette inside your violin. Without Kristi, what’s there to lose?