

Honesty

by CL Bledsoe

1

Bill decided he hated his neighbors on a Sunday morning in June. It wasn't necessarily because of their yapping dog they never apologized for, their smarmy attitudes when it came to displaying their wealth while at the same time paying lip service to a liberal philosophy, or even the fact of their cars that looked like toys, and what this said about their entire attitude towards life; it was, in a sense, all of these things. It was a lack of honesty.

Bill's neighbors hated the poor, for example, feared them, really, in the way of middle class WASPs who've never tasted hunger. They talked politics, referring to protecting the poor as though they were rain forests in Brazil, something one has heard of but never seen. More often, though, they complained about the price of pate and constantly suspected the immigrants who cleaned their home once a week of stealing, though they could never identify a specific missing item.

Bill's neighbors hated each other but they refused to admit it. He knew this not only because of the way they constantly bickered and argued with each other and took every opportunity to humiliate each other in little ways, but because he'd been sleeping with both of them, separately, for several weeks and they'd each confessed their contempt in whining, post-coital self-indulgence.

The problem wasn't that they were shits. Bill could handle shits; he was one himself. It also wasn't that he was jealous. True, Bill only owned his house because his father had passed it down to him. Back then, it had been a working class neighborhood, but over the years, the city had pushed more and more yuppies out into less desirable neighborhoods, until Bill ended up with middle class neighbors. But it was a nice house, and he'd kept it up himself

The problem was their infuriating manipulations, their horrid lack of self-examination, their lies. The problem was that they were drops of water in an ocean; Bill was surrounded like Jim Bowie

at the Alamo, and Bill hated Texas. The problem was that the wife didn't swallow but the husband did, that they both considered abuse foreplay, that they both reeked of slow death. Bill was a little bit afraid that he didn't know what the problem was, and that's what made him really angry.

2

The doctor said Bill was dying, but that was okay because the doctor was already dead. Bill could tell by the smell, and the way the skin of his face drew away from his eyes and bunched up at his cheeks, like people shying away from a crying man on a bus.

The doctor said it was bad genes, killing Bill. "It's what your mother had, and her father."

"Does that mean I should change pants?" he asked.

The doctor chuckled, and Bill's eyes bore into the man's skull, but the doctor didn't meet Bill's gaze, only kept staring.

Outside, it was a beautiful day. The wind was sharp like a wall of razors nicking the face just a bit at a time, until the accumulated nerve damage left Bill numb. It reeked of shit from the sewage plant; even though it was blocks away, the stench stood out in the frigid air. The trees were naked and the birds were long gone or hiding. And yet.

Bill hit a grocery store on the way home. He didn't know why, he just stopped there. In the bakery, they were having a sale on apple pies. He picked one up then headed to the front. Then he had a thought and went back to the ice cream section and bought a box of vanilla ice cream. When he got home, he realized he needed milk, eggs, bread, pretty much everything, and there was nothing substantial left to eat. He put the pie in the oven for a few minutes, stood in front of it, doing a little dance and singing a Chambers Brothers song. It made him feel like a child, like he was ten, except when he'd been ten, his mother would've put him in therapy for singing in the kitchen, or having pie for dinner.

“But you're dead,” he said, to the kitchen empty of everything but the smell of apple, warming. A moment later, the oven timer went off.

3

“There's nothing in your fridge but pie,” Janine said.

“I'm dying,” Bill said.

“Don't you even have any ginger ale? My tummy's upset.”

“I'm dying,” Bill repeated.

“I didn't hear you,” Janine said, returning to the bedroom with a sleeve of stale Saltines she'd found in the cabinet.

“That's good,” Bill said, “neither of us should talk.”

Janine giggled. Bill was afraid she would blush. He hated it because the first thing that came to his mind was “pig”, and someone should love her. If someone loved her, it meant there was hope for us all.

She came over to the bed and stroked his thigh. He twitched and barely kept himself from slapping her hand away. He smiled at her, instead, and her face split into something similar.

“I have to go,” she said, and began to dress. She stuffed in earpods and gathered her things. It wasn't a bad form that she had. She was thinnish but with enough body to have curves. Enough to be desired.

“Why doesn't your husband love you?” Bill asked.

She did a little dance as she pulled on her pants and tee-shirt. It was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen her do, and she probably wasn't even aware of it. It was pure accident.

“Why doesn't your husband love you?” Bill asked again, but she was gone.

4

Mark cried softly in the corner. It was the sexiest thing Bill had ever seen him do. It made Bill want to gather the man in his arms and smother him into stillness. He wanted to stroke his face and enter him from behind, hard, and feel the tight warmth, the friction pain, the smell of shit.

"She doesn't love me," Mark said.

"Do you love her?" Bill asked.

Mark blubbered an answer. Bill really wanted to leave the room, but he was trying.

"Does it matter?" Bill asked.

Again, Mark didn't answer, but this was his way.

Sometimes, days later, he'd supply an answer.

When Mark was gone, Bill stood in the bathroom staring at the tile. The grout in the bathtub was darkening. It looked like coffee.

"I have measured out my life with coffee-spoons," Bill said.

5

Bill invited his neighbors over for coffee.

"I've been sleeping with both of you," he said. "Neither of you can be angry, because you're both adulterers. And neither of you has the balls to do what needs to be done."

They grumbled and complained: "You used us," Mark said.

"Rape, is the word," Janine said.

"Clearly," Mark said.

After, they walked home, arm in arm. Bill carried a bottle of bleach and an old toothbrush upstairs and got to work on the grout in his bathroom. It had been two months since he'd seen the doctor.

"Might be a year, might be more, but you want to consider assisted living, getting your affairs in order," the man had said. "While you still can."

Bill had nodded because that's what you do when people pause. Thinking back on it, now, he giggled.

"Kids?" The doc. had asked.

Bill shook his head.

"Wife?"

Again, no.

"Well," the man said, "maybe it's time for a vacation."

"All my life's been a vacation," Bill said.

When he finished the bathroom, he did the whole floor, then downstairs, then the basement. He had money; he kept thinking about that. There were places for him, good places. He went outside and did the lawn. His neighbors came outside and went to their car, walking faster than he'd ever seen them move and not looking over at him. As they pulled out and drove away, he began to dig in his lawn, thinking he might plant a tree or a bush or something, but really, just afraid to stop moving. For a moment, he smelled their sex in his memory, but he kept digging. He didn't know what he expected to find underneath the grass, maybe some buried treasure, even an old button, something left here from a previous tenant, but all he found was dirt. It was the color the grout had been. He scooped some of it up in his hands and smelled it. Sex. That's what he'd been smelling, all along. He brought it to his nose and inhaled, deeply, the ecstasy of it, finally letting his eyes close.

