

Neighbors

by Curtis Smith

“Hear that?” asks my wife Amy. Books in hand, we relax on our flagstone patio. A shaft of late-day sun borrows through the maples' leafy canopy and deposits a dazzling, sunlit pool on Amy's lap.

I put down my book and listen to the faint threads of sound. A box fan rattles on our bedroom windowsill. A freight train chugs along the cornfields outside town. Squirrels leap between the maple branches, and the orioles snipe back with their cheep-twittering complaints. “Hear what?” I ask.

“Exactly.” Amy grins and returns to her book.

What luxury, this tranquil evening, our neighbors, the Shertzers, guests of a wealthy uncle in Cape May, ten days of sand castles and boogie boarding and excursions on the uncle's twenty-foot sloop. The Shertzers' Sunday morning departure was more circus troupe escape than suburban exodus, the pell-melling ruckus of their two preschool twins and one toddler (the last child an eight-pound surprise, a little girl conceived against all precautions. “Must be something in the water,” Paige Shertzer joked when she told Amy and me the news) corralled into a vehicle already bursting with suitcases and beach umbrellas, straw hats and folding chairs, snorkels, webbed flippers, plastic buckets, and a dog-gnarled Frisbee. Amy and I stood curbside with the adult Shertzers, Tim in his Hawaiian shirt and white shorts, Paige in macadam-slapping flip-flops and a pair of sunglasses whose curved glass held our dark reflections. With a whispering pull, the minivan door slid shut, the beachy scent of sunscreen stirred, the children's fair, freckled skin already lathered beneath a protective layer of double-digit SPF lotion. “Don't worry about your cat,” we assured them as we exchanged hugs and handshakes. “Don't worry about your plants or aquarium fish, your mail or morning paper — we'll take care of it all.” Hugh and Luke cried “Let's GO!” in their eerie twin unison, the barrier of steel and glass unable to mute their shrill commands. We laughed, amused by the boys' impatience, their sailboat-dreaming

anticipation. With a toot-toot, the van pulled from the curb, and Hugh and Luke strained against their protective strappings to wave their mirror-imaged good-byes.

Amy and I bookmark our pages and set out for our evening walk. Twilight, and the graying backdrop sharpens the summer hues, the yellow and orange speckle of lily petals, the first tomatoes blushing red in well-staked gardens. I capture a firefly and hold out my hand for Amy to admire my green-blinking prize.

We cut our route short because there's business to take care of back home, sex business, the red-circled fertile days marked on our refrigerator calendar, the fluctuations in temperature and mucous flow duly noted in a logbook Amy keeps with the devotion of a ship captain's log. *Hurry, hurry* say her quickened steps, perhaps the heavens have aligned themselves, perhaps tonight's the night — but her pace eases when we come upon a young couple pushing a stroller. Amy squeezes my hand, her eyes fixed on the carriage's doze-drooling passenger, her touch an emotional anchor against the blood-streaked memory of two miscarriages. The water that flows into the Shertzers' house doesn't reach ours, a fault of plumbing of one type or another, and nothing bruises my heart like the appearance of a tampon wrapper in the bathroom waste can.

We climb onto the Shertzers' porch. Nearly dark now, and the neighborhood cats haunt the shadows. Summer moths dance beneath the streetlamps, while down the block, a porch light flicks on, a beacon to a child late to return from his afternoon of play. My knees crack as I stoop to pick up the newspaper.

Hot inside the Shertzers' foyer, the still air flavored with the accumulated scents of other lives. Unfamiliar shampoos and soaps. Traces of Christmas potpourri and fireplace ashes. Oiled baseball gloves and kitchen spices. A sense of stalled activity lingers in the mute spaces, the feeling of an amusement park after closing time. Balls of assorted shapes and colors peek out from beneath the sofa and kitchen table. The twins' grass-stained sneakers lie in a mismatched heap by the back door. A dancing Snoopy adorns the only glass left on the kitchen counter.

Splitting up, we perform our neighborly duties. I fill the cat's dishes and sprinkle fish flakes over the aquarium's bubble-rippling surface. Amy gently pushes back the houseplant leaves and pours water onto the parched dirt. I study our house through the window above their kitchen sink, briefly taken back by the skewed perspective, the darkened rooms, the ragged hedges I should cut. I fill the Snoopy glass from the tap, take a sip, and offer the glass to Amy. As she drinks, I playfully flick the water clinging to my fingers, and the droplets bead on her cheeks and throat.

"Come on," she urges, and with a T-shirt tug, she leads me upstairs. We take cursory peeks into Tim and Paige's bedroom, the boys' domain of cowboy-sheeted bunk beds, the brimming toy chest, and the hamper stuffed with soccer uniforms and mud-cuffed jeans. In the nursery, Amy cracks a window, and a faint breeze tempers the room's stifling warmth. Our shed clothes blanket the floor beside the crib, the two of us naked in this talc-scented world of tinkling mobiles and outlet covers. We settle our once-supple forms onto the carpet, and before mute witnesses of stuffed animals and half-dressed Barbies, we once again unfurl our hopes like canvas sails, waiting for a wind that may never blow but in which we must believe.

