

It's Next Door

by Hobie Anthony

The old lady from next door had been really quiet for the last few days. She was hardly ever noticeable, but I was starting to wonder. Chicago had been deadly hot and a lot of old folks had died already.

"You think I should check on our neighbor?"

"Did you find out if we're getting our electricity back?" Marla said. "Maybe you should check on that."

Marla was cleaning out our refrigerator, filling a bag with rancid chicken, wilted frozen French fries, and soupy popsicles.

"You know, they'll fix that when they're good and goddamn ready," I said. "They've known about those transformers for how long?"

"Food's spoiled," she said. "Wanna go to the West Side, find some decent Mexican, and air conditioning?"

"And a movie theater?"

"Here, take this out, it stinks already."

The dumpster in the alley was filling up with rotten food from refrigerators whose power had failed them. It smelled of curdled milk and diapers.

"I want a shower," I said. "I feel like that smell."

"Kids emptied it out with their damn hydrant hijinks." Marla said, using the dwindling daylight to file her nails.

"I dunno, I smell something, though."

"Let's go, I'm hungry."

We found a restaurant which had air conditioning and fresh food. We saw a movie and came straight home. The whole building was dark and quiet. My flashlight cut the dark. Our perpetually-fornicating neighbors were stilled in the heat.

"That smell is stronger. I should check on that lady."

"I don't smell anything," Marla said. "Just try not to move, you're creating heat with all of your worry."

I took a few extra steps, turned left down the hall instead of right. I had the flashlight, I was in control. I listened and knocked at her door. Nothing. I knocked again.

"C'mon, let's go," Marla said. "If she can sleep in this heat, then don't wake her."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

We undressed in the dark. I threw the extra blankets and sheets towards the closet. We lay still, not touching, not creating any more heat. A fly buzzed and careened around the room. I heard it hit the wall.

"That's not a normal fly, it's too damn big."

"It's feeding on the rotten food," she said. "Just sleep, it's not here for you."

