

Our Neighbors

by J.A. Pak

It was with the departure of their last child that the Beazleys became grotesquely petty with each other. Raising their children, they'd been like any other married couple, serving their upper middle class suburban values with model cheer. Real life, on the other hand, had coiled resentfully inside. It was expression they'd never understood.

The Beazleys had always been a good-looking couple. Even now Joanne Beazley was beautiful. Age, the soft wrinkles of her face, the whitening of her hair, burnished her beauty. Her beauty could almost make Mitch Beazley's expression tender. He could be quite tender. With his friend Rene's wife Silkie, he was warm and kind. She made him smile. He wasn't sure why he was so violent at home. Home was a battle ground, marriage a war. Except when the children came home for Thanksgivings and Christmases. And then everything was neat and polite again. They were the perfect parents, the adored grandparents. But alone, something happened to them. Something happened to Mitch and his wife.

Sitting together, there was so much they couldn't say, except in explosive acts like little children sweaty with frustration, screaming "Look at me! Look at me!"

It was during one of their fights that Mitch had his first heart attack. The neighborhood assumed the sirens were the police. They rushed out, gawking, jockeying for places, the speculation high as Mitch was wheeled out of the house, the ambulance light a beacon. Plastic mask over his mouth, ashen complexion, the drama of the ambulance sirens, Joanne Beazley standing at the front door, shocked into incomprehensibility. What good fun.

In the confusion, the ambulance drove off without Joanne.

It's unendurable when parents become violent, hysterical. It's unendurable when children must become parents to their parents. When Mitch recovered, the children split their parents apart. Mitch took early retirement and moved to Hawaii. Joanne went to live with

her mother in California. She laughed when she thought about it. Why hadn't they divorced years ago? It would have been so simple. But when they'd been together, it had never occurred to them to divorce. It was live or die. Like a kind of hostage situation. Only now, thinking of all those years of absolute craziness, the amazingly stupid things they had done to each other, that the Beazleys became embarrassed. Joanne blushed just thinking about Mitch. Strange, now that she was free, how she thought of all the good in him. He had always been a good father, and (that old world view) a good provider. "Marry a good provider," had been her mother's mantra to Joanne and her sisters. Her father had been an excellent provider, but an absent lord of the manor. He'd spent most of his adult life in the Middle East, working for an oil company. Joanne wasn't thinking good provider when she'd married Mitch. He'd had such a tender expression in his eyes whenever he'd looked at her, as if he could really see her and loved her anyway. Well, that had quickly changed—almost from the first night of their honeymoon. They'd had a fight, and it was too much, traveling alone together, two weeks trapped together in Europe. Neither could see a way back to that tender look in Mitch Beazley's eyes.

Once, months after the divorce, Joanne, so angry, had almost picked up the phone to call Mitch, wanting to demand, "Why, Mitch? Why? Why did you change? What happened to you?" But knowing Mitch, he probably would have grabbed his gun and shot the phone. Some days, laughing, she'd think about all the murder plots she'd hatched throughout the years. Some plots involved blood gushing out of Mitch's head, other plots, Mitch dying slowly, day by day, poison fed to him grain by grain. She was a real Agatha Christie. It was a miracle, she'd think, that she had never actually killed her husband.

Joanne and Mitch took turns going to family gatherings. They both eventually remarried, to people who were strangely alike and yet unlike their old partners. As the years went by, it was Mitch who became more and more ashamed. For Joanne it was suddenly all just too hilarious. It wasn't her in the stories anymore. Her new

friends couldn't get enough. Oh, but don't they miss us at the old neighborhood, Joanne thought.

