

Old Eyes

by Jonathan Crowl

I passed the old man from upstairs now and then, usually on Saturdays. Dressed in khakis and a button-up shirt, he carried an Igloo cooler to his white SUV and would be gone from breakfast to dinner. Our eyes often met, his looming large behind wire-rimmed glasses, but we never spoke.

I never see him anymore. The last time I did, I passed him in the night and almost missed him completely. My mother had called earlier that evening; I had been unable to explain why my father had left her. Soon after the rain started falling, just barely tapping on the windows. Natalie began to get ready for bed as I hunched in a chair and grieved amid the static hum. A knock at the door snapped me out of a vacant stare. I knew it was our friend, Mark, dropping by to return a movie. When I swung open the door he was leaning in close.

“There’s a man standing at your bedroom window.”

I let Mark in and grabbed my jacket. Our blinds were cheap; even when closed, our private lives glowed through their slats and holes. Without alarming Natalie, I slipped on shoes and stepped out into the rain. Our apartment was nestled in the corner of a “T” intersection serving our complex, and I looked in both directions expecting a chase, but the paths were clear. A little relieved, I turned to go back inside, scanning the long side of our unit. Pinned in the shadows between a maple tree and our bedroom window, an old man’s face was pressed to the pane.

I took several slow, unnoticed steps toward him.

“Sir?”

He jumped back from the window and shuffled toward me, squaring his body with mine. The thick waft of liquor withstood the falling droplets.

“What are you doing out here?”

The man said nothing. His obsidian eyes reflected dim light from far-off streetlights. His mouth held firm, but he was digging around

in a coat pocket. A small metal object fell and clinked against the wet ground. He reached down to grab it, fumbling several times before securing the item.

"C-clamps," he spat out. He rose and turned it over in his fingers. "I'm switching from Comcast to DirectTV and making a mount for the satellite dish. I needed these C-clamps," he said, stammering and stopping several times. He presented the evidence close to my face.

Mark had followed me outside. Together we towered over the man, half a head shorter than my six-foot frame. He passed easily for 70 and wore a coarse beard of white. The bill of his soaked Ohio State hat ran even with the crossbar on his glasses.

"Why were you looking in my bedroom window?" In my mind I had envisioned this entrapment much differently: bursting forth into the night and subduing the offender, a reluctant hero to my new wife. My upper body would heave deeply above the surrendered criminal, my jacket flapping like a cape in the wind. That sort of conflict played out well in my daydreams; in action, I was a lank pile of nerves.

But this atrophied drunk wasn't looking to run or fight, nor would his body have allowed it. He turned the C-clamp over in his hand and gestured behind him to a row of garage units.

"I wasn't -- I came out to get these clamps, and I dropped it -- I'm in apartment thirty. I can show you the stand," he said, gesturing toward the stairs.

"You were looking in my window."

I crossed my arms, hoped my height and facial scruff would rattle his nerves while I found mine. My flaccid questioning was buoyed only by the man's ebbing coherence.

"I just don't understand what my window had to do with your clamps."

"I just came out to get them."

"But you were looking in the window. I saw you."

He closed his mouth and exhaled. His shoulders slumped. "Yeah, I was." His voice pitched up and bore a note of candid resignation.

"Were you looking at the lady in there?"

This came out sloppily -- I rarely call Natalie a lady outside of jokes -- and my tongue tripped over the words, unsure of what to say. I knew why old men looked in windows. I was scared to hear him say the truth, was afraid of the duty it would place on me. I knew to him we were a nickelodeon that played for free, a silent story whose plot twist came when one of its characters came out from behind the screen and spoke. Understanding and shame seemed to permeate the man's drunken cloud. His body slumped, his face sagged with defeat as he awaited his fate.

"How long were you there?"

The old man shook his head. "Two minutes."

Two minutes on a drunken clock. Two minutes yearning for sights not privy to him for decades -- the firmness of young women, the intimacy that at his age may be departed forever; two minutes not for him, but quietly stolen while his breath fogged the window. It was despicable and heartbreaking, a cocktail not unlike divorce.

My parents had split up after twenty-six years. With all three children out of the house, they were starting over. No promise of companions, their lives moved on in separate directions, tethered together only by children, now guiltily married, tasked with saving them both from lonely ends like the one afflicting this old man.

Mark had gone back inside. I could no longer stare at the withered omen.

"You said you're in apartment thirty?"

"Yes."

"I don't want to get you in trouble, but I can't have people looking in my windows."

"I know. I know. I won't."

"I don't want to find you out here again."

"You won't. You won't."

I stared at him an extra moment, nodded, and walked back inside. I closed the door and met Mark in the entry.

"That's what I would have done," he said quietly. I thanked him and he left.

In our room, Natalie was reading in bed. The rain had drowned out the sounds from outside. Her eyes widened as I explained what had happened. She shook her head.

“That poor old man. We could have been his friend.”

Natalie asked me to replace the blinds; I said I would call the landlord in the morning. I got into bed and formed my body to hers, both of us turned on our sides toward the window. I put my arm over her and clasped her hand in mine. We turned out the lights and for hours were kept awake by our fears, although they weren't the same.

