

NEIGHBORS

BY

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A new family moves in just down the road. A week or so after they arrive they hold a party. Cars and pickups park in their driveway, in the yard, along the side of the road. Maybe it's a moving-in celebration, maybe a family reunion. We have no idea. Things happen here. This is the country, Indiana, houses like ours and our neighbors' on five and six acre lots in between working farmland: wide fields of corn and beans, fenced pastures of cows and pigs for miles and miles. The neighbors' party lasts for three days and nights. Loud laughter and whoops during the day. Bonfires at night. Each afternoon, gunfire. Someone shooting at cans on a stump. We guess that. On the last night, after dark, after dozens of fireworks exploding high in the night sky, someone fires a gun over and over

into the black night. We stand inside our house and listen.

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Sometime after they move in, the neighbors paint an enormous American flag on the side of their garage. On weekends, the father mows the lawn with a new orange tractor pulling a bright red bush hog. He wears a straw hat, blue jeans, and always a white t-shirt. In the first weeks he raises one leather-gloved hand to wave at us when we drive past. We learn he's a pharmacist, works at the local hospital, Monday through Friday. Every weekday morning, his wife drives their four children to school in a green mini-van. We learn they go to a private school, one run by a large church. Each morning after

the family leaves and before the father heads to work, we hear a half dozen shots echoing across the quiet land. In the evening, when the light is fading, the sky turning gray, we hear the same.

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The year they move in is the year we have been building: a new barn, a fenced-in pasture, a riding arena. It's the year that everyone refinances, everyone has money to spend on a dream. This is mine: horses, at home. I have had a horse then for only a year, another dream that somehow came true. I barely know anything at all about horses, not then. Only that I want this gentle giant of a horse that I have come to love more than I might have imagined, I want him at home. That is true. Then there is the lie, the one my husband and I never acknowledge. We are building a barn so we will be building a barn, a project large enough to distract us from anything else: each other, our marriage, the past, and the future. That is the way things are, that is the way they were.

One night, a few weeks into the construction of barn and arena and pasture, we are eating a late

dinner on the back porch. It is a quiet night, birds twittering low in the trees, the dogs sleeping at our feet. The barn is half-built then, framed and trussed, the skeleton of a ship anchored at the back of our six acre lot. We are talking about the barn. There are innumerable details to keep us talking. The sun stretches low across the yard. My husband is finishing his second glass of wine, about to pour another. The bottle is in his hand and then he puts it down and stares across the yard.

"What the hell."

The neighbor is striding across our grassy lawn, up to our house. His head is bare. Then, he is standing at the back sliding glass door of the porch, staring at us. One of the dogs, then the other, begins to growl.

My husband is rising out of his chair. "Asshole," he says.

I know him. I put my hand on his arm, hush the dogs.

"Stay here," I say. "I'll talk to him."

He sits back down, pours the wine. "Good luck," he says.

In the back yard, the neighbor stands before me, tall and fleshy. His hair is receding. His thick glasses glint in the slant light of

the setting sun. He is angry. The fencing contractor has dislodged a surveyor's stake, then put it back, he saw it happen.

"That's against the law," he says.

"I'm sure it was an accident."

"It's against the law. It's illegal." His fists are jammed into his pockets, as though he is restraining himself.

I decide then, not knowing how this story will go, to give this man what I think he wants. "Show me what you saw," I say.

We walk back across the yard toward the half-finished fence and what will become the pasture. I remember now how strange that walk was: I am tiny next to this giant man, this grim and angry stranger in his coveralls and muddy boots. We walk in silence to the very back of the lot. When the neighbor points out the stake, I see that there is a clod of fresh dirt at the base of the wooden peg. There is only one hole in the ground. Nothing has happened. I cannot take this seriously, this angry man, angry about something that is nothing. Yet, I know enough about men like this to act as though I am taking things seriously. I offer to get a new survey, find someone who

will make sure the stake is where it is supposed to be.

"I'm not paying for it."

"Of course not," I say. I am already imagining how to explain all this to another angry man.

The neighbor stubs the toe of his boot into the ground by the surveyor's stake, tamping the loose dirt into place. He lets a heavy silence hang between us before he finally speaks. "I can let it go this time," he says.

Then he walks across the property line, back onto his land and up to his house, and I walk back to ours.

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The next day I hear hammering, a chainsaw, the noise of construction. I look out our bedroom window and see the neighbor at work on his land, as close to the edge of the property line and to our house as he can be. He is cutting down trees, making a long cleared strip of land at right angles to the road, there at the edge of his yard. The neighbor works every day, and I watch him. By the second day, at the head of the cleared strip, he has built a small wooden platform. By the fourth day, at the foot, there are

three bullseye targets backed with bales of straw. At the end of the week, there's no mistaking what he has built: a firing range.

Maybe the neighbor is writing a story with us as the enemy: educated liberals, middle-class white-collar professionals who have moved to the country for peace and quiet, two people with extra income at their disposal to do whatever they want. There we are, building that brand new barn, big and white and solid, a barn for a useless hobby of the rich and entitled: horses. He hates us. In his story he is the hero, the working man supporting four children and a wife on one income and his two bare hands, hands that can fix and build things, hands that know how to hold a gun. He can't stand us. If he wants to build a firing range on his own land, he will, and if he wants to shoot every day, he will, because this is his property, it's his right, it's there in the Constitution, go look it up.

Years later, years after I live far away from this place and this time, I will look at an image of the neighbor's land, and there it will be, that long narrow clearing, the just visible smudges on the image that must be the platform, those three battered targets. I will squint at the

image looking for him, imagining him, still there.

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One afternoon, I call the sheriff's office. A patient man lets me talk. I explain the situation: The gunfire. The shooting. The endless shooting. Hours of shooting.

"It's every day," I say.

"There's not much we can do about it."

"It's so loud the windows shake."

"I understand." The voice on the phone is careful, weary. He's heard this before. From people like me.

"I'm not exaggerating."

"Yes, ma'am."

I stand at a window that faces the neighbor's house. I can see his yard, his carefully mown lawn, the blank windows of his house. Right now, all is quiet. I want to know who this man is. He works at the hospital. He has four children. A wife. A flag on his garage, a house, two cars. All that tells me nothing. I only know one thing: he has guns, and he shoots them, and this changes everything.

I ask about a noise ordinance, about threats, harassment. I want to

know.

The man in the sheriff's office keeps his voice calm, soothing.

"Listen."

I am listening. Right now for gunfire. I want him to hear it. To hear the windows rattle. To feel the thud and boom of gunfire in his gut. The way we do.

"I'm listening," I say.

"Until a bullet hits your house," he says, "There's nothing I can do."

"Nothing."

"Yes, ma'am," he says. "Not a thing."

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By the end of the summer, the barn is finished, the horses home with us now. Two good horses. I want to make peace with the neighbor. I invite him and his wife and their children to come meet the horses. Do I call them on the phone? Do I walk over to their house? I have no memory of how this happens. I only remember the four children and their mother walking down the road to our house one Saturday afternoon, and then up our driveway. There are three boys and one girl, all I can only guess, under the age of seven or eight. The father is not

with them. I watch this small parade from our front window, then meet them in the yard.

"Thanks for coming," I say.

"Thank you for inviting us."

The mother is smaller than I am, a slight woman with short black hair. She and her children stand in a tight knot, uneasy, as though they are not supposed to be here. I lead them to the barn, and I am talking, too much, saying whatever I can think of. I am the only one talking. I keep talking and talking and I start to hear myself as though I am the mother and I am listening to me, this woman who is a little too proud of her horses and her barn and I want her to stop talking, I don't want to be here, not at all, but we have to go through what we started, there's no way out of it, and so we all walk together across the yard.

In the barn, both horses are in their stalls, quietly munching hay. The children and their mother stand in a small knot in the center aisle. I bring out a bag of carrots, hold it out to the children. "You can give the horses treats if you want to." I smile at them, trying, I am trying.

Not one of the children moves. They stand close to their mother, silent and serious. She doesn't

smile. "They don't know anything about horses," she says.

I try the girl. "Would you like to give a horse a treat?"

When she slowly nods her head yes, I show her how to hold out her palm, flat, the carrot on it like an offering on a platter. The horses, as if on cue, raise their heads, move to their stall doors, and lean out into the aisle.

"Like this," I say, and hold my hand out to my horse, Buddy. He stretches his velvet muzzle out to my palm, and delicately lips the carrot into his mouth, to crunch it. I hold out a carrot to the girl. "Want to try it?"

The girl warily places the carrot in her palm and extends her hand to the other horse. He takes it, and she can't help herself—she is a child after all—she giggles, then whispers: "It tickles."

The mother takes her hand then, and the hand of the smallest boy. Her face is stiff and unreadable. "Thank you," she says. "We need to go."

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A week later, Labor Day weekend, it rains for three days straight.

The neighbors are having another

huge party. The rain has been so insistent that they have, for the most part, been kept indoors. But late on Sunday, the rain pauses for an hour or two. Just before dark, the neighbors and a dozen assorted men and women and children pour out of the house and begin to shoot off fireworks. They rise up in the sky, explode over the neighbors' yard and ours.

I am in the barn when the fireworks begin and the ashes are falling like hard rain on the roof. I go from one stall to the other. "It's all right, it's all right," I say again and again. The horses' eyes are huge, their ears flicking back and forth, listening to the barrage outside.

The next day, the rain begins and continues all day; it breaks off again, as if on schedule, late afternoon. The neighbors pour out of their house and begin to shoot. I usher the horses from the pasture into their stalls and carefully close the doors of the barn. The old horse, Freckles, lowers his head to eat his hay. My horse, Buddy, stands alert and listens. "I'm sorry," I say. We never should have built a barn here. Not here, not now, not with these neighbors. I walk back from the barn to the house, it is nearly

dark now, night settling in. Still shooting.

I yell at the neighbors: "Knock it off!"

They don't. My husband calls them on the phone and asks them to stop. They don't. We call the sheriff. A few hours after darkness has fallen, the shooting finally ceases.

*

Sometime the next week, I am in my office at school. It is quiet, an ordinary mid-afternoon. Stacks of papers on my desk. A student who wants me to call her. She's pregnant, due in a month, needs help making it through my class. Another student, evicted, homeless, can he have an extension? And another, a girl I saw that morning, her face bruised and swollen: she's moving out, away from the boyfriend who did this, she won't be in class the rest of the week, is that okay?

That fall, I have been teaching for a half dozen years. The students in my classes have stories, so many stories. They write about themselves, their own lives, this frayed country, this Midwest, this Indiana. They want more, they want

something, it's there in their words on these pages, the ones on my desk where I sit, stacks of student papers before me, lists of things to do, lists punctuated by afterimages of fireworks, echoes of gunfire. So much to do. Start somewhere. Read a paper, write words of advice on it, do the next one.

I pick up a paper from the top of the stack.

Black marks on a white page.

I rub my eyes as though that will help. Black and white. That's all I see. I stare, and stare. I know these are words, sentences, paragraphs. I know there is meaning here. On this day, this afternoon, I can't find it. I simply can't read. Not a single word.

I push myself away from my desk. Get up. Walk down the hall. Breathe in, out.

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A few weeks later, on a Sunday evening, I sit at home, on the porch. I am watching the back yard, the leaves just beginning to turn. I have a book in my lap. I am reading. I am supposed to be reading. It is quiet. An afternoon stretches ahead.

Then, as if he knows, a shot rings out. And then another. More.

Sharp cracks and deep whumps. It goes on, and on. Gunfire. A half hour. Gunfire. Forty-five minutes. So close, the windows rattle and shake. So close, I feel the boom of guns in my chest. My husband calls the neighbors again, and this time no one answers. The shooting goes on.

"I've had it." My husband strides out of the house. I hear his truck start up, then gravel flying as he roars down the driveway. I wait. The shooting stops. I hear shouting. I imagine what will happen next—a fight, someone shoves someone, someone drops a gun, fires a gun, someone gets shot, someone gets killed. These things have happened before and they will happen again.

I get in my own truck, drive to the neighbors' house. My husband's truck is parked at the side of the road and he has one foot in it, and one foot on the road. He is screaming at the neighbor, yelling so loud he is spitting.

If I try to remember now what he said, I only remember it is pure fury. He screams in a raging voice I have heard before more than once but now it is not aimed at me. I want my husband to stop screaming, because there are the four children, standing behind their

father, tiny mouths open and they are children and they don't need to hear this. I can't help but wonder at their life: the parties, the guns, their father, this day, days like this. The mother stands behind her children, mute, as unsmiling and careful as she was when she came to the barn. And her life: what is her life?

Now my husband is screaming louder, and he is raging mad, screaming "Fuck" and "Fuck you" and "Asshole fucking *asshole*." Now I want him to keep screaming. Because there is the father, the neighbor, this man and his gun, standing in the middle of his yard and he is pumping his gun into the air, over his head. In his plaid flannel shirt and Carhaart overalls he's dressed for the part of the farmer, but now he is Rocky, he is John Wayne, he is an American. He bellows lines he must have heard in a movie, on the news, in another fight with someone else somewhere else: "Bring it on! Bring it *on!*"

Then I am yelling. I hear myself, as though this is not me standing in the road, words and words and words coming out of my mouth. Someone else is screaming. She calls this man obnoxious, inconsiderate, and stupid. She points out that his damn fireworks are illegal.

She does not bellow “fuck” the way her husband is still doing, on and on, but she does yell and scream. Now, I have no memory of the exact words that came from the person who was once me. Not anymore. But I do remember the neighbor’s words, what he yells back at me, in a tone I haven’t heard since grade school, the mocking singsong voice of the bully:

“We never cared about guns or fireworks until we got the horse, did we? Did we? *Did we?*”

*

I begin to think the neighbor waits for the moment I go out to ride. When I tack up my horse, walk him to the riding arena and get on, at that moment I hear a gun go off. Once. Again. Then silence. Then another shot, maybe two, three. Silence again. Then gunfire again. There is no regular predictable pattern. Just pure quiet and then the shattering of it. My horse seems to grow used to the erratic gunshots and pays attention, not to them, but to me. I try to follow his lead. Ride. Just ride.

*

One night in October, nine o’clock, dead dark, the shooting begins again. The windows of the house rattle, the boom and bang of the guns so insistent and deep, so loud I can feel it in my body, so loud I can hear nothing but gunfire. I should call the sheriff then. I do not. By then I am tired and afraid of this man, a fear that I know he wants to instill. I am a city girl in the country. I have no idea where I am sometimes. The barrage of gunfire continues. My husband sits at his desk, headphones on, grimly pretending he doesn’t hear it. The dogs hide. I pace from room to room, wanting to do something, not knowing what to do. In desperation, I call another neighbor, one to the north.

“Can you hear that?”

“Yep. Sure can.”

“What can we do?”

There is a slight pause. A low chuckle.

“Stay inside,” he says.

The next morning, I go to the barn as usual at six to feed the horses, muck out their stalls. The entire world is still. The sky a deep dark black, illuminated with a million brilliant stars. A piece of moon hangs low on the horizon. The air is sharply cold and clear. The frozen

grass crunches under my feet, crisp with frozen dew. The world is so beautiful, so calm. In moments like this I think that over time I might learn to live next door to the man with the guns. I might adjust to the noise and the implied threat and the constant sneer. If things had gone on the same, that might have come to pass.

Is this where I write: *it got worse?*

It did.

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One day, early in November, I come home after a day of teaching just as it begins to rain. The old horse is in, but my horse is still out in the pasture.

"I tried to get him in," my husband says. "But he wouldn't come."

I go out, halter in hand. The rain is coming down harder now. I open the gate to the pasture. The horse is on the other side of the creek. He sees me. I call him. He lowers his head and does not move.

Something is very wrong. I go to him, and put the halter on. "Come on, Buddy." I tug. "Come on." He still doesn't budge. I tug again, cluck encouragingly. It is pouring down rain. My husband is in the

field with me now.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know."

I realize now how little I knew about horses then. I have no business having a barn, a pasture, two horses in my care. I have no idea what I am doing. And my husband, the man who thought building this barn would keep us together forever, he knows even less.

Somehow, in that mud and rain, we get the horse to move. He is limping badly.

"Buddy, Buddy." I talk to him as we move slowly toward the barn.

Inside, I put him in his stall, throw a cooler over him, and feel up and down each of his legs. I know to search for heat. Heat means injury and pain and I find it: his right hind leg, just below the hock. Hot. Swollen. I cold hose him, give him some Bute, call the vet.

When the vet comes the next day, after we lunge the horse and watch him favor the sore leg, after the vet ultrasounds the leg and sees the bruised suspensory ligament, after she shows me how to wrap his legs, after she gives me enough Bute to last until the swelling goes down, and then gives instructions on his care—stall rest and hand-walking, maybe a month, maybe

longer—after we put the horse back into his stall, I ask: “How do you think he did this?”

“It’s hard to say,” she says. Maybe he was running and there was a hole in the pasture he stumbled in. Maybe he moved wrong and twisted his leg.

“Maybe something spooked him,” I say.

The vet shrugs. “Maybe.”

In my imagination, I see our neighbor, with his gun, at the property line. He won’t shoot a horse. He is just smart enough not to do that. He won’t even look directly at the pair of horses in the field. He will just wait. Wait while both horses get used to his presence. Wait while they move about the pasture, casually grazing. Wait until one horse moves close to his land. Wait. Watch the horizon. Wait. The horse is right there. Right now. Now. BAM BAM BAM. One horse bolts and gallops to the other side of the field. The other horse lifts his head and follows. Now both are running. BAM BAM BAM There is nowhere to run. BAM BAM. Now, one horse, my horse, falters and stumbles and comes up limping badly. He stops, lowers his head, defeated. In my imagination, only then does the neighbor put down his gun and

after he takes in the scene before him, remembering it all, only then does he walk away.

I wrap Buddy’s legs every night for six weeks. Unwrap them in the morning and let him and his companion out to stretch and move in the riding arena where I can watch them from the house. An hour, two hours. Then I put them back into the safety of their stalls. In the end, they will never go out in the pasture again. That is another story. In this story, I only imagine I will do this for as long as I have to, a month, even longer.

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One day in early December while Buddy is still lame and on stall rest, my husband stands in the living room, pulls up his pant leg and says, “Does my leg look funny to you?”

His leg —right or left I no longer remember—is swollen from knee to ankle. Purple in color. It looks like an oversized bruise.

“That,” I say, “looks bad.”

He will spend a week in the hospital on an intravenous drip of blood thinners working to loosen or lessen, I can never get the doctor to explain clearly which, a deep vein thrombosis in his leg, a blood clot

that has to be monitored in case it becomes dislodged and moves to his lungs where it will become a pulmonary embolism. A "P.E." I remember P.E. from an episode of *E.R.* a long time ago. One of the doctors gets stabbed, horribly attacked. Her throat is slashed. She almost dies. At the last moment, they find her, gasping for air. Emergency surgery, a tracheotomy, IV. She pulls through, is conscious enough that someone can tell her the details of her condition. It's bad. She can make it, they tell her, but there may be complications. She understands. She puts a finger over the trach so she can speak. Her words come out in a ragged whisper:

"P.E.?"

The doctor working on her, a colleague and a friend, nods, solemn. "P.E."

The young doctor holds her colleague's gaze. She knows. And then, she dies.

My husband does not die. He stays in the hospital for a week. I bring him books, the *New Yorker*. I visit twice a day, morning and evening. In between, I take care of the horses. Grade papers. Teach my classes. Let the dogs in and out. Listen for gunfire.

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I am visiting my husband in the hospital, maybe the day he will be discharged, maybe another day. I don't remember. I only remember that this is the day the doctor prescribes a new drug, something for blood pressure or clotting or not clotting. He gives the prescription to the nurse, so she can send the order down to the pharmacy; I idly wonder if our neighbor is working.

And then we wait.

My husband and I sit in his hospital room, and we chat carefully. I don't tell him I find the peace of him being here, and not at home, a kind of relief. The house in the country is calm: dogs, horses, me. I am physically tired. My body is sore. Yet my mind is clear. In the time my husband is not at home I sometimes think: I can do this alone. I even imagine, maybe, that if I were alone I could make peace with the neighbor. We might find a way to co-exist. I imagine many things. Living alone. Living with someone else. I don't say any of this. We talk about safe things. The dogs. The weather. The barn. Him.

It is on that visit that I see our neighbor, the man with the guns, in the hallway by my husband's room.

The neighbor is acting casual. He is acting as though he, a pharmacist who works in the basement, makes a habit of coming up to the patients' floor to see what needs to be seen. He is acting as though he hasn't just read a name on the order that came downstairs, that he didn't have a jolt of recognition, that he didn't invent a reason to come up to this floor to find the room where a man is lying in a bed, hooked up to an IV drip that might, possibly, be saving his life. He is acting as though he doesn't recognize my husband, or me, at the very moment when he pauses at the door and glances inside. It is just a suspension of time, a brief moment, as though he has turned into the wrong room, then caught himself and begun to turn away.

Yet a glimpse of his face reveals everything. When I see him at the door, his expression is not surprise or cruel pleasure, it is not even a face slightly off-kilter with ordinary spite. It is, rather, a mask of pure and shining hate. I will never forget this face, nor how it shifts, an infinitesimal change, and how then there is a smile, a little glow. Even as he is turning away, turning as if remembering he needs to say something important

to a nurse, even at that moment of stepping away from the door, the neighbor's face tells me what he is thinking: in this undeclared war between him and us, he has won.

I move to stand in the doorway of the hospital room. The neighbor makes conversation with the nurse. He knows I am watching him. He won't look at me. He finishes saying whatever he has invented to say and then, he doesn't go back the way he came, not past this doorway; instead, he ducks his head and strides down the hospital corridor through some windowless double doors that swing open before him, and then, blandly shudder shut.