

Raymond
Carver:

In
collection:

Will you please be
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Neighbors

Bill and Arlene Miller were a happy couple. But now and then they felt they alone among their circle had been passed by somehow, leaving Bill to attend to his bookkeeping duties and Arlene occupied with secretarial chores. They talked about it sometimes, mostly in comparison with the lives of their neighbors, Harriet and Jim Stone. It seemed to the Millers that the Stones lived a fuller and brighter life. The Stones were always going out for dinner, or entertaining at home, or traveling about the country somewhere in connection with Jim's work.

The Stones lived across the hall from the Millers. Jim was a salesman for a machine-parts firm and often managed to combine business with pleasure trips, and on this occasion the Stones would be away for ten days, first to Cheyenne, then on to St Louis to visit relatives. In their absence, the Millers would look after the Stones' apartment, feed Kitty, and water the plants.

Bill and Jim shook hands beside the car. Harriet and Arlene held each other by the elbows and kissed lightly on the lips.

"Have fun," Bill said to Harriet.

"We will," said Harriet. "You kids have fun too."

Arlene nodded.

Jim winked at her. "Bye, Arlene. Take good care of the old man."

"I will," Arlene said.

"Have fun," Bill said.

"You bet," Jim said, clipping Bill lightly on the arm. "And thanks again, you guys."

The Stones waved as they drove away, and the Millers waved too.

"Well, I wish it was us," Bill said.

"God knows, we could use a vacation," Arlene said. She took his arm and put it around her waist as they climbed the stairs to their apartment.

After dinner Arlene said, "Don't forget. Kitty gets liver flavor the

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first night." She stood in the kitchen doorway folding the handmade tablecloth that Harriet had bought for her last year in Santa Fe.

Bill took a deep breath as he entered the Stones' apartment. The air was already heavy and it was vaguely sweet. The sunburst clock over the television said half past eight. He remembered when Harriet had come home with the clock, how she had crossed the hall to show it to Arlene, cradling the brass case in her arms and talking to it through the tissue paper as if it were an infant.

Kitty rubbed her face against his slippers and then turned onto her side, but jumped up quickly as Bill moved to the kitchen and selected one of the stacked cans from the gleaming drainboard. Leaving the cat to pick at her food, he headed for the bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror and then closed his eyes and then looked again. He opened the medicine chest. He found a container of pills and read the label - *Harriet Stone. One each day as directed* - and slipped it into his pocket. He went back to the kitchen, drew a pitcher of water, and returned to the living room. He finished watering, set the pitcher on the rug, and opened the liquor cabinet. He reached in back for the bottle of Chivas Regal. He took two drinks from the bottle, wiped his lips on his sleeve, and replaced the bottle in the cabinet.

Kitty was on the couch sleeping. He switched off the lights, slowly closing and checking the door. He had the feeling he had left something.

"What kept you?" Arlene said. She sat with her legs turned under her, watching television.

"Nothing. Playing with Kitty," he said, and went over to her and touched her breasts.

"Let's go to bed, honey," he said.

The next day Bill took only ten minutes of the twenty-minute break allotted for the afternoon and left at fifteen minutes before five. He parked the car in the lot just as Arlene hopped down from the bus. He waited until she entered the building, then ran up the stairs to catch her as she stepped out of the elevator.

"Bill! God, you scared me. You're early," she said.

He shrugged. "Nothing to do at work," he said.

She let him use her key to open the door. He looked at the door

across the hall before following her inside.

"Let's go to bed," he said.

"Now?" She laughed. "What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing. Take your dress off." He grabbed for her awkwardly, and she said, "Good God, Bill."

He unfastened his belt.

Later they sent out for Chinese food, and when it arrived they ate hungrily, without speaking, and listened to records.

"Let's not forget to feed Kitty," she said.

"I was just thinking about that," he said. "I'll go right over."

He selected a can of fish flavor for the cat, then filled the pitcher and went to water. When he returned to the kitchen, the cat was scratching in her box. She looked at him steadily before she turned back to the litter. He opened all the cupboards and examined the canned goods, the cereals, the packaged foods, the cocktail and wine glasses, the china, the pots and pans. He opened the refrigerator. He sniffed some celery, took two bites of cheddar cheese, and chewed on an apple as he walked into the bedroom. The bed seemed enormous, with a fluffy white bedspread draped to the floor. He pulled out a nightstand drawer, found a half-empty package of cigarettes and stuffed them into his pocket. Then he stepped to the closet and was opening it when the knock sounded at the front door.

He stopped by the bathroom and flushed the toilet on his way.

"What's been keeping you?" Arlene said. "You've been over here more than an hour."

"Have I really?" he said.

"Yes, you have," she said.

"I had to go to the toilet," he said.

"You have your own toilet," she said.

"I couldn't wait," he said.

That night they made love again.

In the morning he had Arlene call in for him. He showered, dressed, and made a light breakfast. He tried to start a book. He went out for a walk and felt better. But after a while, hands still in his pockets, he returned to the apartment. He stopped at the Stones' door, on the chance he might hear the

cat moving about. Then he let himself in at his own door and went to the kitchen for the key.

Inside it seemed cooler than his apartment, and darker too. He wondered if the plants had something to do with the temperature of the air. He looked out the window, and then he moved slowly through each room considering everything that fell under his gaze, carefully, one object at a time. He saw ashtrays, items of furniture, kitchen utensils, the clock. He saw everything. At last he entered the bedroom, and the cat appeared at his feet. He stroked her once, carried her into the bathroom, and shut the door.

He lay down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. He lay for a while with his eyes closed, and then he moved his hand under his belt. He tried to recall what day it was. He tried to remember when the Stones were due back, and then he wondered if they would ever return. He could not remember their faces or the way they talked and dressed. He sighed and with effort rolled off the bed to lean over the dresser and look at himself in the mirror.

He opened the closet and selected a Hawaiian shirt. He looked until he found Bermudas, neatly pressed and hanging over a pair of brown twill slacks. He shed his own clothes and slipped into the shorts and the shirt. He looked in the mirror again. He went to the living room and poured himself a drink and sipped it on his way back to the bedroom. He put on a blue shirt, a dark suit, a blue and white tie, black wing-tip shoes. The glass was empty and he went for another drink.

In the bedroom again, he sat on a chair, crossed his legs, and smiled, observing himself in the mirror. The telephone rang twice and fell silent. He finished the drink and took off the suit. He rummaged through the top drawers until he found a pair of panties and a brassiere. He stepped into the panties and fastened the brassiere, then looked through the closet for an outfit. He put on a black and white checkered skirt and tried to zip it up. He put on a burgundy blouse that buttoned up the front. He considered her shoes, but understood they would not fit. For a long time he looked out the living-room window from behind the curtain. Then he returned to the bedroom and put everything away.

He was not hungry. She did not eat much, either. They looked at each other shyly and smiled. She got up from the table and checked that the key was on the shelf and then she quickly cleared the dishes.

WILL YOU PLEASE BE QUIET, PLEASE?

He stood in the kitchen doorway and smoked a cigarette and watched her pick up the key.

"Make yourself comfortable while I go across the hall," she said. "Read the paper or something." She closed her fingers over the key. He was, she said, looking tired.

He tried to concentrate on the news. He read the paper and turned on the television. Finally he went across the hall. The door was locked.

"It's me. Are you still there, honey?" he called.

After a time the lock released and Arlene stepped outside and shut the door. "Was I gone so long?" she said.

"Well, you were," he said.

"Was I?" she said. "I guess I must have been playing with Kitty."

He studied her, and she looked away, her hand still resting on the doorknob.

"It's funny," she said. "You know - to go in someone's place like that."

He nodded, took her hand from the knob, and guided her toward their own door. He let them into their apartment.

"It is funny," he said.

He noticed white lint clinging to the back of her sweater, and the color was high in her cheeks. He began kissing her on the neck and hair and she turned and kissed him back.

"Oh, damn," she said. "Damn, damn," she sang, girlishly clapping her hands. "I just remembered. I really and truly forgot to do what I went over there to do. I didn't feed Kitty or do any watering." She looked at him. "Isn't that stupid?"

"I don't think so," he said. "Just a minute. I'll get my cigarettes and go back with you."

She waited until he had closed and locked their door, and then she took his arm at the muscle and said, "I guess I should tell you. I found some pictures."

He stopped in the middle of the hall. "What kind of pictures?"

"You can see for yourself," she said, and she watched him.

"No kidding." He grinned. "Where?"

"In a drawer," she said.

"No kidding," he said.

And then she said, "Maybe they won't come back," and was at once astonished at her words.

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"It could happen," he said. "Anything could happen."

"Or maybe they'll come back and . . ." but she did not finish. They held hands for the short walk across the hall, and when he spoke she could barely hear his voice.

"The key," he said. "Give it to me."

"What?" she said. She gazed at the door.

"The key," he said. "You have the key."

"My God," she said, "I left the key inside."

He tried the knob. It was locked. Then she tried the knob. It would not turn. Her lips were parted, and her breathing was hard, expectant. He opened his arms and she moved into them.

"Don't worry," he said into her ear. "For God's sake, don't worry." They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves.

A C C L A I M F O R

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When We Talk About Love*

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—James Dickey

Prof. J. HRUBÝ (in Katedrála, 1994)

Sousedé

Bill a Arlene Millerovi spolu byli šťastní. Ale tu a tam mívali pocit, že jsou sami dva svíraní jakýmsi kruhem — Billovi nezbývalo než se věnovat účetnickým povinnostem a Arlene se zabývala rutinními úkony sekretářky. Někdy o tom spolu mluvili, hlavně v souvislosti s životem svých sousedů — Harriet a Jima Stoneových. Millerovým se zdálo, že Stoneovi žijí plněji a zajímavěji. Stoneovi se věčně vypravovali na večeri nebo měli společnost doma, či někde cestovali v souvislosti s Jimovou prací.

Stoneovi bydleli na stejném patře jako Millerovi. Jim byl obchodní cestující u firmy prodávající náhradní díly a často se mu podařilo skloubit služební cestu s výletem. Při těchto příležitostech bývali Stoneovi pryč tak deset dní, nejdříve je do Cheyenne a pak do St. Luis k příbuzným. Po dobu nepřítomnosti jim Millerovi dohlíželi na byt, krmlili Micku a zalévali kytky.

Bill s Jimem si u auta podali ruce. Harriet s Arlene se držely za lokty a lehce se políbily na rty.

„Mějte se hezky,“ řekl Bill Harriet.

„Budeme se snažit,“ odpověděla. „Vy se tu taky mějte.“ Arlene přikývla.

Jim na ni mrkl. „Ahoj, Arlene. Pořádně na toho svého dohlídní.“

„Neboj,“ řekla Arlene.

„Mějte se,“ řekl Bill.

„To víš, že jo,“ přikývl Jim a poklepl Billa po paži. „A ještě jednou díky.“

Stoneovi odjížděli a mávali a Millerovi mávali také.

„No, kdybysme tak byli na jejich místě,“ řekl Bill.

„Dovolená by se nám teda sešla,“ přikývla Arlene. Cestou do schodů k jejich bytu vzala Billa za ruku a dala si ji kolem pasu.

Po večeri se Arlene ozvala: „Nezapomeň, že Micka to má první večer s játrovou příchutí.“ Stála ve dveřích do ku-

chyně a skládala ručně tkaný ubrus, který jí Harriet vloni koupila v Santa Fé.

Bill vešel do bytu Stoneových a zhluboka se nadechl. Vzduch už byl nevětráný a slabě nasládlý. Na hodinách nad televizí, které vypadaly jako slunce, bylo půl deváté. Vzpomněl si, jak Harriet s těmi hodinami přišla domů, jak šla přes chodbu, aby je Arlene ukázala. Držela mosaznou skříňku v náruči a hovořila k ní přes hedvábný papír jako k dítěti.

Micka se mu otírala čumákem o trepky a pak si lehla na bok, hned ale vyskočila, když šel Bill do kuchyně a z hromady na lesklé odkapávací ploše vybral jednu plechovku. Nechal kočku žrát a zamířil do koupelny. Podíval se na sebe do zrcadla, pak zavřel oči a zase je otevřel. Otevřel lékárníčku. Našel lahvičku s pilulkami, přečetl si nálepku — *Harriet Stoneová. Jednou denně podle předpisu* — a strčil lahvičku do kapsy. Vrátil se do kuchyně, natočil vodu do konvičky a šel zpátky do obývacího. Zalil květiny, postavil konvičku na koberec a otevřel domácí bar. Zezadu vyndal láhev Chivas Regal. Dvakrát se napil, otřel si ústa do rukávu a vrátil láhev na místo.

Micka spala na kanapi. Zhasl světla, pomalu zamkl a ještě zkusil, jestli je zavřeno. Měl pocit, že něco zapomněl.

„Cos tam dělal tak dlouho?“ zeptala se Arlene. Seděla s nohama složenými pod sebou a dívala se na televizi.

„Nic. Hrál jsem si s Mickou,“ řekl. Přesel k ní a sáhl jí na prsa. „Pojď už, miláčku, do postele.“

Druhý den si Bill z dvacetiminutové odpolední přestávky vzal jen deset minut a odjel z práce ve tři čtvrtě na pět. Zaježděl na parkoviště, právě když Arlene vyskočila z autobusu. Počkal, až vejde do domu, a vyběhl po schodech, aby ji chytil, až bude vystupovat z výtahu.

„Bože, Bille, tys mě polekal! Jseš tu brzy.“

Pokrčil rameny. „V práci nebylo co dělat.“

Nechala ho, aby odemkl jejím klíčem. Než za ní vstoupil dovnitř, otočil se ke dveřím na druhé straně chodby.

„Jdeme do postele,“ navrhl.

„Teď?“ Zasmála se. „Co to do tebe vjelo?“

„Nic. Svítkni se.“ Neobratně ji stiskl. „Panebože, Bille. Rozepnul si pásek.“

Později si objednali činu, a když jído dorazilo, hladově se beze slova najedli a poslouchali přítom desky.

„Nesmíme zapomenout nakrmit Micku,“ řekla.

„Právě jsem na to myslel. Hned tam zajdu.“

Výbral pro kočku plechovku žrádla s rybí příchutí, pak natočil vodu do konvičky a vydal se zalévat. Když se vrátil do kuchyně, kočka štrachala ve své krabici. Uprně na něj hleděla a pak se dál věnovala výstelce. Otvíral všechny skříňky a prohlížel si konzervy, vložky, balíčky s jídlem, skleničky na víno a koktejly, porcelán, nádobí. Otevřel ledničku. Přičichl k celeru, dvakrát si ukousl z čedaru. Když šel do ložnice, žvýkal jablko. Postel mu připadala obrovská, huňatý bílý přehoz visel až k zemi. Vysunul zásuvku nočního stolku; našel krabičku s několika cigaretami a nacpal si je do kapsy. Pak přistoupil k šatníku a právě ho otevřel, když se ozvalo zaťukání na dveře.

Šel kolem koupelny a cestou spláchl záchod.

„Co tady děláš?“ zeptala se Arlene. „Už jseš tady přes hodinu.“

„Opravdu?“

„Jo, opravdu.“

„Chtělo se mi na záchod.“

„Záchod máš doma.“

„Už jsem to nemohl vydržet.“

Večer se opět milovali.

Ráno přiměl Arlene, aby ho omluvila v práci. Vysprchoval se, oblékl a udělal si lehkou snídani. Snažil se zabrat do knihy. Výrazil ven na procházku a hned se cítil lépe. Ale po chvíli, ruce stále v kapsách, se vrátil do bytu. Zastavil se u dveří Stoneových, ještě náhodou neuslyší kočku. Pak odemkl svůj byt a šel si do kuchyně pro klíč.

Zdálo se mu, že je uvnitř chladněji než v jejích bytě, a také větší tma. Přemýšlel, jestli květiny nemají vliv na teplotu vzduchu. Vyhlédl z okna a pak pomalu procházel místnostmi a pečlivě zkoumal všechno, co mu padlo do očí. Jeden předmět po druhém. Viděl popelnicu, kusy nábytku, kuchyňské potřeby, hodiny. Viděl všechno. Nakonec vstoupil do ložnice a u nohou se mu objevila kočka. Jednou ji pohladil, odnesl ji do koupelny a zavřel dveře.

Lehl si na postel a zíral do stropu. Chvilí ležel se zavřenýma očima a pak si strčil ruku pod pásek. Snažil se vzpomínout, co je za den. Snažil se vzpomínout, kdy se mají Stoneovi vrátit, a pak ho napadlo, jestli se ještě vůbec někdy vrátí. Nevybavoval si jejich obličej, ani jak mluví nebo se oblékají. Vzdychl si a namáhavě se skulil z postele, aby se sklonil nad toaletkou a mohl se podívat do zrcadla.

Otevřel prádelník a vybral si plážovou košili. Po chvíli hledání našel pečlivě vyžehlené bermudy. Byly pověšené přes hnědé keprové kalhoty. Shodil ze sebe oblečení a vklouzl do šortek a košile. Znovu se podíval do zrcadla. Šel do obývacího pokoje, nalil si pití a na zpáteční cestě do ložnice pomalu usrkával. Oblékl si modrou košili, tmavý oblek, modrobílou kravatu. Obul si černé mokasíny. Sklenička byla prázdná, a tak si šel pro další.

Když byl zpátky v ložnici, sedl si na židli, přehodil si nohu přes nohu a usmíval se. Díval se na sebe do zrcadla. Dvakrát zažvonal telefon a zase přestal. Dopil a svlékl si oblek. Chvilí se přehraboval ve vrchních zásuvkách, až vytáhl kalhotky a podprsenku. Natáhl si kalhotky, zapnul podprsenku a pátral v šatníku po vhodných šatech. Oblékl si černobíle kostkovanou sukni a zkoušel zapnout zip. Pak si oblékl sytě pálenou blůzu se zapínáním vepredu. Uvažoval i nad jejímá botama, ale bylo mu jasné, že do těch se nevejde. Dlouho zpoza záclony vyhlížel oknem obývacího pokoje. Pak se vrátil do ložnice a všechno uložil.

Neměl hlad. Ona také mnoho nejedla. Nesměle na sebe pohlédli a usmáli se. Vstala od stolu a podívala se, jestli je klíč na polici, a pak rychle sklídila se stolu.

Stál ve dveřích kuchyně, kouřil cigaretu a pozoroval svou ženu, jak si bere klíč.

„Jdu naproti, udělej si zatím pohodlí,“ řekla. „Přečti si noviny nebo něco.“ Sevřela klíč v dlani. Řekla mu, že vypadá unaveně.

Snažil se soustředit na zprávy. Přečetl noviny a pustil televizi. Nakonec přešel přes chodbu. Dveře byly zavřené.

„To jsem já. Jseš tam ještě?“ zavolal.

Za chvíli se dveře odemkly a Arlene vyšla ven a zavřela za sebou. „To jsem tam byla tak dlouho?“ zeptala se. „To jsi teda byla.“

„Opravdu? To jsem si asi hrála s Mickou.“

Prohlížel si ji, až uhnula pohledem. Ruku ještě měla na klíče.

„Je to zvláštní,“ řekla. „Víš — chodit takhle k někomu do bytu.“

Přikývl, sundal jí ruku z klíčky a vedl ji ke dveřím jejich bytu. Otevřel a vešli dovnitř.

„To teda je zvláštní,“ řekl.

Všiml si, že má vzadu na svetru bílá vlákna. Tváře jí hořely. Začal ji líbat na krku a vlasech, otočila se a políbky opětovala.

„Krucci,“ řekla. „Krucci, krucci,“ prozpěvovala a tleskala rukama jako malá holka. „Teď jsem si vzpomněla. Úplně jsem zapomněla, proč jsem tam vlastně šla. Nenakrmila jsem Micku a nezalila kytky.“ Podívala se na něj. „Není to praššěný?“

„Ani ne. Počkej chvíli. Vezmu si cigarety a půjdu tam s tebou.“

Čekala, až zavře a zamkne dveře. Pak ho vzala za biceps a řekla: „Musím ti něco říct. Našla jsem nějaký obrázek.“

Zarazil se uprostřed chodby. „Jaký obrázek?“

„Uvidíš,“ řekla a dívala se na něj.

„Vážně?“ Usmál se. „A kde?“

„V šuplíku.“

„To mi neříkej.“

Pak dodala: „Možná že už se nevrátěj.“ Hned ji její slova zarazila.

„To by se klidně mohlo stát,“ řekl. „Může se stát všelicos.“

„Nebo se možná vrátěj a...“ Větu nedokončila.

Drželi se těch několik kroků přes chodbu za ruce, a když promluvil, málem ho ani neslyšela.

„Klíč,“ řekl. „Dej mi ho.“

„Cože?“ zeptala se. Dívala se na dveře.

„Ten klíč,“ opakoval. „Klíč máš ty.“

„Kristepane, já ho nechala uvnitř.“

Zkusil otočit klikou. Bylo zamčeno. Pak to zkusila ona. Knoflíkem na dveřích otočit nešlo. Otevřela ústa a ztěžka dýchala, jako by na něco čekala. Rozevřel náruč a ona mu do ní vklouzla.

„Nic se neboj,“ pošeptal jí do ucha. „Pro boha živýho, neboj se.“

Stáli na místě. Drželi se. Opírali se o dveře, jako by se schovávali před větrem, a objímali se.