



The Adjacents

An original short story by Myles Kovalik

During the long hot summer which preceded my enlistment I happened to live in a second floor apartment with no AC unit in my room. The heat from the floor below would rise up and permeate my private quarters with tepid, second-hand air. Tried as I might to combat this temperature with fans and open windows, the now-scorching climate could not be combated in any manner approaching success. Therefore, that summer, which I would have preferred to spend restfully recovering from the heavy Spring of tiresome examination I had had, was to be spent instead in idle languish traipsing around my living room from the loveseat to the armchair alternatively until one soaked up my body heat and forced me back to the other.

My roommates, the two close friends that I had been so excited to move in with, dealt with this heat in their own ways; they were almost never home until the dead of night when the cool of dusk had somewhat tempered the sun's blaze and made sleep under sheets and comforters could be considered. Sometimes, they never came home at all. One, the motivated self-starter type, had secured an entry level job working for a defense company and spent long hours researching new weapons and tactics meant to save us from The Attack if it ever did come. The other had tried with me at first to spend the summer in rest, but had eventually given up and committed himself entirely to laying his complaints upon other acquaintances at their house - air-conditioned. So it was to be that the summer I had meant to spend sleeping and enjoying the company of these two companions was spent instead in a sort of liminal space, alone and weary.

I guess that I could have gone out like one did or found a job somewhere like the other had, but that did not appeal to me. And anyway I had resigned myself to idle after the excruciating Spring of indoctrination and establishment that still left my energy levels drained. I only went out once or twice a week and only to buy groceries at the shop just around the corner. My stipend provided enough for that, though with rising prices, I had to be careful and know where to spend my money. The price of eggs wasn't affected too much, but things like red meat and fruit I had to let slip out of my diet. In fact, that summer I ate mainly eggs. Three scrambled in the morning and two for a second meal - I wasn't eating much then. The only annoying bit was that we had no dishwasher so I had to scrape the soggy detritus from pans and plates twice a day because I only had so many. A boring and rote task - yet this is what led me to the discovery.

It now becomes important to describe to you the character of my neighborhood. I live in an old part of town, one that hasn't been touched much since the last century when the final of these kitschy house-shaped-apartments was finished. Though there is a lot of leftover architecture around: an old bus stop portico off a burned out concrete facade, a sealed up subway entrance, a bent-over stoplight formerly used to direct cars. Plants and animals grow wild around the buildings (government overseers haven't stopped by here in years), and they're aided by the people of all sorts who live in these reclusive apartments - people that I didn't often see. I only caught glimpses of cloth and fabric, anonymous lonely shapes, on my weekly walks to the grocery store. It was a quiet neighborhood, one on the end of a cul-de-sac, so privacy was possible despite the big city setting. Privacy from the street level that is.

There just so happened to be a big window in front of the sink where I washed my dishes that looked directly down into my neighbor's fenced-in concrete backyard. In fact, I guess all the neighboring complexes had windows that in some way or another could look down into this yard (though that didn't come to me until after). This building was the one exception in the neighborhood, a lone large house instead of an apartment complex. And the people that lived there seemed to be hoarders because there was so much junk (as I saw it then) in their backyard: discarded kitchen appliances, car parts, and, of all things in this space-conscious city, a sizable trampoline. The first time I saw it I had to double-check myself; it had been years since I had even seen one on TV. Anyway, I saw this all as a waste of real estate and was justified in my beliefs because the first few times I peered out that window I never saw anyone go back there, much less bounce around on the thing.

One day though, as I was working on a particularly stuck bit of egg, a bright tomato shade danced into my peripheral view and I looked up, expecting a bird, but saw a woman; around 30 and tall in a red sundress. I must admit she was quite beautiful with a slender figure and carefree attitude as she flitted around the backyard bending down to pick up scraps of machinery. Obviously she couldn't see me, yet I felt wrong somehow watching her graceful movements. But I couldn't help myself because the window was right there and a slight breeze of cool outside air blew in so I was in no rush to escape. I gradually finished

my washing while she sorted these bits into three separate bags. Then, she left, leaving two of them behind. I found I had finished my dishes by then and left too. That night, when I finally got cool enough to lay in bed, I thought of her and the gleaming things she had touched.

The next morning I checked the window again and the two other bags were gone. To the trash as well I guess. It was another long day of shifting seats in the heat and doing just what I needed to to get by with the least effort on my part. Washing dishes after my second meal late in the afternoon though, I once again incidentally noticed movement in my neighbors yard. This time a strong young man in yellow attire. His muscular physique wouldn't have escaped the notice of anyone. He was carrying a tray of something, I couldn't tell exactly what because it was covered, and left it on a little side table randomly placed at the edge of the yard.

The next day, the tray was gone and I noticed no movements of the people I had now come to think of as "The Adjacents" during my two long dishwashing intervals and thought that perhaps this was the end of the entertainment next door. However after a week of nothing eventful (despite perhaps a brief excruciating period when my little AC unit gave out on me) I saw something entirely bothersome. The two of them came out together, both the attractive woman and the chiseled man, with arms full of scavenged mechanical parts. They made several trips inside and out, returning each time with even more and more until an incredibly large stack of the stuff had piled up again where the woman had sorted it earlier. They stood back and looked at their work immensely satisfied. The man gently slipped a hand under the woman's shorts and she smiled back at him, moving her body closer to his. A kiss. Because it hurt so terribly to watch this (how lonely I was then!) I turned away to drape myself on the loveseat and watched a fly buzz around the unfinished dishes from afar, circling in the diminishing sunlight until it finally drifted out into the night.

I returned to finish what I had left undone and was even more astonished with what I saw this time. Across the way The Adjacents were leading a pack of six people, men and women about my age, into the back. They all looked so happy, parading in like a procession from an ancient frieze. And each had something in hand: one had a cookie jar, another carried a water jug, and yet another was holding a cloth pouch - strange. As I stared on incredulously, an old tungsten beam flickered on, dampening the scene in hazy light and together all of them began sorting the bits and ends into different bags.

The dishes no longer concerned me as I watched these jumbled eight intently. They all just seemed so joyful being together, working on a common goal. But to what end? I had to know. I looked in my cabinets, the egg carton there had only one left. Maybe I could try and borrow more from them, saying that the store had already closed and I needed another for dinner. It wasn't a great plan but I had to know what was going on. How was I supposed to relax when something so nebulous was going on next door?

So I went to my room, still sweltering even at this time and changed from my rags that I had grown accustomed to wearing. Newly dressed in a shirt and slacks, I combed my mane in the shattered mirror in the bathroom, not quite able to see my face. I prepared the place for my exit and grabbed my egg carton for evidence. I looked around my apartment and locked the door behind me with the one key we had as I went. My roommates, wherever they were, would have to find some other way to get in.

I walked next door and was about to knock when I noticed a path opened up to the back, in what had used to be a driveway in olden times. A line of five other people waited there at the gate. I fell in behind the last one, a mousy woman with scraggly hair, and told her I needed to borrow eggs from The Adjacents. She nodded back at me and said something about salt, holding up an empty container. I knew I had some back in my apartment but I'd misplaced my key somewhere on the walk over so didn't mention that. Suddenly, there they were: the comely woman and the golden man. They met us and told us about their plan, about the metal and the design and the way The Attack was to be carried out soon with the help of underground communities like ours.

I forgot all about my eggs as we followed them into the back and met the six I had seen earlier. We all pushed the trampoline back revealing the rough hewn hole that led into a temple of networks below. Then, grabbing our bags, one by one, we filed into the darkened depths below.

We've been here in the years since.

We work on those metal bits, fashioning them into anything useful for The Attack and I've never felt so invigorated in my life. I'm no longer tired and the work is easy and even the food is good! The man brings it down on that cloth covered tray. I'd forgotten how sweet cherries are, how savory a well-cooked steak can be. And the others are kind too, that scraggly-haired woman is my favorite. I've even forgotten what heat feels like, as here the temperature is always refreshingly cool. All in all, I wouldn't mind if The Attack never comes, I love it here that much, but when it does I'll gladly go along because of everything The Adjacents have done for me. And besides, after it's over I won't want anything else.

