

Mrs. Shapiro's Neighborhood

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He half limped, half ran down the street, putting 20 feet between him and the two boys. Wheezing, he stopped in front of a red brick house with an electric menorah glowing in the window.

The boys sauntered after him, as if they had all the time in the world. The bigger boy called out, "Where you running, mister? You ain't paid your parking yet."

The smaller one said, "Looks like he's going to the Jew lady's."

The man stumbled up the porch steps, hanging on to the wrought iron railing. He groped for the doorbell. The door opened a crack, then banged to a stop, latched by a security chain. A white-haired old woman stared out at him.

"Mrs. Shapiro? Can you help me? I used to live across the street. My name is Elliot Roth."

"I know who you are." The door closed in his face.

His chest tightened. This had been his last hope. Even if he gave them the money, he was sure these boys would beat him now for running. He felt his testicles contract.

He struggled to his feet. Blood seeped through the rip in his pants. His calfskin gloves were shredded, and bits of gravel lodged in his palms. He glanced over his shoulder. The boys stood in the streetlight's spot, arms crossed over their chests. For some reason they seemed reluctant to come any closer.

The door opened again, wider this time. “Well, don’t just stand there like a statue, Roth. Come in already if you’re coming. And take off your shoes. I don’t want your mess in my living room.” She turned and clomped away, leaning on a tripod cane.

Elliot closed the door and latched the security chain. He peered through the small window at the top of the door. His glasses were a mess—one lens cracked, the other one gone—but he could see that the boys lingering in the street. The larger one was bigger taller and broader than he was; the smaller one, a head shorter. They wore mirrored sunglasses pushed over their knit ski caps and baggy warm-up suits with a logo Elliot recognized from clothes his sons wore. He knew what he paid for his boys’ outfits. He wondered where they got the money for theirs. He turned away from the door.

The living room was beyond the small foyer. A massive walnut breakfront filled one of walls. The shelves held tall-stemmed wine glasses, white china, a pair of porcelain ballerinas, a small Israeli flag, a cut-glass unicorn and several photographs in silver frames. Elliot recognized Mrs. Shapiro’s daughter Barbara, who was 12 years older than he was; she would be 55 by now. She used to baby-sit for him and his younger brother Harold. Mrs. Shapiro threw her out of the house when she was a college sophomore because she’d admitted to dating a black football player.

A loud crack, like wood splitting, resonated from the street. It sent a jolt through his spine, but Mrs. Shapiro didn’t seem to notice. Maybe she was hard of hearing. His knee throbbed as he hobbled to the front window. He eased open the drapes.

“You want a better view, Roth? Look through the glasses.” Mrs. Shapiro motioned to a pair of binoculars mounted on a stand to the left of the curtains.

It was like looking through a camera that took him back in time. Forty years

earlier, he'd had grown up on this street, Rosedale Street, three long blocks of identical two-story brick duplexes, with four-step front stoops and tiny back yards. 90% of the families had been Jewish until the 1970's flight to the suburbs. Now, some of houses had Christmas lights. Some were spattered with graffiti.

He spotted his BMW. Just four months old, he'd bought it for himself when he'd made senior vice president, over his wife's objections that they should have put away the bonus money for their boys' college.

A jagged silver "X" gleamed silver against the black passenger door. The boys in the street had scratched it on with a screwdriver. It made him sick to see it. He turned from the window. "There's no sign of those kids. They must have gone home."

"Oh, they're out there, Roth. But you won't see them, they know how to hide in the dark, the niggers."

The word blindsided him. Shouldn't he correct her, tell her not to use that word, it was racist, and he wasn't a racist, the boys could have been white. But they weren't, were they.

He wondered if she'd seen them attack him. He flushed at the thought that maybe she'd witnessed the entire humiliating incident. "Mrs. Shapiro, would you mind if I sat down for a second? I'm a little dizzy."

"So sit."

He slumped on the sofa. His knee throbbed. After a few deep breaths, he took out his glasses case and put on his prescription sunglasses. They made everything amber, but at least he could see clearly. He flashed back to the street. Ten minutes earlier he'd been down on his hands and knees, scrambling away, being kicked in the rear by the bigger

boy's work boot. It wasn't the pain the pain he felt so much as it was his embarrassment, his impotence.

He took a writing pad from his jacket pocket. He flipped past some notes from a client meeting he'd hosted that morning. He printed, "Attack of 12/15. Timeline," and underlined it, twice. Beneath it, he wrote, "Left office approx. 5:30 p.m. Parked on Rosedale St. approx 6:20. Walked ten blocks to Field House. Game over 9:45. Returned to car, approx 10:00 pm. Encountered assailants. Two African American males, approx 12 and 16. Assailants demanded money for parking. Refused. Car vandalized with screwdriver. Tried to intervene, shoved to ground and kicked. Ran away." Ran away? No. He crossed it out and substituted "fought them off, escaped."

"What are you writing, a letter to the editor?" Mrs. Shapiro sat opposite him in a high-back chair, scowling, her hands folded in her dark housecoat. A brown wart dotted her wrinkled forehead, and her hair, pulled back tightly curled in wisps around her ears. Except for the cane, she seemed exactly the same as she did 40 years ago, when she and her husband ran the neighborhood grocery store.

"I need to get the facts down before I call the police. I would have called them already, but my cell phone's in my car. Maybe I could use your telephone."

She shook her head. "It's a waste of time, the police. They won't do anything, if they come even."

"But those boys tried rob me."

"What else should expect, huh, Roth? What? You want the niggers should be your best friend?"

Again the word stunned him. He almost told her that she shouldn't use it, that it

was racist and mean-spirited, but the way she thrust her chin out, it was as if she were baiting him, waiting for a challenge. Maybe she was right about the police, but he said, “Still, I think I should call.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Where’s your telephone?”

“Where else should it be?”

Her kitchen was identical to the one in the house he grew up in: knotty pine cabinets, linoleum floor, the round ceiling fixture, the single casement window.

He took a blue aluminum drinking glass and filled it from the tap. His mother had a set of glasses like these. They were boxed up somewhere in his attic, along with several other personal items he saved when they closed up her house: family photo albums, a few sticks of furniture and his bar-mitzvah suit, which he’d put away for Adam, his older son. He was hurt and angry when Adam refused to wear it because it was “so brown,” not black, not cool.

Mrs. Shapiro shuffled in. “You make your call?”

“Not yet.”

“I’m putting water on for tea. You want I should make you a cup?”

His eyes teared up for a second at her gruff kindness. “Yes, please.”

She ran the water. “So tell me, Roth, what brings you to the neighborhood? You didn’t come to visit me.”

He kept his eyes down. “Well, I was going to the Pitt basketball game, so I figured I’d park my car here on the street and walk over to the Field House. But when I came back, those boys out there, they wouldn’t let me get in my car unless I gave them

\$20. For parking, they said. I wouldn't do it, so they jumped me. Knocked me down, took a screwdriver to my car." He left out the part about how the boys called him bitch and flicked lit cigarettes at his face. He looked up hopefully.

She shook her head from side to side. "But why didn't you park in the parking lot?"

"With all the traffic, it's a hassle to get in and out. You can get stuck in there for an hour. Plus they want twenty dollars."

She snorted. "Like your friends out there."

"What?" After a pause, Elliot mumbled, "It's not the same thing."

"You went to the game by yourself? You got no one else to go to with you?"

"My sons couldn't make it." Adam and Joel were supposed to take the express bus into town to meet him for dinner and the game, but Adam had called his office just before five, saying that he and Joel had huge reports due the next day and couldn't come. Elliot tore into him—they had known about the game for weeks, they shouldn't have left the reports for the last minute, these were courtside seats and cost him \$75 each. Adam told him he was acting like a total Nazi, that it was just stupid college basketball game, that his junior grades were way more important, especially if he wanted to get into an Ivy League school, like Elliot had been pressuring him about since the sixth grade, and that if it mattered so much he could take the goddamn ticket money out of his allowance. Elliot roared that it wasn't about the money, but Adam had already hung up.

But what if his sons *had* come? How would they have reacted when the boys in the street confronted them? Would they have stood up to them, fought them, or would they have panicked? Would they have pleaded with Elliot to give them the money? His

sons were skinny and un-athletic, and as far as he knew, they hadn't been in a fight since grade school. And what if they had seen their father humiliated, slapped in the back of the head, kicked like a dog? He shuddered at the image.

“What does that mean, they couldn't make it? You paid a lot of money for the tickets, no?”

“They were fairly expensive, yes. It's just that something came up. Extra homework.”

She opened the refrigerator. “It's none of my business how you raise your children, but I don't understand how a child can turn down a privilege like just like that. You spent good money on those tickets. They could do their homework on the bus. It sounds to me like you're apologizing for them.”

He flushed again. “No, I mean, look, Mrs. Shapiro, it just didn't work out.”

“Uh huh.” She put a thick slice of cake on a glass plate in front of him “Honey cake.”

It smelled so rich, he could almost taste it. “No thanks, I really should get going.” He stared to rise.

“What's your hurry, Roth? You miss your friends out there? Sit a while. Keep an old lady company. So how's your mother?”

He sat back down, relieved that she'd changed the subject. “Oh, Mom, she's fine. I mean, she has her good days and bad days, like anyone else.”

“Your mother didn't know what was good for her. She shouldn't have given up her home. My Barbara tried to get me to sell this place and move into that Jewish warehouse, that Hebrew Home for the Elderly where your mother lives. Ridiculous. You

go there, you play bingo, you eat the dreck they call food, and then you die, and that's that. You give up your home, you give up your life."

He visited his mother every Sunday. When he reached for her hand, she pulled it away. The head nurse told him not to take it personally, that his mother was at the stage where the only people she responded to were her daily caregivers. The guilt shot straight to his heart.

"It's not all bad there, you know. They have shopping trips, movies, exercise classes."

She pointed her finger at his face. "Don't tell me it's Ring around the Rosies, Roth, I'm not stupid."

Elliot chewed honey cake. It was moist and sweet. He finished it before Mrs. Shapiro poured the tea. "This cake is excellent. You made it?"

She took the chair opposite him. "Who else? You want another piece?" Without waiting for him to answer, she filled his plate.

He took another fork full. "You know, I was a little surprised you remembered me. It's been a long time."

"Oh, I know you, Roth. You and your mother. Always acting so superior. She would come into my store with her gloves on, as if she didn't want to dirty her hands. My store was spotless! The nerve."

"She never said anything."

"I couldn't stay home and play mahjongg like the other ladies. I had to work. For 33 years Abe and I ran a grocery. It's a cash business, Roth. I'm going to trust someone at the register that's not family? Don't be ridiculous. I worked six days a week and

cooked and kept a clean house. I should apologize for that?”

“Well, no.”

“You Roth’s thought you were too good for me. Now look who needs my help.”

She took a pack of Pall Mall’s from her apron and lit one. Immediately, she waved the smoke away with her other hand. “So where do you live now, Roth?”

“Uh, Woodmere Hills.”

“All the way out there? With the goyim? Better you and the kids on the street should have stayed here, taken over your parents’ houses, kept up the neighborhood instead of leaving it to an old lady and the schvartzes. Oh, excuse *me*, I mean, the coloreds.”

“I just wanted to give my kids the advantages I never had, that’s all.” As soon as he finished he realized how stupid it most have sounded to her.

“Advantages. You had such a bad life here?”

Whenever his sons complained that they were bored and there was nothing to do, Elliot would tell them about growing up on Rosedale Street. He and his friends played ball right in the street, all year round—no adults had to organize a game for them. The parents put on block parties in the summer, where everyone chipped in salads and sodas and desserts, and cooked burgers and hot dogs on charcoal grills and everyone danced in the street. He even told them about his gang of sixth-graders, who called themselves the Secret Six, and would sneak up to a rooftop and smoke stolen cigarettes and look down at the festivities, young kings of the block.

His boys would listen with blank expressions. The only thing they knew about the ‘50s was from what they saw on cable re-runs. In Woodmere Hills, their lives had been a

succession of play dates, soccer practice, music lessons, and now, math and French tutors. At night, they stayed in their rooms with their doors closed and played violent video games, or used the Internet in ways that Elliot was afraid to ask about.

“So why, Roth?”

Her voice startled him. “Why what?”

“Why wasn’t Rosedale Street good enough for you anymore?”

“It’s complicated.” Elliot mumbled something about property values, the school system, parks, proximity to the airport and interstates. As he rattled on, parroting the reasons his wife and his neighbors and Amber Cohen, the female rabbi at the temple would give. Now it sounded so hollow. “I don’t know, Mrs. Shapiro. Things change. It’s just the way it is today.” A car went by, its bass thumping so loudly the windows rattled. “Maybe you should leave here, too.”

She smacked the table so hard her teacup jumped. “I should leave? I should let them run me out? This is my house, bought and paid for with a G.I. loan and a 30-year mortgage. I sat shivah for my Abe in that living room. I kept this place up, even after he died. The house you grew up in, look at it, it’s falling apart. The niggers, they don’t paint it, they don’t mow the lawns, they don’t trim the hedges. A window gets broken, they put up a board. Their gutters come down, they leave them where they fall. They don’t deserve this neighborhood. They should leave, not me.” Her dark eyes blazed. “But you don’t want to hear it, Roth. You think I’m some meshugah old lady.”

“No. I mean, you have a right to be here.”

“You’re damn right I do.” She stubbed out her cigarette. “But you’re the outsider now, Roth. Those boys, they know that. It’s my neighborhood, and their neighborhood,

but not yours. That's why they want you to pay to park here."

A car alarm began to honk and bleep. He got to his feet. "It's late. I should go." He peaked through the binoculars. His car looked abandoned. "Mrs. Shapiro?" He took a deep breath. "Would you come to my house for dinner sometime? My wife Karyn, I think you'd like her. She's a good cook. Not as good as you, of course. You could meet my boys."

She lit another cigarette. "Why, Roth?"

"I just want to thank you for what you've done for me tonight."

"Done for you? I should let you die in the street?"

God, she made it hard. "Mrs. Shapiro, I just want... I want us to be friends." He started to reach for her hand, but hesitated. "Won't you please come?"

"No."

Her answer felt like a slap. He buried his hands in his pockets. "All right then."

She rinsed her teacup in the sink and wiped her hands on her apron. She dumped the cigarette butt into a trashcan. "You want we should be friends? Fine. You bring your family here, to my house, next Friday night. Shabbas dinner."

"Here?"

"Here. Like I just said,"

Elliot hesitated. It wouldn't be easy to convince his sons, much less his wife. Friday nights, all the boys wanted was a pizza and a ride to the mall. "Well, I'll have to check with my wife. Can I call you? I'll call you, o.k.? Tomorrow. For sure."

"Five-thirty."

"What?"

“At sundown, Shabbas dinner. Next Friday. Be the man, Roth.”

He blushed. He cleared his throat. “O.K.”

“We’ll see.”

“Anyway, I really should go.” He pulled on the remains of his gloves. He cracked open the front door. There was no sign of the boys. He took a twenty from his wallet, and added a ten, just in case.

“Roth.”

“Yes?”

“Put your money away. I’ll walk you to your car. They won’t bother you if you’re with me.” She took out a blunt-nosed revolver from her handbag. “This we kept in the store. My husband, he showed me how to shoot it good. The schvartzes, they know. They don’t come near me.”

He stared at the gun. For an instant he wanted to take it, to walk up to the bigger boy and blow his head off. But he guided it back into her bag. “Listen, I’ll be fine. I’ll see you next Friday, 5:30, O.K.?” He touched her shoulder and closed the door behind him.

He was ten feet from his car when the boys reappeared.

“Where you been, Mister? We need our goddamn money.”

The smaller boy laughed. “Look at the pimp with them shades on. You think you’re Mr. Cool pimp? Mr. Mac Daddy?”

Elliot stopped. “Listen, O.K.? Just go home.”

The bigger boy shoved the other boy playfully. “You hear this fool?” He came

up to Elliot's face. "Give me fifty dollars or I'll jack your ass up good, Mr. Peepers."

"What's going on there?" The voice came through a speaker from a black and white patrol car. A car door slammed. A flashlight beamed in the faces of Elliot and the two boys. "Sir, these punks bothering you?"

The smaller boy stared down at his feet. Moving in front of the X on his door, Elliot placed his hand on the big boy's shoulder. "No, officer, I couldn't get into my car. These computerized things, half the time they're on the fritz. No, these boys here, they were trying to help me out." He pressed the remote button on his key chain. The car chirped. "Well I'll be damned. *Now* it works."

The officer looked at the boys, then back to Elliot. "You sure you're all right? You look a little scuffed up there."

"Yeah, I tripped before. I'm fine." He handed the boy a ten-dollar bill. "Thanks again, guys."

The boy looked at the bill. He cleared his throat. "Thank you, sir."

Five minutes later, he was on the freeway. His cell phone blinked rapidly. Three calls from Karyn. None from his boys.