

Neighbors

There may be people there. I only know what I see. Who can say what is behind things? The regular rise and fall of the automatic garage door; electric lights being turned off and on: these are real. Stay with the face of things, I say. Keep out of trouble.

Like morning coffee, that garage door, picking itself up. I can't read the paper 'til it has opened and closed. When that electronic glow from the family room continues for hours, I give long lectures about the evils of television watching. He never listens.

If there is a he. I want to stick with facts. He pushes his way on to my typewriter, mumbling something about immortality. His garage door is what I am familiar with, the way it puts its face out there.

He hides behind drapes, timeless as the moss creeping into his brick walk. Two sets, the sheers he never opens, the impenetrable ones that can be held open with tie-backs. If he goes further into withdrawal this set will fall, heavy and satin.

I quit writing, take a shower. He comes in, says, "Call me George."

"George! No!" I wrap into a towel and his fixation on g's, a familial relationship with e, o, and r.

"Then you'll have to be married. I haven't even thought about a wife. I'm sorry. Georges are always married. I don't make the rules here, George. You'll have to become more responsible, middle management, 2.9 children. I've never seen any kids out front. Put up a basketball hoop and we'll see what we can do."

I had hoped to avoid children here. Not altogether, of course, one passes by now and then, lunch bucket in hand. People are more interesting without children, don't you think? They travel to Zanzibar, have exotic breakables in their living room. I have children, but they are semi-manageable at this point.

I had hoped a sort of escapism from motherhood. One feels so responsible if they turn out badly. As if a word here, a phrase, a pause in the right place might have made the difference.

It is 8:15. He hasn't left for work yet. Tuesday morning. What kind of a person stays in bed on Tuesday morning?

I am not allowing George to have children at this point. We'll talk about it later. Easier to be neurotic without children. That's what I wanted George to be, but the name is a handicap.

What I started out with here was the regular electric currents that run through George's house, opening the garage door, turning lights on. That is all that I know.

Is he dead? Is the alarm buzzing to ears gone deaf forever, the mattress slumping under the new weight? Thank goodness he didn't have children. I couldn't bear it. I don't think he has a wife. I can't picture her, waking up next to that unresponsive body, screaming, running from room to room behind those implacable sheers, pushing them back a bit, looking into the mornings bland sky for a part of George that is missing. Or turning inward, thinking of all the things he never fixed.

Now she is. Still formless, faceless behind the drapery pleats. She doesn't have a name yet, just Goerge's wife or widow, as the case may be. I'm not convinced he is dead. She interests me more. She doesn't garden. If she jogs, it is in another face. Nothing sweats behind those drapes. Lights don't flicker randomly. The garage door has a very steady pace. What does she do behind there?

She has chosen to dedicate her life to keeping the house clean. She spends endless, happy hours searching out dust, surrounding it, giving orders to the troops, "Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes!"

On days she discovers a cobweb, although revolted at the thought of the enemy within, she is giddy with the chance for another conquest.

After the battle, wiping the blood from her hands, she bellies up to the bar, for a drink with the troops. It is four o'clock. She has time to take a bath, put on her mask, simmer the onions.

This is not my real life. I do important things. Rags stuffed into holes because it has a voracious appetite, the mind. Crumbs in the bottom of the toaster, something from months ago, something of today. How does one ever get rid of them all? How does she do it? You don't get to be a General for nothing.

What does one do with the mind while carrying out the trash? Put it on a shelf, saying, I'll be back in a minute, you just rest? It never does. It follows you around, because, well, what else has it to do but think? I wish I had such leisure. It goes playful, swirling everything I had organized into a loop-the-loop.

Just now I was told that George used to be a basketball player. I don't know if it was his insane desire to be written about or the restless tromping in my head, but there it is and I'm not surprised. Nothing about that house is without routine. The drapes have been practicing for years. They just about have it--what to do when you are down by three with two seconds to go. Shoot and get fouled. This is what they share with George, shielding him from people who don't even know how many minutes there are in a quarter.

I suppose he never made the big time, like Kareem Abdul Jabbar, or why would he need me? Imagine, a man I've never even seen intruding himself this way.

As I say, this isn't my real life. I cook spaghetti. I clean toilets. This is what it will say on my tombstone. Who will remember the midnight wanderings in my head? Who will know the terror there, of living a few yards from another wanderer, storing it all, storing it. Why don't we celebrate together?

Do you think I want George to come out, shake my hand, introduce me to his family? No. We are both in our own cubicles. Then, he would be a certain weight, a certain height, maybe 5'6" or 6' 5". He would have graduated from Oregon State or Georgia Tech. I would have to be nice to his children, buy Girl Scout cookies. His wife would come to coffee and, knowing her as I do, knowing her--well, reality has such a flatness, doesn't it, like a pan made to sit on the stove.

At a cocktail party, Goerge would bore me in five minutes. Now he is clay. I can make one leg shorter than the other, or give him a weight problem, or study his palms to see the effect of 5324 dribbles. Maybe I can even get him to change his name.

I like to think of her drilling the troops back there. Organized, disciplined, she examines them with microscopic care. I like to think of the troops there. As she passes out medals of valor, her almost human quality is apparent, beneath the laundry starch. On command, their eyes glisten with admiration.

I understand now why she doesn't garden. It was presumptuous of me to think...Tiny men in the Weed Patrol, with rifles and bayonets stand guard through the night, while the General and her neighbors sleep.

Peeping George. Wait a minute. Don't call the police. Remember George is only a figment of my imagination, or am I a figment of his? He has no real lust. He is an extension of the mechanics of his house.

The part we can touch and see, the garage door, opens (what is more trustworthy than that?) and a blue Volkswagen Rabbit pushes its tail outside. Goerge is inside.

He can not get out of the car to peep. So, he drives slowly around corners, peering into living rooms. Do they have a pool? Do they leave the living room vacant for days, slumming around the television at the back of the house? Sometimes cars are parked out front, and behind the windows, shadows have a wonderful time. Then he tells himself witty remarks which keep him laughing for hours. A crowd gathers round him.

"Why don't you get out of the car, George? Come on in and have a drink."

He was invited to this party. The General told him about it, while wearing her happy homemaker dress fatigues. She never bosses him around, though happy in fact to let him take charge when he is home. She makes the troops stay in the extra bedroom. Enforces strict curfews.

George didn't want to go. She said that was okay, that this occasion wasn't directly related to her career path. She understands that George likes to maintain a distance from other people. It is, the Pentagon said, a reaction from being guarded too closely by a forward, from all that ducking and dashing. With distance, he can shoot whenever he wants. With the hand not on the steering wheel, he controls the clock.

The General's mother is coming. There may be people there. I only know what I see. Who can say what is behind things?

George refuses to die. Certain events of his life, such as his mother-in-law's visit, are lost in the memory bank, or hidden away like a drowning. His last name is Common, though he keeps hinting in late night conversations with me that he is going to court to have it changed. He wants to add a two-letter prefix--Un. This is what keeps him alive. His whispers promise change. He waits for the court order.

He says watch each night at 3 a.m.. He will signal me when the papers come through.

"One if by land, two if by sea."

And I on the opposite shore will be.

George is bothering me today. Knowing I was going to the hardware store with my husband, knowing that people would be around and I can't write with people around, he kept telling me he wanted to change, to be more, and the proof of this is in his name change. He is the jealous type, wanting my attention most when I am busiest.

"Write this down," he says. "Do you think I'm going to repeat it?"

I go for a walk with the dog. George trips along behind me, picking up stones, dropping lines about immortality. It is a long word and people trip over it, they remove the first "t" to avoid falling, I say. They like it better that way.

We pass quiet houses, with many windows and drapes. How many Georges are there waiting to be discovered, some so discouraged they haven't picked up the newspaper to see if their name is in headlines? Everyone wants to be remembered for more than mint brownies. They don't remember you for clean toilets; no one cares anymore.

I have had them over. I have scrubbed for hours, George. They come in, stand around drinking, playing the cocktail tape, mouthing the words, drinking too fast before the tape runs out, blinding themselves to the possibility. They never enter my glistening bathroom until the blinders are in place, else they would see it shines more brightly than Mary in the stained glass window. Blinded to their own nakedness, reflected in tile, chrome and mirror. Everyone wants what you want, George. Does it really make any difference? When you lie there in the box, cold and unthinking, does it help to be remembered? I don't think so, George. It helps while you're here. Like central heating, it only helps when it's turned on.

We become philosophical on our Saturday afternoon walk. He needs structure, I suppose. Weekdays. All the hours in a graph, or a square, everything adding up evenly. No remainders. I used to hate remainders in math and George says he did, too. It was so nice when all the columns were neat and the paper came back without check marks, just that three digit number on top. I held it there, not even wanting to put it in my notebook or let the corners bruise. I wanted it to be my permanent math paper.

"Then," he says, "I married the General. She was a neat math paper, with all the correct answers. I could display her and people would know I was all right. I never thought it would go this far, however. The troops are perfectly disciplined; if they play poker and drink gin all night, it is when they are on field maneuvers. If one creeps out occasionally to watch television, I still get to choose what we watch."

"Still," George went on, "I can't say what it is, but lately, when I touch her, her skin seems to have some substance on it. I never see it on my fingers, not a trace, but I feel it. Is it being absorbed directly into my cells? What will it do to my children? I want to have some, you know."

This was the first time children had been mentioned, the first intimation of a difference. Was there marital difficulty across the street? Of course, how would I know? Isn't this always how it turns out when you get involved with the neighbors? You hear more than you had planned; you try to close the door; pain, your own or theirs, holds it open like a size twelve foot.

We walk a part of the bike trail and slowly return up the hill, noticing that we reach our respective homes with some reluctance. We have become friends. It is not so easy to wave goodbye. A basketball game is on television, the boys have friends over. Everyone is hungry. George slips away unnoticed.

I'm not optimistic for George. Everything encourages us to be ordinary, to do what we did yesterday--it got us through, didn't it?

We are handed a book at birth. Whether we can read or not, we have the script memorized soon. Can we insert pages, erase, throw away whole chapters? Not impossible, but mother has taught us to be neat. Her book is hard-bound. To insert pages means breaking the bindings.

"Neatness," George says over my shoulder, "is what she's good at. She must be a natural born mother. I'll see you later."

"You're making a mistake," I holler as he moves through the ivy.

He is not listening, but I'll write it down, anyway. He can't resist reading about himself. Sometimes he wakes me at 4:30 to ask what he should do that day.

It is a terrible responsibility, creating another person. Sometimes they cling to your hand, begging to go to Disneyland; sometimes, they turn away from you, rolling their own cigarettes, a habit you find disgusting and messy.

I was going to say something to George here. To insert it quickly while he is gone. Anytime I say something I don't want him to hear, he hears it. Neatness, George, in troops and in homes like yours, that's what this country is all about.

What we are having this escapade for, George, is to fall out of line, to erase the line, to tear up books and shuffle the pages. Put in a line of Henry James with Shakespeare and Norman Mailer. When you need a breather, use Hemingway. (Not yet, the CIA hasn't caught up with us yet. They are working on thought control. Until they get it, their men must still look for outward signs of subversion--dust on top of the refrigerator, cobwebs sneaking along the rafters.)

No, not Mailer and co. Not anything that has been written. Until we devise a new language, we'll have to use this one. But we can rearrange it. Write down what Hemingway never knew, what no one ever...new, George.

Monday morning, the sun was out early. I promised to pull weeds from the strawberries after George left for work. Soon the sun was covered by clouds and if his garage door had any sensitivity it would have groaned at being pushed open.

George left as usual, throwing scraps from the Rabbit at my door, along with nylons and chocolate from the American soldiers.

Here I am, with a what's-it-all-for depression, unaided by the task masters all over my house calling from every room: the bed wants to be made, the dishes want cleaning, the floor wants to be sucked into the universal vacuum.

All this and he goes off to work, expecting me to appease the masters and weave his scraps into a tapestry unsurpassed.

Words are spread all over my front steps; I haven't picked them up yet, wiped the mud, early morning dew, or the oppressive air from their gentle limbs, caressed them in my palms, held them up to the light.

George says that in a past life he was a nun, choosing to give up his individuality and personal misgivings in exchange for a life-long assurance of something to wear. In the convent, he (who was then a she) grew restless--during prayers, his legs would twitch, he started counting beads two at a time. Then he prayed to come back as

a basketball player. He thought that to move quickly and freely, to jump and score would be heaven.

Why is it like this, Goerge? Why don't we just sit on the curb and talk to each other? Curb sitting isn't fashionable, nor the bended knee. I went shopping, said hello to three Dodge Colts, seven station wagons, and a Honda Accord.

Just a party-line would take care of it. How I hated it then, always busy, with eight families connected by a wire, that carried our secrets like a bond.

Is it party-lines that create neighborhoods? I can't remember. Here where we live, is a gathering of houses, surrounded by brick facades that impress people I don't know. Private lines wait to connect me to someone whose name I've forgotten. When I'm not conscious my right-hand extends to grasp what isn't there.

"What is this all about," asks George, "what about me?"

You can have the line when I'm through. Stop thinking so much about yourself, tune into the communal message.

It's because I don't know you that I want to, Goerge. Do you drive that Volkswagen Rabbit or does it drive? Is there someone back there, uncommitted to neatness and falling in line? Or is the Rabbit married, middle management, 2.9 children? That would represent failure in a rabbit.

Tell me, do you bleed and what color? Does it hurt? Is it an important part of yourself, dripping away, or something you never used much anyway?

When did she become a General? Did you follow her around during the North Africa campaigns? How did people react to you?

A foreign correspondent. A patch over one eye, a short and mean temperament, an irregular schedule, a pipe.

Wednesday. George drives by in the most routine way, neck tied. Not a day for change, he asserts. Too late in the week, too early in the month.

"And, I have a meeting at 9:45."

Meetings, he says, preclude change. People are invited whose character has been aligned to corporate objectives.

"That's why Wednesdays aren't a good day for change," George adds, "being involved already, having a lunch date. I like lunch with my friend, repeating the things we've always said."

So there you have it. What chance does middle-management George, who likes routine on Wednesdays have to become immortal? Only representational, that's the only way, like the man with a hoe, or the unknown soldier.

Too much against you, George. Even the pansies along your front walk are in rows and blossom, predictably.

"That's the way we've always done it."

"Besides," George says, "people might look at me. You know, I drive by now and people see nothing but the Rabbit. That's kind of nice. I don't have to explain anything. People don't ask much of those they don't know."

My hopes for George or George's hopes are being crushed by Wednesday's wheels: newspapers printing the same headlines every day; elevators that never seek out new floors; clerks who always take money with the same hand.

"I don't get paid for day dreaming. Any changing I do has to be on my own time. After five. Well, there's the commute. After six. But then it's dinner with the General. I like all that pomp, the little men treat me so well."

From the beginning I knew, George. How proper it is to stay on our own sides of the fence.

Sometime in the night, Wednesday night, George has trouble sleeping. The way the wheat is being harvested disturbs him. Stalk after stalk falls quickly into the machine. He wakes up feeling thin and tall. He goes to the refrigerator, which opens by voice command and someone eats a piece of chocolate cake for him, with milk.

He walks into rooms where no one is expected, small rooms where the harvester can't enter. He looks down at his own hand. He thinks about messing up the pillows. Somewhere he hears crying. He listens for direction. The pores along his left forearm are cavities filled with wet reeds.

She never intended for this war business to go so far. A diversion. Company C takes care of the latrines. A typical housewife, nothing more. She enjoyed domesticity, could de-bone chicken perfectly.

She did everything perfectly for George. The army, hearing of her exactness, came to her. They needed a specialist in the field of precision drilling. She couldn't resist the offer, even knowing that it would cause her to postpone having a family. She thought that once her career was established, she could bear children, slip them into the ranks without anyone noticing.

The house was never empty or dirty. George thought perhaps they would have to go to the town council to get permission for the military base, but as it was a covert operation, they didn't. Permission was granted by a higher authority. The neighbors didn't know. They went on mowing their lawns, driving in and out of their garages, taking groceries into the house, as if nothing had changed. Certainly, the appearance of George's place was highly acceptable--and this in a bedroom suburb where outward indications are first on the agenda at every place where two or more are gathered.

The military solution worked for her; she was too quick for Newcomer's Club; the Parents Club didn't offer a wide enough vista for her enviable abilities. The record of her leaps up the military ladder are studded with notes about out her "ability to prioritize, organize and sublimate."

When the troops arrived, they had first to go through a self-minimizing course.

"Picture yourself as one person in a huge crowd. Picture that crowd from the air. Fly away from the crowd."

By this method, she was able to keep thousands in her spare bedroom, quite comfortably.

She has not had the course and thus stands head and shoulders above them, with the appearance of a goddess. A military goddess.

I've told George that if he is to make a truly significant contribution to the future of mankind he must execute a takeover. I have suggested that he secretly teach the men self-actualization processes, which will help them to maximize their potential, as well as their stature.

"What about my wife?"

Personal desires must be put aside during the war, George. People are the most expendable element.

George abandons me, appalled at the lengths I have suggested. We are constantly surprised at ourselves, George. We start a little fantasy of wondering. We lose control. Our fingers take over, rarely even telling our mind what is coming next. We are as perplexed as any other reader.

We look in the mirror with all the lights on. We move in close as for a pimple. We can hardly understand ourselves. If we took ourselves seriously, George, we might walk into outer or inner space.

He has been talking it over with the General. A mistake, of course. He believes in negotiation.

She believes such mischief the result of idle hands.

"Stay busy, George. Work hard. The 60's would never have happened if those kids had had enough to do. Brush your teeth longer, four times a day."

She threatens to put him on the weed patrol. She could have him interrogated, followed.

"Or," she said, abandoning her General role, "I could cut you off."

"Anyway, why should I change? I'm quite happy and you are immortalizing me, now, as I am."

It's expected, George. I mean, even my son says, if you go on with this, George has to change. What's to keep people turning the pages?

I know you're content on Wednesdays, but late at night, or Saturday afternoons...can you spend two hours, alone, without radio or television? Where is the unprogrammed part of you?

Did you think you could be the main character in this narrative without any effort? You were raised here, George. You know nothing comes without struggle. Hard work, neatness, busyness.

How do you think it is for me, George? I started this with a light-hearted gesture in the direction of people who share the same street, stop at the same stop sign at the bottom of the hill, celebrate the same holidays and laugh at the same tv shows.

We may even vote alike, scrub our navel with the same brand of bath soap. Does all this make us a community? Didn't we all start out with nothing, but the willingness to follow? Shouldn't our having arrived at approximately the same place, the same time cause us to look with curiosity at each other, hoping to recognize some of the fine qualities we possess?

Or the paths built out front, that give us easy access to each other, the street, the driveways, the sidewalks and steps; all become a massive barrier, like the large picture windows, that we cover so quickly.

If once I had seen a human hand behind there, my mind could have categorized and forgotten you. So, we got into this together, George. What are we going to do with it?

He worries about my hands, turns them over carefully, checks my life line for his, running along the trenches, checking for potholes.

He has spoken to her about protection for them, a sort of Glove Patrol. I tell him, no. Nothing worth protecting can be.

He loves them for writing about him, thinks they are magic, buys soft lubricants at the Standard Station. Along the joints he searches to see where the messages are stored. He thinks he spots something ancient, tries to bring in an archaeological team. He thinks I know where the good stuff is and won't tell him.

It's in the air, George. The air, the brain, it runs along the arm. It spills here and there, leaving soft piles under the elbow. Only a few get through, with all the connections, the pulse, the taste, touch, smell and memory. Then it is fresh, like a still fuzzy peach, causing the skin to tingle.

I appreciate his solicitude. If he had a choice he might have picked someone younger or more well known, but until now he fit into a common mold.

He thinks: what will she do with me next? What will I allow her? I chose my own name. I impose myself almost at will. Between us, secrets neither of us knows, but we are finding a way. She thinks I am dictating, but no. It is the part of herself that she doesn't know. She creates me in her own image. I am the part of her that is always alone, that wanders through thick crowds and sits at a table for one.

A voice. A building has collapsed and a voice is saying something important. It is George's voice. I recognize it, like the sign he flashes at the football game, the sign reading, "H E L P." Under the rubble, another sign calls out, "Go, team, go." So many voices, the camera has to choose which ones will live. Which message survives. Disguise yourself as a cheerleader, George, with nice legs. When the camera runs it's sweaty lens over your body, flash your message. Your immortal message, George. What is it?

Make it short. No longer than a 30-second commercial. We may flip you off, deciding that another channel, another pile of rubble, might contain the quality we seek.

I listen for his voice. I want to hear it. I believe in it. But will I recognize it through the static, the washing machine and dishwasher? I would quit making cookies to hear his voice. It is always there, like something recognized from a past I don't remember.

George, I say as we kick pebbles, let's forget immortality and live for today. Just a walk, not a pursuit. He is staring through exercise bars, standing very still as his body goes through sit-ups. Muscles rippling, he runs ahead, thinking of marathons and prizes.

I sit out in front of George's house on a stool made of hours for clues to that voice, putting my ear to the wet California earth.