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Neighbourhood Friends

“WE’RE NEIGHBOURS,” Gina said, resting one hand lightly on Fred’s shoulder. “I live at Johnstone, two buildings over.” Tray full, she whisked away to service her tables in the dining area.

The old man, Fred, liked her immediately. He had a full head of white hair, moustache and drawn face. He sat at the bar like a good student at a desk, forward and attentive, and kept his draft beer right in front of him. Although he preferred wine, when out he kept to light beer to stay trim, a feat he had admired earlier that evening while tucking in his button-down shirt in front of the mirror, his evening ritual. Several nights a week, after a simple dinner of soup or a sandwich, he ventured out of his two-bedroom condo and patronized one of the local restaurants—Pop’s, Pierre’s Cafe, or Baxter’s, the restaurant he had chosen for tonight. The wait staff of Baxter’s, an intimate, friendly regiment clad in black polo shirts, were young, working their way through school.

Gina stopped by the bar again with a drink order. Fred asked, “So why are you waitressing? You said you’re a teacher.”

“I’ve got student loans,” she replied.

“It’s a travesty, all the young people like yourself having to come out of school with enormous debt,” he said. “A poor way to have to start out.”

“Poor’s not so bad,” she said and raised her eyebrows. “I try to stay positive.”

“What else can you do?” he asked.

“Just have faith. I found mine.” Gina probed the neckline of her polo and tugged at a small cross on a chain.

“Yes, well,” he said and took a drink.

In the three years since his wife Marian’s passing, life bored Fred with its monotony. Even reading had lost its invigorating spell. The condominium complex was centrally located for Orlando, amongst the well-to-do northern

suburbs of the city. His fellow retired neighbors amused themselves with gossip; it was rare that a nice young person like Gina would be living nearby. He might see her around, down by the pool or taking a walk.

Gina glided among her tables and stooped to chat with customers. Fred guessed she must be around thirty, although these days any woman under forty seemed like a girl. Would he and Marian have had any children of their own, he might imagine Gina as one of their daughters. Now that Marian was gone, it struck him as curious, even unsettling that when they were a young couple his wife hadn't pushed for children.

Gina stopped by the bar again for a drink order, rearranging the drinks on her tray to make room.

"Why don't you teach college?" Fred asked her. "It pays better in the long run."

"I must have inherited it from my grandfather," she replied. "He taught high school. Math, he could do calculus in his head. But he was dedicated to that age group."

"You're good with people," he said. "I can tell."

"Oh, no, I'm not." She lifted and steadied her tray. "I'm actually shy. Sometimes I'm amazed that I've come this far."

"Your customers like you."

"Or maybe it's the food," she said and pointed to his glass. "Or the drinks." Then she slipped off into the dining room.

Fred watched her for a few minutes as he finished the rest of his beer. At one of her tables, a large party, Gina must have said something funny as she took their order, because the whole table laughed right afterward.

"Another one?" the bartender, Brian, asked. He looked too old to be single, but Fred gathered from overhearing the waitresses' talk that Brian had a different girlfriend every week. Why did young people wait so long to get married nowadays? They missed out on those hard, early years together.

"This is my second." Fred tapped the glass's rim.

"I know, I got you. Three and then the tab."

Fred fumbled in his pants' pocket for a minute and produced a newspaper clipping, folded carefully into a square: "Shortage of Nurses in Central Florida Grows More Desperate." "Thought this might be of interest to you," he said, placing it down and giving it a little shove toward Brian.

Brian examined it carefully. "I won't have my degree anytime soon," he said. "But thanks, that's nice of you."

"It'll happen sooner than you think," Fred replied. "You just keep at it." He moved his left foot, still wrapped in its oversized orthopedic shoe from where the doctor had removed the skin cancer spots, and rested it on the ledge underneath the bar. The beer let him forget his uncomfortable,

grotesque foot. He soaked up his moments out before he had to bumble home to his condo. For now he could pretend it was six years earlier, and he still had students to talk to.

Nineteen years ago, Marian asked him to stop drinking. Soon after her death, however, he went out for one beer, then another. The doctor said once in a while, with his heart condition, he could have two or three over a few hours, so he stuck to that.

Brian leaned over the bar slightly and asked, "You okay, Fred?"

"Why, I'm as spry as a twenty-six-year-old, glad you asked," he said. "Just don't tell anyone I'm really seventy-six."

Easing off the high bar stool, he headed out with a slight limp.



The next morning at ten, Fred sat next to the window overlooking the walkway and parking lot, drinking a cup of instant coffee with one blue packet added to it. He pored over the day's *Orlando Sentinel* and *The New York Times*, glancing up whenever he heard a car passing through the lot on its way to exit onto the main road. How silly, he thought. School started early, and Gina must have left hours ago. Still, he wondered which of the cars in front of Johnstone belonged to her. Probably the Honda Civic. He doubted she could afford much more.

He spotted an article about local actors breaking into independent film and decided to clip it for Hilary, another server at Baxter's, who was getting her degree in theatre. The scissors he had put back on the desk the other day, so he got up to fetch them. At the doorway to the second bedroom which he had fashioned into a neat architect's office, he paused. Shafts of dust-flecked light streamed out from the halfway opened blinds onto the alphabetically-arranged shelves of books. The room remained untouched since the day he moved in, having downsized from the house he and Marian occupied for thirty-seven years in Sarasota. His drafting table was set up as if awaiting his return.

After cutting out the article, he sat by the window for a long time. Some days he made an excursion to the chain mega-bookstore in the nearby shopping plaza that the developers had cleverly called a "village" in an attempt to draw attention away from the messy conglomeration of vast parking lots, boutique stores and noisy traffic that it comprised. Other days he saw movies by himself, often two at a time. He felt like doing neither today. He had not retired until seventy, even though Marian had taken early retirement from her position at the Ringling Museum. He wondered now, too

late, if her retirement had been a hint for him to follow. How many of his former students still appreciated his dedication?

He paced, washed the breakfast dishes, and sat down again, restless. He wanted the beauty and passion of life back but he didn't know how to go about it. Then he got out some note cards, thought carefully for a few moments, and then before losing his nerve, he hastily scrawled: "Gina, come over and visit for a few minutes at your convenience. Your neighbour, Fred."

A few minutes later, he slipped it in the slot of her door and headed back to his condo, the droop of his chin lifted. He admired a cormorant perched on the dock at the edge of the lake, gallant and content in its posture, biding its moments in the sun.



His doorbell rang later that afternoon, and he nearly tripped over the stack of old newspapers piled at the entryway. There stood Gina, in dark slacks and a button down shirt—in her teacher clothes, he assumed.

"Please, come in, come in," he said. "You don't have to go to Baxter's tonight?"

"Not until six," she said. "That was nice of you, sending that note. I don't really know any of my neighbours here. I'm so busy."

"But you're here now," he said. "What can I get for you? I don't have much, I'm afraid."

"No thanks, I'm fine."

"Tea? I have some jam and toast." He arranged some Melba toast on a platter and brought it to the table.

"For awhile I wished I had a roommate, but actually I'm getting to like it," Gina said. She sat down at the dining table cluttered with several different newspapers piled on deck for clipping. She skimmed the headlines of the section on top before carefully moving the pile to make space.

"Go on and read that if you like," Fred said. "You must not get a chance to read much, I'll bet. All those papers to grade."

"I teach biology," she answered. "Lab reports. I don't really read."

"Science, wonderful," he said. "I love reading science books. Science is something you must keep up on. So much to learn."

"All I did was read books as a kid," she said. "Too much of a good thing, you know?"

"Don't you have a boyfriend?" he asked, reaching over and placing the newspaper section in front of her—the book review, one of his favourite sections.

She shook her head and said, “What? You look surprised.”

“Never mind,” he said. “It’s just that you’re bright and attractive. And still young, certainly.” He took his seat across from her. “I don’t understand it.”

She paused over the paper, scrutinizing the articles with interest. “What about you? There are lots of eligible ladies around here, I would think.”

“I feel the same about old women as I did when I was your age: I don’t find them attractive. That’s the trouble.”

The whistle on the teakettle belted out its whine. Rising, he said, “I’m afraid I don’t have regular sugar, or cream.”

“That’s fine,” she said, and checked the screen of her portable phone.

“Relax,” he said. The tea bag had risen to the top of the boiled water. He liked tea, but making it was a bothersome activity, and he never understood why Marian had enjoyed “the ritual” as she called it.

He handed Gina the cup of tea, and she immediately began to blow on it. Something about the gesture struck him as childlike and innocent. At her age, she really didn’t know much about life, he thought.

“Weren’t you attracted to your wife when she got older?” she asked.

“Growing old together is another experience,” he answered. “You can’t replace that marriage, so why bother?”

“My grandmother said that a lot, after Pappy died.” Gina rested her chin on the palm of her hand. She moved the newspaper out of the way before setting her cup down. “But at least you know she’s in a better place.”

“Marian? I have no idea.”

She regarded him quizzically and pushed the plate of Melba toast crumbs aside.

“It doesn’t change anything,” he said. How could he explain this to her? No matter how many crosswords he completed or educational programs he watched, the emptiness surrounded him. He said, “You’re welcome to borrow the book review section you’ve got there.”

“That’s okay.” Gina brushed her hair off her shoulders and straightened up. “It was nice visiting with you. Funny, this whole time you’ve been my customer, and we’re neighbours.”

From his window he watched her the whole way down the sidewalk—the energy of her young legs in stride—until she disappeared around the corner. A neighbour woman a few doors down paused while watering her outdoor plants, and when she looked back toward Fred he quickly shut

the blinds. Then, he gazed in the bathroom mirror at himself, the almost comical Santa Claus hair and whiskers, the age spots on his fumbling hands. He drank some Chianti, then fell asleep on the couch.



After the first visit, Gina stopped by for a chat about once a week, but never long enough. Just when they got talking about something good, a nonfiction book or an art display coming to town, time was cut short because she had to rush off somewhere. Over Spring Break, she took a trip to the Dominican Republic and he missed her visits. She promised him a postcard and he stuck it on the center of the fridge. The poverty of the Dominicans made her grateful, she said, and you really had to be there to believe it. She looked forward to talking to Fred about the details when she returned.

In bed at night he tossed and turned over the words scribbled on the postcard.

Finally he noticed the reappearance of her car one day in the parking space before the Johnstone building. Not wanting to seem like an overzealous schoolboy, he paid his usual visit to Baxter's that night. But after a few minutes in his spot at the bar, there was no sign of her.

He asked Brian about Gina.

"Slow tonight. She got cut early and went home."

Fred downed the rest of his beer quickly, declined another and instead asked Brian to pick out a nice bottle of red wine. In the last few weeks, he had grown careless about his drinking and visited two or even three bars until late at night. Red wine had been a favorite of Marian's, and he guessed a safe bet for most women. A classy gentleman would bring over decent red wine, and a former architecture professor certainly possessed the credentials.

Outside, rain poured from the night sky and the dank odor of earthy vegetation arose from the ground. Although in a hurry to catch Gina before she went to bed, the clock in his Dodge sedan reading nine-thirty, he drove carefully. No good getting pulled over on a night like this, treacherous puddles on the roads and a great girl to call on.

The answering machine in his condo blinked, a rarity, and Fred couldn't believe his luck when he played back the message. He nearly dropped the bottle of wine. "Hi, it's Gina, back from my trip. I want to talk to you about it sometime later this week." According to the machine, she had just left the message. Perfect. He donned a hat, tucked the wine under his trench coat and headed to her place, not bothering to telephone

first.

In the overcast darkness, the condominium complex was deserted as he made his way along the parked cars. A breeze rustled the tall palms overhead and his neighbour's hanging plants swayed. Rounding the corner of his building, he heard hushed voices from the porch of the last unit and caught a glimpse of a middle-aged couple—although they stuck him to be nearly as young as teenagers—talking, sitting closely together. They shared a low, private laugh, as if not sensing his passing at all. Ahead, soft lamplight shone from behind Gina's curtains. Beneath his coat, he cradled the bottle of wine closer to his warm body.

At opening the door, Gina looked taken aback. "What a surprise, I just left you a—"

"I know," he replied. "Since you were up, thought I'd stop by." He reached behind his coat flap and held the bottle of wine out like a prize. "Ta-da! I even brought us a present." He stepped past her and into the living room.

"That's nice of you, but I'm just getting ready for bed." She signaled to the cotton pajamas she was wearing, then looked at him and smiled apologetically. "Maybe another time."

"Nonsense. There's always time for a glass of wine between friends." Fred reached forward to set the bottle down on the coffee table, swayed and lurched so that he grabbed the arm of the couch just in time. Now she'll think you're drunk, he scolded himself. But he went on, "You need to unwind."

She took a deep breath. "One glass."

While Gina opened the bottle in the kitchen, Fred took in her condo. The walls displayed some cheap black-and-white prints of European street scenes, and the fabric on the red couch felt worn. Evidence of her recent trip littered the room: hiking boots perched atop a spread out newspaper on the kitchen tile, a travel medical kit lay opened on the counter, and a string bikini hung tendril-like from the knob of the bathroom door.

He took the glass of wine she handed to him. To his dismay, Gina sat opposite him in an overstuffed chair, keeping the coffee table between them. "I've been thinking lately that I need a change. I haven't been back to Sarasota since I moved."

"A trip?" she asked.

"Maybe. Maybe something else." He added, chuckling, "I've got my wits and then some. I guess I like it enough here."

"It's not such a bad place to be." Gina picked up what looked like a travel pamphlet and waved it in the air. "The Dominican Republic, now that

really opened my eyes.” She tossed the pamphlet onto the coffee table.

“You need to have more experiences like that,” he said. “I didn’t do enough of it.”

“I don’t have the money,” she said. “This was a sponsored trip.”

“So put aside some of your tips,” he said. “I always wanted to make it to Barcelona to see Gaudi’s work. La Sagrada Familia and all that.”

“I learn more from the people when I travel,” she said. “The locals. You should see my pictures.”

Fred squinted, trying hard to make out the words on the pamphlet. “Maybe when there’s more light for me to see,” he said.

“Here, sit. There’s better light on my side of the room.” She turned on another, much brighter lamp.

Its brightness hurt his eyes a little, so he looked away. “I’m fine where I am.” He patted the cushion next to him, hoping she’d make a move to sit there. “I have some friends in Chicago, but the winters are too hard up there.”

“Now hold on.” Gina resumed her seat across from him. “A trip is one thing. But moving?” She tilted her head, adding in a dubious tone, “Come on, Fred, we’d all miss you at the restaurant.”

“Lately I’ve been reconsidering things,” he said. “Like friendships.”

“But you get out quite a bit.”

“I keep myself occupied. That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Isn’t there something you haven’t done, that you always dreamed of doing?”

He considered this for a few moments. “I always wanted to be a cartoonist.” It seemed silly, just saying it aloud. “But taking up drawing would do nothing for the loneliness. Only a companion can do that.”

Gina rummaged in a magazine rack next to her and tossed a thin copy of a newspaper, *Westmoreland Church News*, on the table between them. “An older man at our church has cartoons in here all the time.”

He shook his head. “You realize at a certain point in your life, that you can’t do everything. It’s impossible.”

“What about volunteering?” she suggested. “You might meet a companion after awhile.”

“Volunteering never really interested me.” He went to take a sip from his glass, and he had drunk it down to empty. When he reached for the bottle and poured a refill, Gina eyed him doing it but didn’t say anything. Startling how much she behaved like Marian, the more he got to know her. “The comics are my favorite part of the paper, if you can believe that.”

“You can do small things.”

“I don’t want to do anything. Or is that some sort of crime these days?”

“Of course not.”

“Busy busy busy. If you ask me, I don’t see one person any happier for it.”

“Just enjoy yourself then.” Gina had finished her glass of wine and set it down. “And it’s been nice having you over, but I really have to go to bed now. It’s a school night.” She got up and waited for him to rise.

He pointed to the wine. “You save that for next time.” Walking, he nearly lost his balance again. He hadn’t been this drunk in ages, and it seemed to come out of nowhere. He’d be damned if he couldn’t hold his liquor anymore.

Gina stood before him, a few feet from the door. She made a comment about the rain, and the next thing Fred knew he had stepped forward and encircled her in his arms. She hugged him back briefly and tried to pull away, but Fred clung on to her warmth and her soft young skin.

“That’s enough,” she said. “I said that’s enough.”

His hands found the smooth skin of her lower back and rubbed it. He moved his face toward hers but missed her mouth, so he ended up kissing the air instead. Finally Gina managed to disentangle herself from him, stepped away and flung open the door.

“We’re friends,” Gina said. “You understand? We’re just neighbours. That’s all.”

He muttered an affirmative reply and trudged home in the wet darkness. The porch on the corner unit now loomed in the dark like an empty cave, and a wind chime sounded faintly from among the hanging plants.



A few days later, Fred stopped into Baxter’s and waved to Gina as she passed by. But she ignored him. The next morning, he threw his small wine collection of a dozen or so bottles in the trash. Almost immediately he pulled them out.

Several weeks passed, and Fred noticed Gina had been markedly absent from Baxter’s. When asked, Brian replied, “Gina? Working two jobs was too much for her, so she quit.” Afterward, Fred didn’t talk to her again for months, although occasionally she drove by his condo and waved if she saw him reading on his porch.

Another time, she knocked on his door accompanied by a middle-aged man who was charismatically cheerful. They were going around the

neighbourhood collecting donations for a church mission trip, the man said. Gina inserted a few words here and there, the entire time shifting her weight in her sneakers and glancing around, uncomfortable.

“I don’t give to any charities,” Fred replied, trying hard to not stare at Gina after not seeing her in person for so long. She was dressed too young for her age, he thought, in a tight-fitting red polo shirt and a short denim skirt and played with a piece of her hair as she listened. He added, “If you start giving to one, you have to give to them all, you know.”

The man nodded, disappointed.

Gina stepped up. “Thanks, anyway, Fred,” she said. “How are doing lately? Everything okay?”

“Sure, okay. Doctor sliced another spot off my ear the other day, but who needs cartilage?” He pointed to his bandaged ear as he spoke.

Gina grimaced and said nothing. She and the man thanked him again and knocked at the door of the next unit.

Fred saw her with the church fellow again, at the French bistro across from the park. He guessed it must be her boyfriend. Throughout their dinner, he watched them from the bar and felt certain Gina must have spotted him, but if she did, refused to catch his eye.

He avoided bars and young people for awhile. The neighbourhood did have amenities of which he could take advantage, like the exercise room and clubhouse terrace overlooking the lake and the pool. Lots of the residents his age gathered over there for bridge and afternoon barbeques.

One afternoon, he was on his way down to the pool with a freshly delivered issue of *National Geographic*, when he noticed a woman much older than he, sitting half-slumped on her condo porch overlooking the lake. Maybe she’s had a stroke, he thought, hurrying over. He opened the screen door and entered. The woman raised her face toward the sky and pointed up with a frail, quivering finger.

“See him?” she asked. “I’ve been watching that hawk for two hours now. He’s swooping around the lake, can’t seem to find anything to eat.” Fred stood there, stunned.

“Come in and sit, won’t you?” She returned her hand to her lap and kept her eyes fixed on the bird. Fred took the seat next to her and looked up. He guessed the dark brown bird was a cormorant, not a hawk, but the old woman’s eyes probably weren’t too keen. They both watched the bird circle in silence for a minute.

Fred didn’t know what to say. The woman seemed to have no inclination in finding out his name or who he was. Finally she asked, “How old are you?”

He told her. "I guessed about right," she said, nodding. "Can you guess how old I am?"

"I have no idea," he said.

She gave a little laugh. "You didn't even stop to think about it."

He felt taken aback, realizing she was right. Next to her, he felt like a five-year-old boy. "How long have you lived here?" he asked.

"Forty years," she answered. "Now that's a quick answer, but it didn't require much thought. I've been a widow for thirty of them."

Fred tried to comprehend this. He gulped and blinked a couple times as he stared at her. The woman still gazed over the lake and the treetops, the palms and cypress trees blowing gently in the warm breeze. Tendrils of Spanish moss trailed down from limbs and into the glassy water. She seemed almost a part of their surroundings, the lake and trees, grass and sky with everything in it.

"You must have seen some things change in your time, then," Fred replied. It sounded stupid, once he said it. He felt sure she would make a quick, sharp reply, but she didn't.

"You can't get in the way of change," she said. "When it's ready to happen, it just comes."

When he looked around from where he was now, he saw only the vast expanse of shimmering lake. But he hadn't felt so at rest since long before his wife died. In the short days of their retired life together, Marian would make his tea, sit down across from him and they would each quietly read their sections of the paper. From overhead an eager cry cut through the air, and he looked up at the cormorant, now diving toward a small, flapping ripple on the water.