

## Neighbors

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“Did you get one of these?” Shirley stood by the chain link fence that separated my backyard from hers, the Community Sex Offender Notification in her right hand. A small calico snuggled against her chest. She stroked its head as she spoke.

The same notification had arrived in my mail three days ago, a five by eight-inch postcard displaying a black and white photo of a man in the top right corner. Sad eyes, sagging jowls and a small goatee. Fifty-one years old. His ten-year-old offence, sexual conduct with a minor. His name was Santos Williams. The card warned that although Santos Williams was a registered sex offender he should not be threatened or harassed.

“I guess they have to let neighbors know.” I was sitting on a beach towel a couple of feet from the plastic kiddie pool Kerri-Leigh splashed in.

Santos had moved into the empty house next door to me a couple of weeks ago. The house had been empty since April. I’d noticed him pushing his recycling bin to the sidewalk, bringing in his mail. Other than that, his place appeared deserted, no signs of life, like a lot of houses in the cul-de-sac. Whole Phoenix neighborhoods transformed into ghost towns in the summer. People hibernated in air-conditioned houses to avoid the heat. Except Shirley Llewellyn.

Shirley Llewellyn looked like an older version of that country and western singer Sissy Spacek played in *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, I had seen on T.V. back in graduate school. Black hair with strands of gray hung to her waist in matted waves, shorter in front with curls falling

around her aged, make-up-caked face. She always wore a long sundress with spaghetti straps, tie-dyed with large peace-signs. Barefoot. An aged flower child of the 1960s, the way I remembered my mother and her friends. Shirley had an impossible number of cats roaming her property. I'd see her through the chain-link fence that separated our backyards, walking around with a large Circle K cup filled with cat food, distributing it into various small bowls throughout the yard. I'd catch a glimpse of her face, full of joy as she filled those bowls with food. Sometimes cats jumped over the fence and came into my yard. They didn't bother me. Kerri-Leigh liked to pet them.

Shirley had a swimming pool, about three-quarters full of green, algae-ridden water. Dead palm fronds and other debris floated on top. Late afternoon when the sun hit that green water, it shimmered like a mirror, deep moss-colored in spots, translucent in others, reflections of the Mexican palms in her yard like daggers jutting from the sides at odd angles. A distorted David Hockney painting.

The calico squirmed and jumped from Shirley's arms into my yard. When Kerri-Leigh saw it she got out of the pool and chased it around the yard until it bounded back over the fence.

"He's paid his dues. Isn't that enough?"

I wasn't sure.

Sometimes after I put Kerri-Leigh to bed I'd bring a lawn chair to the edge of the back patio and sit in the dark, listening to the white noise of the freeway that looped around the neighborhood. One evening I noticed Santos strolling around his yard, smoking a cigarette. He stopped at a spot in the center, took a few drags and moved onto another location closer to his back gate as if surveying the land, planning a garden or something. It was too dark to see his

face. I briefly wondered if I should be worried about Kerri-Leigh, but couldn't imagine how he would pose a danger to her. She was never out of my sight except when she slept. Maybe I'd have felt differently if she was older.

Shirley's cats prowled the neighborhood at night. Came into my yard, and Santos's. Like they were looking for something or someone. Sitting in the darkness I'd think how close we all are to being alone. Surrounded by family or friends one minute, then poof, everyone is gone. When you've got a kid, you have to believe in things like tomorrows and hope and meaning to life. At least pretend to.

On Labor Day, I took Kerri-Leigh to the kiddie pool at the park a few blocks away. When we got home, Shirley was standing in her driveway, holding a plastic Pepsi bottle. She waved and approached the car as if she'd been waiting for us.

"Looks like everybody's left town."

"I guess they've all gone up north," I said. Our seven-house cul-de-sac appeared empty. No cars in the driveways, no sign of life. Except for Santos's open garage door.

I unbuckled Kerri-Leigh's car seat belt. She climbed out and stood next to me, her Lion King towel dragging behind her.

"Somebody's been swimming." Shirley looked at her sort of wistfully. "You two like chicken?"

"Sure."

"I'm cooking one tonight," she said. "Come on over and you won't have to fix dinner."

I hesitated.

“I’ve got plenty, way more than I can eat.” Shirley lightly touched Kerri-Leigh’s still wet hair.

I pictured Shirley alone at a kitchen table. All those cats roaming around her feet.

“Sure,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Around 5.”

Cats were everywhere, roaming in and out of the living room and kitchen, lounging on the sofa and kitchen chairs, sprinting after things visible only to their eyes. Two sprawled on the kitchen counter, a third one in the sink with its tongue out, licking at water that dripped slowly from the faucet. An old gray and white one with matted fur and large bald spots around its neck slept on a Barcalounger. Another one the color of charcoal smudge, skinny with unusually long legs and a pointed face sauntered around the living room like ancient Egyptian royalty.

The love seat Kerri-Leigh and I sat on sagged nearly to the floor. Shirley lifted the gray and white from the Barcalounger, settled in and placed the cat on her lap. The lounge’s torn fabric was patched together with duct tape. The only thing that didn’t look ancient and ready to collapse in the living room was the large flat screen mounted on the wall. Though not a filthy mess like you might expect with all the cats, odor from litter boxes wafted through the house. She told me neighbors had complained but they couldn’t do anything about the cats.

“The city requires that at least three people file complaints,” she said. “Nobody’s done that.”

The sex offender notification lay on a coffee table next to a stack of Readers’ Digests. Santos Williams stared up at me.

A large ginger cat approached Kerry-Leigh. It rubbed against her legs, then jumped up and settled next to her, rested its head on her lap. The cat was fat, its belly looked close to bursting, obviously pregnant.

“That’s Beatrice.” Shirley got up from the Barcalounger and went to a drawer in the desk by the front door. She pulled out an odd little crocheted figurine, about six inches long with a head, arms and a long gown. No legs. It was pale orange and beige and looked sort of like a clown with the colorful clothes and painted face.

“I made this for my son.” She said as she passed it to Kerri-Leigh. “Many years ago.”

Kerri-Leigh took it and looked at me. I nodded and smiled. “What do you say?” She thanked Shirley.

“Take good care of it. It’s very special.”

Shirley went into the kitchen and returned with a box of sugar cookies covered with brightly-colored icing and sprinkles of silver glitter. She took one out and passed it to Kerri-Leigh. “Dinner won’t be ready for a bit.” She closed the box and set it on the coffee table.

I noticed an eight by ten framed photo on a bookshelf next to the flatscreen.

“Is that your son?”

Shirley picked up the photo and passed it to me.

She sat back in the Barcalounger, pulled the lever to semi-recline and let her flip flops fall from her feet. The aroma of lemon, garlic and rosemary filled the room.

“His name is Doug Alan,” she said. The soles of her feet were black and calloused like leather. “My son.”

In the photo a younger Shirley stood next to a teenage boy in front of her swimming pool. The water glistened, like a sheet of cellophane rippling in the sun. The boy stood several inches taller than Shirley, his right arm around her shoulder. Brown, wavy hair slicked back behind his ears. A half smile on his face, sort of engaging.

“Does he live nearby?” I’d never seen anyone else at her house.

Shirley shook her head. “Florence.” Doug- Alan was her first born, she said. Conceived with Bobby Llewellyn, the only man she ever truly loved and whose name she took as her own. She used those exact words.

“Killed on an isolated stretch of state route 377 between Holbrook and Heber.”

At first I thought she meant her son, Doug Alan was killed. I was confused.

“Four days before Doug Alan’s second birthday. Bobby’s Econoline, full of cigarette cartons skidded off the pavement into a utility pole.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“The officer who came to my house asked me if I knew what my husband was doing with a van full of Marlboros, Camels and Lucky Strikes. I shook my head. I was eighteen years old.”

I tried to imagine Shirley at age eighteen. I saw Sissy Spacek in that movie. “That had to be hard.”

“The cigarettes were smuggled out of Colorado.”

Shirley closed her eyes and was silent for several minutes. When she opened them, she pointed to the sex-offender notification. “You ever talk to him?”

I shook my head. “You?”

“No. He keeps to himself.”

After dinner, Shirley retrieved the container of sugar cookies from the living room and set them on the kitchen table. The label on the side read Safeway, \$5.99. She again took out a cookie and laid it on a paper towel in front of Kerri-Leigh.

“These are his favorite,” she said. “Doug Alan’s birthday is Thursday. Can’t take anything out there that might be a weapon. Last year they took away a glass snow globe with a scorpion inside. These cookies are the only thing I’m sure are okay.”

Thursday morning, I dropped Kerri-Leigh off at Sunburst Daycare a few blocks away and came back home. As I pulled into my driveway, I saw Shirley standing in front of her car, hood open, hands on her hips. She drove a twenty-year-old, 1985 Nissan Sentra with no air-conditioning, back windows permanently stuck in the rolled-down position, front passenger side window missing. Most of the time it sat undisturbed in her driveway. Shirley stared into the engine, breasts sagging under her old hippy dress, left spaghetti-strap off her shoulder.

“Damn thing won’t start.” She was close to tears. The box of birthday cookies sat on the passenger seat along with a small Walgreen’s bag.

I looked at my watch, 9:30AM. I didn’t have any classes or meetings that day, didn’t need to go into campus.

“I can drive you. I need to be back by 3pm though.”

Her face lit up. “Oh, would you? No problem getting back by 3.”

On the ride down to Florence, Shirley held the cookies and Walgreens bag in her lap and looked out the window. Monsoon clouds blessed the day and made me think of fall and cooler weather. I wanted to take Kerri-Leigh up north to the mountains to see the snow when winter came.

Shirley pulled out a birthday card from the Walgreens bag, held it up so I could see. The card displayed a cartoon drawing of a teddy bear wearing red handcuffs, with the caption, *let me out*, printed below. She smiled, removed a photo she had put inside the card. "This here's Buster." I glanced at the photo, worn and ragged around the edges, a large black and white cat. "Buster was his favorite."

She ran her fingers through her long hair, put the photo back inside the card, both back into the Walgreen's bag.

Highway 79 sliced through Florence. Housing developments, strip malls, fast food joints and senior-living mobile home parks lined both sides. Then prisons, one after the other along a two or three-mile stretch, state and private prisons, immigrant detentions centers. Arizona State Prison Complex was next to *Oasis in the Desert* retirement community. I waited in the parking lot while Shirley went in to visit Doug Alan. The prison was enclosed by chain-link fencing topped with razor wire. The shuffle board court at *Oasis* was on the other side of the fence. A man with a long pole pushed a bright orange puck down the court. Another man in a Hawaiian shirt and large sunglasses sat in a lounge chair, a paper opened in front of him.

Shirley was inside for less than an hour. When she returned, her eyes were glassy. We sat there for a few minutes, not speaking. A car pulled in beside us, two women got out and headed to the guard station at the entrance.

"He don't belong in a place like that," Shirley said.

I felt I should put my hand over hers, give it a squeeze. Hug her or something. But I've never been good at that kind of thing. Except with Kerri-Leigh. I just sat there looking at the

swirls of razor wire, rereading the sign, Arizona State Prison Complex–Florence. As I pulled the car away from the prison, Shirley kept her eyes on the guard station, didn't take her eyes off until it was out of sight.

“What's he in for?”

“I asked that judge, Parnell or Parsons or something like that how my boy could have known Clarence Burrell had loaded up both guns. Or that Clarence would get so nervous? How could Doug-Alan be responsible for that?”

“Someone was killed?”

“It wasn't his fault. He shouldn't be in that place.” Shirley put her hands to her temples, massaged them. “Maybe somewhere else, but not there.”

A dust storm whipped up a few miles before we reached the U.S. 60, one of those haboobs that descend upon the Arizona deserts. A sheet of brown covered Highway 79 and swallowed my car in a vortex of blowing earth and tumbleweed. It wiped out all points of reference.

“Pull over there.” Shirley pointed to a vague green outline of a Starbucks logo.

I followed the green to a strip mall, stopped and turned off the ignition. For over twenty minutes, we heard nothing but the howl of wind and slamming of particles against the car while dust and debris swirled all around us. When the air cleared a little, I realized the sign was not a Starbucks after all. The familiar green circle surrounded a serene, bearded face with long, flowing hair and a crown of thorns atop the head. Words printed in the circle read *SACRIFICE FOR ME*. The building was a storefront church.

“He told me not to visit anymore,” Shirley said.

I stared at the Jesus Christ logo.

“Looked at me blankly, like he didn’t even know who I was.”

“I’m sorry.”

The storm had slammed a tiny Hummingbird against the front windshield, its wing pinned between the wiper on the passenger side and the glass. It looked near death. Shirley opened her door and reached around to the front of the car. I thought she was going to bring the little creature inside if it was still alive, but she brushed the bird to the ground. I couldn’t tell if it was dead.

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The weather was still scorching the last week of September. I couldn’t sleep that Saturday, up and down all night. Started reading, couldn’t concentrate, scrolled through Netflix and couldn’t decide, read through my lecture notes for the following week and couldn’t concentrate. It was after midnight when I went outside and lit up a joint. Santos’s yard was quiet, the freeway noise intermittent. I’d been out there about fifteen minutes when I heard Shirley’s sliding glass patio door squeak open. I watched in the dim yellow of her porch light. She carried a cardboard box, about two feet square, both arms wrapped around it. One of the cats followed, meowing. A sliver of moon hung high. Shirley stopped at the edge of the pool and lay the box on the concrete, next to her feet. She moaned, softly at first then louder until the sound turned to long, wailing sobs. I thought of going to the edge of the chain-link and asking her if she was okay, but didn’t. It seemed I shouldn’t interfere with whatever she was doing and going through. She reached into the box, pulled something out and held it over the water. It was a kitten. Her sobs grew louder. Tiny squeaks came from the kitten she held and from inside the box. The big cat walked in circles, looking up to her hand that held the kitten. It

was Beatrice, the large ginger. It meowed its head off, tried to get into the box, but Shirley had closed it. She ignored the meows and the increasingly loud squeaks from inside the box. She dropped the screaming kitten into the algae-laden water. Stood still for a few minutes, then opened the box, reached in and pulled out another kitten. She dropped it into the water. Her sobs seemed to come from some bottomless cavity of sorrow in her chest. She pulled out another kitten and held it over the water. I should have tried to stop her. I don't know why I didn't. I felt paralyzed and as if what I watched wasn't really happening. She dropped the third kitten into the water. She repeated this two more times, dropped the little creatures in one by one, then kicked the box hard toward the open patio door. She pulled up the long nightgown or whatever she was wearing, to her knees and sat down at the edge of the pool. She dipped her feet into the murky water as Beatrice walked up and down along the pool's perimeter, meowing. I closed my eyes. It seemed a long time before I heard Shirley's patio door squeak again and opened my eyes. The door was closed and she was gone, only that dim patio light and thin wedge of moon.

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It's called a Zafu, the cushion Santos sits on. I noticed them for sale in the yoga studio I started going to twice a week before I picked Kerri-Leigh up from daycare. A couple of weeks after Shirley drowned the kittens, I was playing with Kerri-Leigh in the backyard. I looked over at Santos's yard, he was building a small dais out of cinder blocks. He placed a stone Buddha on the blocks and spread a blanket on the ground in front of it. He turned, saw us playing and waved. Sort of. The next morning I was up just after dawn, drinking coffee on the patio. Already the morning rush had begun, the din of traffic buzzing in background. Santos placed the Zafu on

the blanket and sat before the statue, his back turned to me. I watched him until my cup was empty. He never moved. I tried to conjure the calmness I thought I observed.