

Michael Downs

NEIGHBORS GATHERED

Joyce, the Arborist

Twelve feet up a tree, she works the chainsaw and recalls her father and *his* tools – those heavy knives he kept sharper than hope. A short man, arms hard from decades cutting off heads on a slaughterhouse line. Imagine what he'd say to this: his Joyce, nearly so old as when he retired, squirreled between branches, two-fisting her saw through this limb?

Her bare forearms sweat, catch dust. Hot and sticky, this end of May sun right there like she could light her cigarette on it, air wet as a dish sponge. The two-stroke spews fumes, and behind that Joyce gets a whiff of the maple's green life. Her dad never needed a chainsaw. In East Baltimore, shade came from awnings. A limb? That's what the doc called that arm or leg you broke playing football on asphalt. Some days she tagged along to watch him work, and that's the smell of her youth – rank blood. Scuffing sidewalks home, she carried

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tender pork cuts wrapped in paper for supper. He died years ago, her dad, but this strength in her arms is his strength, the sweat in her eyes, his sweat: what she uses to cherish this rough patch of green.

When a sedan pulls to the curb in the shade of the maple, she knows who it is: a sales agent with prospects for that house across the street, the one next door to Sylvia and Jerry's. The owner's asking a high price for a skinny Depression-era three-bedroom. The bathroom's upstairs and the basement's not what you'd call finished, but that's how it goes these days. Joyce kills the saw. She doesn't want to be the crazy neighbor in a tree who scares them away.

Trim, well dressed but not fancy, a woman and man study azaleas, gutters. Joyce shifts her perch, draws the last breath of her dying cigarette. The butt she grinds against the tree bark, then pinches into the pocket of her denim shorts. Somewhere wind chimes clatter. She wonders who these people are and whether they'd be happy here, the way Joyce is happy – rowhouse kid landing in a home with a yard. This beats a gajillion winning nights at Fullerton Manor bingo. Every leaf in this tree is a lottery ticket to cash in.

The man puts a camera to his eye, snaps photos of the house. The woman points to the front yard's dogwood in bloom; the agent laughs.

When at last they drive away, Joyce rips the saw back to life and aims for that limb, thick as a pig's neck.

Bert

From street to sidewalk, with his broom to brush the cut grass and dust. It's August and swampy, and Bert's sunglasses slide down his nose. No breeze lifts the American flag from its pole in his yard. Three doors down, the English professor, new to the neighborhood, unloads another box from the moving van.

When Bert introduced himself a moment ago, he told the professor that his favorite play is *Macbeth*. And then that line Bert quoted? It's still with him – toad's croak in his head – even as he brooms dust into a pile. He'll hear it again, or think it, later that evening, when he helps his wife out to the back stoop in the cool shade of the house. Carol will wave to neighbors and try to answer their hellos, but her sounds won't work. The lovely voice Bert married now an emphysemic huff, words blocked by gasps.

Fair is foul, and foul is fair. Some forty-five years ago, when Bert was a schoolboy at St. Dominic's, that line struck him, and he wishes he remembered why. What meaning did it have for him then, so callow and sincere? A boy so distant he's mostly forgotten.

In the evening, sitting with her on the back stoop, he'll watch Carol watch their cat stalk the yard. Her shoulders will curl inward, her neck fail to keep her head raised. A hard thing to see, so Bert will turn, too, to the cat and the yard in dusky light, and blindly reach for Carol's hand.

Joyce's Imaginary Friend

Joyce says, "I've got to go home and fix dinner for Fran."

She says, "Fran and I drove to the cemeteries to visit our mothers."

She says, "That light in the basement is for Fran's turtle."

She says what she says, but neighbors joke that Fran is a leprechaun, a pooka, a Mr. Snuffleupagus. Who ever sees her? She's never at parties and shies from people. Joyce spends hours outdoors, planting tomatoes and pruning rose bushes and edging the grass, chatting with nearly every passerby. Fran never works beside her – though it's Fran's house, one that belonged to her parents. Old-timers – like Bert – remember Fran as a girl. He asks Joyce, "How's it going for Fran at the can factory?"

But more recent neighbors?

"Fran is a mirage," one says.

"Joyce's imaginary friend," says another.

They ask, "Any Fran sightings?"

Now and then, though: a glimpse around dawn, after third shift, her blue Toyota backing into the driveway, then Fran on a bee-line for the house. Or a moment on the back stoop as she tosses seed into the yard, feeding squirrels and birds.

When Bert's wife died, visitation at Ruck Funeral Home drew a crowd, many of whom lived in the neighborhood or had, once, maybe gone to school with Bert and Carol's kids. Joyce paid her respects, and Fran came, too, dressed in a neatly ironed shirt, untucked, slacks pressed, her shoes flats.

A stir moved among the newer neighbors. That's Fran. Fran, at last!

She knew just about everyone, and those she'd never met she knew of – their dogs, their work, when they'd moved in. Fran chatted with her and him and that person, too – a chirpy chickadee. New neighbors studied her, how her eyes slivered when she chuckled, her jolly gnome cheeks.

But the next day, no one saw her. Or the day after that. A week passed, then a month. No Fran sightings.

Joyce said, "She's getting extra hours at work."

Mrs. Gounaris

Sheri and Michael live in the bedroom where Mrs. Gounaris died. Here they read the *Sunpaper*, fill in crossword puzzles, touch under sheets. Red tie or striped, he wonders. Sheri snaps her panty hose. Dogs pad about the bed, claws *click* on the hardwood floor; they want out to chase rabbits. An ancient watercolor Sheri found at a yard sale hangs framed on the wall above the bed. It reads in Polish, *Jezu Błogosław Nam*: "Jesus Bless Us."

Then they notice a clock has slowed. A radio station finds a new frequency, news becomes classical.

"Mrs. Gounaris," they say.

Sometimes, when they speak her name, it is to credit her with mischief. Other times, her name begins a plea.

"Mrs. Gounaris . . ."

(Why did you switch the radio station?)

"Mrs. Gounaris . . ."

(Please stop changing the clocks.)

They ask Sylvia, a neighbor, who remembers. What color did Mrs. Gounaris paint the walls? Did she plant those trees? Was she happy?

Mrs. Gounaris never goes outdoors. She busies herself in the radiator pipes and on window sills. She extinguishes new light bulbs, shrinks pajama pants.

In the room where she died, firefighters in boots marched about the bed, a paramedic touched fingertips to her neck, told an off-color joke. Was it then, Sylvia? Was that when Mrs. Gounaris, alone and exhausted, decided to turn back the clocks?

Verizon Guy

The van he drives marks him, tells us that he engineers conversations, connects voices across wire and light. Because of him, one tongue finds another through this modern Babel.

Yet here on this street, he's silent as the moon.

He's no hermit. In the dark early morning, his fishing buddies visit, and they go out for a day. Sometimes that lady stays overnight, with the little girl whose plaits require many, many barrettes.

He's not antisocial. But when he waves, it's a surprise. Mostly, he stays indoors. His Jack Russell terrier has more to say – at all hours.

Neighbors have invited him to parties. He stays away.

Maybe, because he's the Verizon Guy, he's heard distant talk. He's heard the neighbor who said black people smell bad when they're

wet with rain, and he's heard the neighbor who said she never goes to *that* part of the city, and he's heard the neighbor who asked of some rambunctious midnight-teens, "Were they black?"

Maybe he's heard all that and doesn't need to hear more.

But one summer day, Joyce's chainsaw bucked and bit her knee. Neighbors gathered around the woman and her bloody flesh, carrying clean towels and concern. From the back of his van, the Verizon Guy brought first aid: antibiotic wipes, butterfly bandages, gauze and tape. He daubed and wiped, thick fingers careful and precise after years of tying hooks to lines, marrying wires. Joyce thanked him, then caught a ride to where the wound could be stitched. The Verizon Guy returned his kit to his truck.

Later, Fran said no chainsaw ever again.

Sharon and John

A lifetime ago, John plucked bass guitar for a good-time band. You know the type. A bunch of lanky guys who need haircuts. Droopy mustaches, oversized sunglasses. Enough talent to get people dancing in a certain kind of dockside bar. No big dreams, but gigs paid for smokes.

Then he met a girl. Great legs, and she made him laugh. Floaty skirts, big bangles on her wrists. Not shy about her cleavage, either. Bummed his cigarettes. Her last name conjured weather: *Rains*. She made him think Caribbean thoughts.

They married. He packed away the bass guitar and took up computers to pay bills. She filled their house with rowdy jokes and golden retrievers: Winston and Rainn (the sensible one), Leo and Dylan Fuss-bottom. She'd drive away and come home with surprises: dinosaur statuettes for the garden patio, and carousel horses and red tin stars, an antler chandelier to hang from the front porch.

A decade passed, then three. John and Sharon got wrinkles. Got old, but not *that* old. You get the drift.

Later, with the doctors, he'd hear that the problem was her heart – nerves and electricity and muscle all mixed up. Drumming like a hummingbird's, and hummingbirds live such brief lives. She'd need surgery, medical devices planted behind that beautiful breast, medication. And no, even then nothing was certain.

Time is relative, the scientists say, but it's hard to know what that means. No matter how you measure it – whether in four-four or twelve-eight, golden retriever years, or the butts stubbed out in ashtrays – there's a consistency to time. Time is reliable. What a bass

player works with is tempo: how you hurry or relax through what time you're given. Years ago, John set tempo with his four strings, and the band followed. Now, at Sharon's bedside, he works his fingers through hers, and wouldn't it be something if he could plug his bass right into her too-fast heart. Night and day, he'd hold to the necessary beat, life-giving and steady. He'd play for cheap, too. Just tips and Friday night on the couch with a bad movie and the dogs, her laugh as he peeks inside her flimsy blouse.

Charles

Such a delicate spring afternoon, yet here he stands in his front yard, face contorted, arm extended as he jabs a finger at the house next door. The owner, silver-haired Bobby, paces in his driveway, muttering to no one. It's Bobby's drug-addict housemate who's causing the trouble, the pear-shaped twenty-something with his arms thrown out to each side ("What am I supposed to do?"), his expression somewhere between aggrieved innocence and a snarl. From behind him, a similarly shaped woman points at Charles.

"Don't you threaten my son!" she shouts. Her perm quivers. Though only visiting, she's quick to get involved.

Between Charles and these people, lodged along the driveway in a long muddy smear, lie several large rocks. Rocks that required both of Charles's big hands to lift. The smear, technically, belongs to Charles and his fiancée, Kristen. It's their yard. But this young man who parks his car in Bobby's driveway made the muddy mess. He can't seem to steer straight.

"He is not to move the stones," Charles commands. He delivers the order in a deep baritone, with an accent as elegant as his Kenyan education. Head shaved and glistening, he carries himself like some Bantu king of old.

This moment is not only about stones or the muddy smear. It's about patience lost. This is about strangers at all hours, heads nodding, unable to keep their feet. It's about tricks pulling up in cars and women leaving Bobby's house to take a brief ride. It's about property values and whether Charles and Kristen can raise children next door to a yard where rampant dandelions conceal discarded syringes.

"Those rocks damage my car," the twenty-something housemate snarls.

"My boy's very sensitive!" his mother cries.

"He is not to move the stones!"

Several months later, Kristen and Charles will sell the house at a

loss. It's a great recession, after all, with prices plummeting everywhere. They'll move out of the city, paying suburban rent instead of a mortgage, but they'll miss this neighborhood too much. Eventually, they'll sign a new lease and move into the house on the other side of Bobby's. The lot is configured differently, the house faces away. A tough chain link separates the properties. And it's only another rental, after all. Not their investment, merely their home.

Once Kristen and Charles return, their children will visit with Joyce, pet Michael and Sheri's dogs, trick or treat up and down the street. One year, Kristen will make homemade costumes, dressing the three as heroic puppies from a TV cartoon.

Paw Patrol! Paw Patrol! goes the show's theme song, *whenever you're in trouble . . .*

Paw Patrol! Paw Patrol! will be there on the double . . .

By then the neighbor who couldn't steer straight will have vanished, become only this rumor: Overdosed in jail.

Kenny and Tracy

It was a sunny, late summer day when the baby stopped breathing.

The baby had stopped breathing while in the house's basement and in the company of her father, who had re-built the basement into a comfy, orderly carpeted grotto where he could gaze at the baby or, when she napped, play Xbox games on a big-screen television.

The baby made a sound. Her body became rigid; she shuddered. She stopped breathing.

The baby's mother was away, picking up a pizza. She'd just left, and then the baby had stopped breathing.

Next door, Sheri sat at her desk in the second-floor bedroom she'd converted into a study. She wore her go-to cardigan, tangerine-orange and light weight, because the day felt cool. But it was summery-cool, warm enough to open windows. Sheri worked at her desk in bare feet. Her husband was away, playing basketball.

Then Sheri heard a man scream. She heard a man scream, "Help me!" Because this was Baltimore, she imagined a stabbing, sharp knife to the belly and a wince. Or a galvanized steel pipe swung toward a skull. She thought: strangers. She thought: danger.

"Help me!"

She didn't recognize the voice but it called with such need – wild and primitive – she hurried out front to answer. She heard "Help!" again and turned and saw her neighbor, Kenny, on his porch. She hadn't recognized the voice as his. It was too strained, too high. She

was barefoot, and there was a broken-concrete driveway to cross and brick steps to climb, but she rushed to him.

He'd laid the baby at his feet. Her eyes darted and searched, startled. Kenny crouched over her, his hands jerking toward her and away, not knowing what to do. Sheri lifted the baby, but she lifted her without a plan, just to do something, to discover or to comfort, as if touch might explain why Kenny had screamed, as if holding the baby might heal her.

Elsa had made a sound, Kenny told Sheri, and he'd looked, and she wasn't breathing.

She breathed now, little baby breaths. But in Elsa's eyes Sheri saw such fear: as if her father's were her own.

Other neighbors reached the porch. Joyce from across the road. And Bert from a few doors up. And people who did not even know Kenny or Elsa but who recognized a terrified heart when they heard it. Kristen came, too, who lived at the corner four houses away. She worked in physical therapy at the city's shock trauma center. She knew emergencies.

Someone told Sheri to lay Elsa back down on the porch floor. Because the floor was concrete, Sheri slipped out of her cardigan, folded the tangerine sweater and pillowed it under Elsa's head.

When Tracy turned her car onto the street, she saw a half dozen people on her porch, and she knew what you know when you leave for pizza and return to find neighbors crowding your porch.

The look on her face when she parked, rushed out of the car.

The look she saw on Kenny's face.

Febrile seizures, Kristen explained. Or tried to. Scary, she said, but not severe. A reaction to a fever. Generally brief; no lasting effects. But who was listening? Elsa's eyes darted and searched. Breathing now, yes, but before she had stopped.

Paramedics arrived; they repeated what Kristen had said. Scary, not severe. We'll take her to the hospital. She'll be okay.

Tracy stepped into the back of the ambulance with the paramedics and Elsa. After the ambulance turned out of sight, Kenny sat on the porch steps and cried.

Everyone could see he'd best not drive, so Joyce volunteered. Then she stayed at the hospital for as long as the family needed her.

That night, Bert thought about the family and prayed for them. Joyce smoked a few more cigarettes than usual. Soon after, she bought a new toy to give to the baby. When Sheri's husband came home, she told him what had happened. She glanced toward the porch as if she could still see all the people who'd come, their soft faces.

Tracy and Kenny brought Elsa home that evening. A fever seizure,

the doctors had said. The baby will be fine. It happens sometimes. There'll be no lasting effects.

Bobby

He's not arrested or dead. He's not at a meeting. He's not high, he's not sober. He's not cold, though he should be. There's no electric or heat because he hasn't paid the bills. The blanket wrapped around him smells like ashes after rain.

He's not sure of the month or the hour.

He's not upstairs, because since the fire the floorboards aren't dependable. When he needs a toilet, he uses the one in the basement. His piss, he notices, streams dark orange, smells like broccoli.

He's not expecting anyone, because everyone's locked up or buried or on to the better thing. There's always a better thing. There's never a better thing. That's not a contradiction. It's a swear-on-the-Bible truth.

He retrieves the mail from the box out of habit. The envelopes and circulars make sloppy piles on the kitchen counters, on the radiators, on the stairs up to where the fire started. Sometimes he pats the piles neat to make it easier for whoever will face the paperwork after he's gone.

He's not bathing. He's not praying. He's not practicing the steps, except maybe the first. In the end, only the fact of weakness makes sense.

Meetings promised hope but gave him housemates instead. They had names, but he doesn't remember those, and probably they don't remember his. What he recalls? A man with a long knife. A topless dancer. The fellow whose mother visited. He remembers how during one deep snowfall, the man with a long knife got the old blower out of the garage and cleared paths up and down the street.

Bobby treated his housemates kindly, who brought him dope and stole his Social Security and moved on. He understood, forgave. They weren't mean down deep – he's not, either. Mean people don't fall this far.

Betty

Sylvia's daughter sips her cold, sweet wine. It keeps the bourbon buzz alive.

"He loves you, girlfriend," says the radio-woman's voice, velvety and assuring. "This one's going out to you from him."

Under the metal awning of the patio, in the center of a glass-topped table, a thick, solitary candle burns (smolders with longing). Betty thinks of her man, who is at home now with his wife. He has a cancer. His wife has health insurance.

If Betty had her own house, and health insurance, her man would leave that whore. Or if Betty's mom would give up the big bedroom.

This is her mom's house. Mom's table, mom's booze, even her mom's radio.

Baltimore's Hit Music Station drips out another song full of cooing and violins. Betty thinks of her dead husband, Jackie, who knew how to treat her. That mule! He worked hard so she could spend days lounging with beach sand between her toes, spend Happy Hour with Dirty Bananas and Sea Breezes on her lips. She'd wanted something like a divorce – what's called a Maryland separation – which means he'd keep paying the bills, but still. Stupid heart attacks.

Now, here she is, fifty-something, the life insurance run out, her house sold back to the bank, and no one hiring for the kind of job she deserves. That's why for the last year she's slept in the back bedroom she thought she'd left thirty years ago. That's why she tells her mom, You need new carpeting. You buy flowers, I'll plant them. That's why she tries to be nice. It's not always easy, because Mom won't always listen. Sometimes Betty has to pin that crone to the sofa, kneel on her arms, scream at her ugly face until she gets it. God!

But this house? It's free and clear, and her mom's had throat cancer.

On the radio, the woman purrs. "Call us with your requests," she says.

A Student of Russian Literature

Home after a late night at work, Michael lugs a garbage can to the curb for the next day's pick-up. The stars hang low and soft, the air easy. A rabbit nibbles clover in the yard next door. Passing on foot, a young man pauses, and the night allows for him. He sways as if slow-dancing with the easy air, until he faces south, generally, and holds out a hand as if in blessing.

"Down the street," he says. "They stole my car. I'm just warning you. Lock your doors."

Michael wonders, Did this crime just happen? Should he be

alarmed? So long as he's lived here, no one has stolen a car, not even the night when a drunk neighbor left his Hyundai's doors open, the cabin light shining: even *then* no one stole anything.

Where, Michael asks, and when, and the young man once more blesses all things southward.

"So, I walked up to these guys who were parked, flashing their lights, the whole thing. And we talked. It was very *Sopranos*."

Michael admits to having never watched *The Sopranos*. Because this is Baltimore, he explains, he made it a point to watch *The Wire*. Meanwhile, the young man moves in and out of street and porch light, in and out of shadow. His cheekbones are high, his chin pointed. He hasn't shaved, but he's young enough that it's a good look.

"I could tell you about stocks. You have a nice house."

Michael thanks him, says how he's not the type to buy stocks, that he's only an English professor at a second-tier state school, at Towson University – UPS drivers earn more in salary and benefits – and there's a recession. Furloughs and whatnot. He wonders for a moment whether *stock advice* is a euphemism for *robbery*.

"You want to have a beer with a Jersey frat boy," says the young man, "you go to Towson."

Michael does not want to have a beer with a Jersey frat boy. He just left Towson. Didn't Tony Soprano live in New Jersey?

"Now you get a blunt, and the Chinese have covered it with a special coating."

How did the conversation get here? To the Chinese? Michael recalls waking on a sub-zero night in a state where he used to live, because a kid about this fellow's age was running to and fro on the snow-packed street outside, shirtless and barefoot and shouting about fish. Fearing that boy was a danger to himself, Michael called police. Tonight's young man seems not to be in danger, seems not even to be someone who will ask for a ride to his grandmother's in Overlea, or for bus fare. Why then stop to talk? Why not a "hello" and move on? The young man is addled – drugs, sure – and Michael's tired. Conversation-wise, they're giving each other little to work with. But it's hard to let go. This moment, it's what the stars and clover, the easy air, seem to want. On a night so gentle, to loiter is a holy obligation.

But then the young man tips a hat he isn't wearing, and he raises his other hand, as if he's late for an appointment and must go. He grins, shuffles northward.

"This," he says, "has been a Dostoevsky conversation."

The Brides

Megan and Sara wear matching gowns, shimmery white and strapless, have coerced their hair into bun and twists. Though wedded down Interstate 95 in D.C., where such unions are legal, they've saved the party for Baltimore's Inner Harbor waterfront. John and Sharon give Joyce and Fran a lift, and who knew when Joyce had last worn a dress, but here she is stepping out of John's SUV in a knee-length leopard-skin print.

Outside the restaurant, half a dozen neighbors pose for pictures with Sara (the short one) and Megan (tall). Here is love to be celebrated, and history, too. Joyce wraps an arm around Sara's back. Fran, her shirt pressed, stands at Joyce's side, as she has some three decades and more. Behind them, wind chops the harbor's gray water. August's humidity washes out the sky to a faded denim.

Indoors, after the first dance and after others with family, Megan and Sara stride with purpose – as they'd done into the courthouse in D.C. – and each reaches out, one to Joyce and one to Fran. The women in white lead their neighbors onto the dance floor for a turn.

The song ends, another begins, more couples crowd the space, and Joyce and Fran move into each other's arms. They dance clumsily, Joyce in her stubby heels and Fran in her flats, but they dance with grace of a sort they've practiced, a sort their neighbors recognize. It is the grace that envelops them as they back the car into the drive-way, rake leaves, toss bread to birds, one chore following the next, the grace that comes when there's nothing to notice or question: how it is when you belong, when you're at home.