

Pictures
of
Houses
with
Water Damage

stories

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Black Lawrence Press

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For *you*

and

in memoriam
Barry Hannah
1942 – 2010

Why Don't You Use Your Parking Space?

Mid-afternoon that Saturday I notice my upstairs neighbors have been using my parking space to have a yard sale, although there is no yard attached to this apartment building. They are selling things, everyday things, the things people discard, and they are making some money.

Two women in their late twenties live upstairs, right above my apartment. I often hear their feet as they walk around. One of them is a new tenant; she moved in after the other woman's boyfriend, a rap singer of some sort, moved out.

I'm annoyed. This is my parking space; they are using my space and didn't ask if I needed it, if it was okay.

This bothers me.

I wonder how long they've been at it. I've only noticed it now, mid-afternoon, because I slept until 11:30.

I have a hangover.

I go outside. Only one of the women is there, the new neighbor, she is blonde. She wears big blue-rimmed sunglasses and blue shorts and her blonde hair is in a long ponytail held back by a blue ribbon. I look around at the stuff: clothes, utensils, books, men's shirts, some recording equipment, a turntable, some vinyl records that probably

have warped out here under the sun. I wonder if the other woman's ex-boyfriend knows she is selling his rap gear.

The other woman, the neighbor who has been upstairs for two years, is Asian. I don't know what kind of Asian. I know her name is Lisa because when she fought with her ex-boyfriend, he'd yell her name a lot. Lisa this and Lisa that and Lisa you bitch and Lisa *Lisa Lisa stop stop stop it now!*

I approach the blonde woman.

Hi, she goes.

Did you think of asking my permission? I say.

I don't understand, she says.

This is my parking space. I pay rent on it.

Oh, she says; the landlord told Lisa it was okay.

But did you think of clearing it with me?

She goes, All I know is the landlord told Lisa it was okay.

I call the landlord. He did tell her she could use the parking space. But as long as it was okay with you, he says; she was supposed to clear it with you. Are you saying she didn't?

No, she did not.

Young people today, he says. No one asks anymore, no one says 'please' or 'thank you' or 'excuse me' anymore. Have you noticed that? he says.

I think I have, I say.

It's their parents' fault, the landlord says; folks don't teach their kids manners anymore because they don't have manners themselves. Has this inconvenienced you at all?

No, but it could have.

I understand, he says.

If I needed the space . . .

I know; she should have asked.

An emergency . . .

I'll talk to her, he says.

No need . . .

I'll talk to her, he says.

Outside, the blonde girl is saying something to Lisa, who has come down from upstairs. I look out the window. The blonde points at my door. Lisa glares at my door. Her cell phone rings. Her cell phone is in the front pocket of her jeans. She answers it. I know it is the landlord, because when she gets off the phone, the two start to pack things up and take the items back upstairs.

I want to tell her she can stay; she can keep selling. I don't. I expect her to knock on my door and go, Sorry. Or something. She doesn't.

I find the blonde attractive. She looks like someone I was once going to marry and have children with, and then it fell apart and left a hole in my heart, left a fear of getting close to someone again. She looks too much like this woman, this blonde, as I watch her go up and down the stairs.

I'm not sure if it is my imagination or if this is true.

For the past month, I have been working on a screenplay set in a science station at the South Pole, titled *It's Very Cold Down Here*. I've been writing it for a producer who will probably not produce it because I've written something for him before and he didn't get the money together, but he did pay me. I have cashed his recent check and I have two more months to get him a ninety-to-one-hundred page script.

It is not coming along well.

I sit at my desk and stare out the window a lot, then type in a scene with a penguin. The window at my desk looks onto my parking space and the courtyard of the building. The past two weeks, I have been seeing the blonde a lot, coming and going, sometimes with a bicycle. Over the course of two weeks, the blonde looks like she is losing weight, perhaps from bike riding or maybe she's not eating like she used to, she goes from slightly chubby to slender and every day she looks more and more like the person I once loved and still love.

Speaking of which, I think it is she, the one I once loved, who has been calling on the phone; it rings now and then, at any hour, and there is no voice on the other line, just breathing. The caller ID is blocked. I am almost certain it is she. Why doesn't she speak? What does she want to say? Why doesn't she just simply say *hi*?

After a few weeks I find myself wanting to say hello to the blonde whose name is Heidi because I have heard Lisa and someone else call her Heidi. She looks like a Heidi; sometimes she wears her hair in two braids. It no longer bothers me that she looks like the person I used to love and that I think keeps calling at all hours and not saying a word.

I hear Lisa's new boyfriend, this tall guy with a lot of tattoos whose name I do not know, say something about Heidi's birthday next week. He asks: What are you going to do on your birthday, Heidi?

I don't know, she goes, probably nothing, she says.
You have to do *something*, he goes.

I have nothing to do, she goes.

She has nobody, I thought. She's like me; she is alone.

Maybe we'll take you out to dinner, Lisa goes.

You don't have to, Heidi says.

We'd be glad to, Lisa's tall boyfriend with tattoos says.

Oh, don't worry, Heidi goes.

No one should be alone on a birthday, he goes.

I have—before, she goes.

Like me, I think. I remember a birthday, a Thanksgiving, a Christmas, two Christmases, before the one I once loved moved in with me, and we were "dating" (if that was what it was, we were having sex), did not come to see me, be with me. She said society put too much pressure on these days, these events; too much expectation, she said, too much opportunity to disappoint and hurt. She said: Why become a slave to false constructs of celebration? When I showed up at her door with flowers, champagne, and a present, she burst into tears and said: Being kind and romantic is not always the best thing. She said: I'm not used to men being nice to me.

I think about this and I think that Heidi might be the same. She is saying she does not want to celebrate, but deep down she wants attention and gifts and kindness and maybe even some affection.

We'll do something, Lisa says.

If you insist, Heidi says.

We insist, the tall boyfriend with tattoos says.

What I do is something stupid but I do it anyway because I think she needs it and it makes me feel good to do it. It also makes me feel devious. And stupid; desperate. I have a vase full of flowers, fifty dollars worth, delivered to her door upstairs. I almost order the flowers from the Internet, but realize I will have to use my credit card, and she could call the company and ask who sent them, because they are going to come from 'A Secret Admirer' and I don't want her to know it is I. Frankly, I have no desire to get to know her, to talk to her, to date her, to be intimate. She looks too much like You Know Who, as I said, and right now I don't need the complication of someone in my life, I have to finish this damn screenplay and make money otherwise I will have to step outside into the world and get a regular job which I hate doing. I'd much rather write screenplays and watch TV and DVDs.

I walk three blocks down the street to a florist that is across the street from a gas station. I pick out some flowers, a blue vase, and write down the address for delivery. I accidentally put my apartment number down, too used to doing that when writing my address, I put '3' and then change it to '8' which is easy to do, the numbers resembling each other, she is in '8' and I put 'Heidi' on the front of the card, I write I hope these put a smile on your face because your smile makes your face beautiful and sign it your Secret Admirer.

I pay for the flowers and walk away and I wonder what the hell I am doing. I do not know this woman, barely spoke to her; I had accused her of being rude. I miss sending flowers to someone; I used to send them to the one I once loved and was going to marry; she would always smile when she got flowers and I loved to see her

smile because that meant she wasn't sad and she was sad all the time, she was bi-polar, that's why it never worked, she was always depressed, always believing that things were doomed, nothing would ever work out, she would be a horrible mother, she couldn't have a child with me, but when she had the flowers she would be happy and say thank you and kiss me and act like everything would all right and good from then on.

I think Heidi is sad. She looks sad. I could be projecting. I am aware that this happens to people who are alone. She is alone, she has no one, it is her birthday. But maybe she wants it that way. Maybe she's gotten out of a bad relationship.

Speaking of bad relationships, Lisa has been fighting with this new boyfriend lately, like she used to fight with the rap singer boyfriend, only these fights are less verbal and more physical—twice I have heard them hit each other, scream and yell, and then he runs away, runs down the stairs, and she calls him names and tells him to never come back but he comes back the next day.

The florist across the street from the gas station told me the flowers would be delivered by 3 P.M. This does not happen. I specified that time because I notice Heidi leaves on her bike, which is painted blue, every day around three-thirty and returns around seven-thirty. I have no idea what she does—a part-time job, maybe, or school. I want her to be home so I can hear her reaction.

She does not come home at the time she usually does. There is no one up there. I call the florist but they are closed. I am going to have words with them tomorrow. A woman in a beat-up silver Toyota Corolla pulls into my

driveway at 8 P.M. I am about to go out there and tell her not to park in my space; she gets out of the car with a vase of flowers, goes upstairs, knocks on the door. No answer. She leaves the flowers at the door.

I step outside, as if I am going to get my mail from the group of mailboxes on the side of the apartment building. I see the flowers at the door upstairs. The arrangement looks nice. Again, I wonder what the hell I am doing, spending that kind of money on someone I don't know just because she reminds me of someone I once loved and was going to have children with and broke my heart and left me sad.

I almost run up the stairs and take the flowers when I hear some voices that I think are Lisa and her tall boyfriend with tattoos. I go back inside. The voices do not belong to them, but they do come home ten minutes later, with Heidi, and they are giggling happy like they're drunk. They must have taken Heidi somewhere, had food, drinks.

I find myself wishing I had gone with them.

The three walk up the stairs and their giggling stops.

Flowers, Lisa says, are they for me?

Huh, her boyfriend says.

Maybe he thinks her ex, the rapper, sent them.

Ohhhh, Lisa goes, they're for *Heidi*.

What, Heidi says.

For you, Lisa says.

Me.

Your name.

Where did they come from?

They're just here.

This is weird, Heidi goes.

They're very nice, Lisa says.

Cooooool, the boyfriend goes.

What does it say? Lisa asks. The card.

Is this a joke, Heidi says, is someone fucking with my head?

What does the card say? Lisa goes.

Heidi's voice goes: A secret admirer.

Seriously?

The boyfriend with tattoos laughs. I imagine his tattoos laughing.

Weird, Lisa says.

Who would...?

Heidi doesn't finish her sentence.

Well, Lisa says, they *smell* nice.

The boyfriend sneezes, loudly.

Allergies, he goes.

No shit, Lisa says.

Two days later, I hear Lisa and the tall boyfriend with tattoos talking on the balcony as they smoke cigarettes:

It's still a mystery, she says.

What is, he says.

The flowers, she says.

Ah, yes, those.

But I think I solved it, she says.

Oh.

I think I know who sent them.

Who?

You, she says.

Me?

You, she says.

He laughs at that: Why do you think...?

Because you feel sorry for her, you said you did; you wanted to make her feel good, to be happy on her birthday, 'to smile' like the note said.

Why would I spend money like that on flowers, on her?

Good question. Why would you?

I wouldn't. Not even to be nice.

Tell me the truth, she says.

If I was going to buy flowers for someone, he says, I would buy them *for you*.

That's what I want to hear, Lisa says. Hey, you've *never* gotten me flowers, fucker, she goes.

I'm allergic to them, he tells her.

Right, she says.

He's like, Isn't my dick a good enough present?

Oh, shut up, she goes.

He's like, Didn't you like the box of chocolates?

And she's like, Loved them to the last bite.

So—what *if* I had sent them to her? he goes.

Well, yeah, *what if*, she's like.

Would you be mad?

What do you think, asshole.

Well, it wasn't me, he says.

It's driving her batty, Lisa goes, she can't figure it out, who it is; she's looking at every guy at work and trying to discover clues, the way this guy looks at her or another guy acts around her. She's like, 'What if it's someone I don't want it to be?' Like a married guy, the fat guy, there's this jerk who comes on to every woman at her job, but she doesn't think he would say something romantic like 'I hope these put a smile on your beautiful face.'

He's like, *Is* that romantic?

And she's like, Sure it is.

He goes, Sounds sappy.
It's *kind*, she goes, and *nice*, she says.
He goes, I like the smile on your beautiful face
Quit it, she says, you're just sounding like a jerk,
she goes.
I was *trying* to sound romantic, he says.
Not working.
He's like, I *can* be.
And she goes, Ha *ha*. Ha.
He says, You don't think so...
And she goes, Ha ha. *Ha*.
That's an insult, he says.
She goes, Your romance is in your pants.
And he's like, Now you're getting me hot.

Sometimes, at night, I can hear Lisa and this boyfriend above me, in their bedroom, having sex. I used to hear her with the other boyfriend. Heidi must hear them too, sleeping in the living room. I wonder if the sounds make her feel the way I do. When I hear Heidi walking around the living room at night, I think this is ridiculous and indeed sad: here are two lonely people, alone, and all that separates them is wood and stucco.

The world never works out the way it should.

Two-thirty in the morning: the phone rings and there's no voice, just breathing, the faint sound of a television in the background, tuned to twenty-four hour news, I think.

What is it? I say.

Talk, I say.
You can ask a question, I go.

Two weeks later, I see Heidi sitting outside a coffee house, not far from the florist, drinking coffee, eating a bagel, writing or drawing in a blue notebook. I'm getting coffee. She sees me and I see her.

I decide it is time to say hello.

I approach her.

She looks up.

I say, Hi.

She says, Hi.

She closes her notebook but I see, briefly, what she is doing—drawing a vase with flowers.

Can I join you?

She doesn't reply.

I sit across from her.

I say, We're neighbors. I thought I'd say hi.

Why? she asks.

Why not.

Do you want to accuse me of shit again?

Look, I say, that was a mistake.

She smiles.

I didn't mean anything, I say.

I'm kidding, she says, I didn't mean anything.

I tell her my name and she hesitates, and tells me hers. I don't say that I already know it.

We walk to the apartment building together. We don't talk about anything significant, just chitchat between strangers.

Well, I say.

It was nice meeting you, she says.

We're neighbors, I say.

So it seems, she goes.

She walks up the stairs and I go inside. I can hear her walking around up there. I hear her for a while. I take a nap. It's a start, at least.

I wake up from my nap to the sounds of violence. Lisa and her tall boyfriend with tattoos are at it again, and it sounds pretty awful—they both scream at each other, throw things at one another, and it sounds like he tosses her against the wall. I hear hands hitting flesh—slaps or punches, who knows, but it does not sound good.

Heidi runs down the stairs and knocks on my door.

Help, she says, can I come in...

I let her in. She's wearing blue and white pajamas, holding her blue notebook. Her feet are bare. Her toenails are painted dark blue.

I just need to be somewhere safe, she says.

Maybe I should call the cops, I say.

No, no, she says, they'll stop soon, they always stop and make nicey-nice.

It sounds bad.

It only sounds that way.

She sits down on the couch. I sit on the floor across from her.

I'm sorry, she says.

It's okay, I say.

The fighting wanes down upstairs, and stops.

There, Heidi says.

How do you, I start to say.