



The New

Neighbor

A short, short story by
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New neighbors are moving into the apartment across the hall, and are already causing a ruckus. Yelling in the stairwell and bumping into walls. Surely, it doesn't require that much noise to carry in boxes.

My friend Donna suggested I move into her senior living community for quieter surroundings. No offense to Donna or the other residents, but I'm not old enough for a senior living community, which is just another way to say *old people's home*. My birthday is next month, and I'll be sixty-one years young. I work part-time as a patient intake coordinator at New York Presbyterian, attend yoga classes twice a week, and live alone in an eclectic, hipster neighborhood. My apartment is one of four units in a charming rehabbed brownstone. That is *not* the life of an old person.

The new neighbors are now in front of the building having an argument. Steam rises from my kettle, and its high-pitched whistle cuts through the noise outside. After I turn off the stove, I move it to the back burner.

“Yo! Why are you so cheap? You should have just hired movers!”

A frustrated voice floats through my open window, and I walk closer to get a look at the culprit. Pressing myself against the small space next to the window, I peer out.

Two young men are facing off in front of a U-Haul truck. One a few inches taller than the other, a grey t-shirt stained with sweat clings to his gangly frame. The other one has a stocky build and is wearing a white undershirt, and a pair of red shorts that hang so low on his hips, you can see the black band of his underwear.

“I thought Trent and Vic were going to show up and help us!” The tall, gangly one refutes. Something in his tone makes me shudder, his voice sounding oddly familiar.

“Man, this is gonna take forever!” The stocky one complains.

He's right. I don't know how much stuff they have packed in the truck, but based on the amount of time they spend arguing—they are definitely in for a long night. Before the gangly one can reply, a small blue car pulls up next to the U-Haul.

“Where the hell have you guys been?” The stocky one yells, his arms raised in frustration.

I sigh, relieved. It looks like Trent and Vic have shown up to help after all. Two people exit the car—another stocky young man and an athletically fit young woman. I wonder if Vic is short for Victoria.

Realizing I'm too invested in the moving drama of my new neighbor, I step away from the window. The smartwatch on my wrist buzzes with a notification, I don't bother checking it. It's a reminder that my yoga class is starting in an hour. After drinking a cup of green tea with lemon and ginger, I change into my yoga clothes.

Ten minutes later, I open my front door to find the hallway blocked. Stocky One and Two are carrying in a banged-up sofa. I tuck my yoga mat under my arm and move farther down the hall to give them room to navigate.

“Oh, hi! Sorry, ma'am.” Stocky Two responds, as the arm of the sofa hits the door frame.

“Careful!” Somebody yells behind them.

Once they clear the hallway, I come face to face with the gangly one, who I assume is actually renting the apartment. He gives me a sheepish smile, and my knees buckle.

“Ma'am? Are you okay? Oh, shi—” Those are the last words I hear before everything goes dark.

I've always considered the brain to be the body's primary organ. Some would disagree and say it's the heart. Because once your heart stops beating, you're dead. But what about when your brain stops functioning? It can lead to other issues that might cause your heart to stop or make you

blackout. This could explain why I fainted, and why after I regain consciousness, I feel like I'm having a massive heart attack. Stocky One and Two both look terrified, and the lone girl in the group has a phone pressed to her ear.

“An ambulance is on the way.” A voice close to my ear announces. Someone is cradling my head as I lay sprawled on the floor.

I feel slightly stunned looking up at his face. *How is this possible?* Reaching out a shaky hand, I trace his well-defined cheekbones with my index finger. He flinches.

“Elijah?” My throat is dry and my voice strained.

He frowns. “Um, no ma'am. My name is Caleb. My grandfather's name is Elijah.”

Hearing that name makes me lightheaded and my vision starts to dim. The next time I wake up, I'm in a hospital room. There is an ECG machine monitoring my heart, and they've started an IV, probably to get fluids into my system.

“She's alive!” Someone nearby declares, and I groan.

They took me to the hospital where I work.

“Hello, Dr. Chavez.” I clear my throat and sit up. Knowing him, he's probably ordered every medical test known to man.

“Anita Parker, my favorite intake coordinator. And the healthiest person I know. What happened?” He asks, approaching my bedside and pulling out his penlight.

As he examines me, I tell him I think my brain may have shut down for a second. This turns out to be a mistake because now he wants to do an MRI. I won't argue with his assessment since I am clearly having some type of an episode. An episode that made me believe I saw my husband, Elijah. A man I haven't seen since I was twenty-three. A man I abandoned along with our two young children over thirty-eight years ago.

“What do you want me to tell your ‘boy toy’ in the waiting room?” Dr. Chavez waggles his eyebrows.

“Boy toy? What are you—” *The neighbor. Caleb.* “He’s here?” I ask, shocked he stuck around.

“Oh wow, I was kidding. Is he really your boyfriend?” Dr. Chavez looks stricken.

I scowl. “Stop being disgusting. He was moving into the apartment across from mine. He’s young enough to be my grandson!”

My grandfather’s name is Elijah. Did he say that? Or had I imagined it?

I ask Dr. Chavez to bring Caleb to my room. A few minutes later, Caleb knocks before opening the door and poking his head in.

“Come in.” I say.

He stuffs his hands in his pockets, walking into the room. “Are you okay?” He asks.

The timbre of his voice sounds so much like Elijah’s at that age. A voice I have never been able to forget. Even after decades of medication and therapy.

I nod before words tumble from my mouth. “Yeah, I’m fine. The doctor wants to run some tests as a precaution. But I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me. You get back home and finish moving in.” I smile.

His eyes study my face for a long time. And I remain stock-still under his scrutiny. I think he might ask me if I know his grandfather, but he doesn’t. Instead, he turns abruptly and heads back to the door. I need to ask Dr. Chavez to order an echocardiogram because this feeling in my chest definitely isn’t normal.

Caleb stops with his hand on the door handle.

“My dad’s name is Darius.” He throws the words over his shoulder.

My gasp is loud and almost strangled at hearing my first-born son's name. Caleb's shoulders sag as he walks out the door, leaving me alone with the mounting pressure in my chest, and the haunting memories of another life.