

NEIGHBORS
by Dave Biscella

Stacy arrived home shortly after 5 o'clock just like every Friday. She entered her small apartment building and walked up the few steps to get to her second floor apartment. The building only had four apartments in it. Stacey's was on the second floor, across from some guy who seemed to always be out of town for weeks at a time. The apartment below her was empty, and had been for a little over a month, and across from that one lived Aarron, somebody Stacy had really only ever seen out her window and never actually talked to.

As Stacy went up the stairs and entered her apartment, closing the door behind her, Aarron exited his apartment and headed up the stairs. He'd lived in this building almost three years now, and this is the first he's ever went up those stairs. He heard Stacy come home almost every day, but has never once spoken to her. Yet.

Aarron reached the top of the steps and immediately turned his shoulders to Stacy's door, lifting his arm and knocking weakly. He knocked twice, then took a step back and waited patiently. The sound of the chain latching could be heard through the door, before the door opened slightly.

"Hi," Stacy said hesitantly as she peeked through the small opening in the door. "Did you need help with something?"

"Can I kill you?" Aarron asked without hesitation and without stepping towards the door.

"Excuse me?" Stacy responded in a bit of shock.

"That came out wrong, I apologize," Aarron began to explain before taking a deep breath and starting over "Would you like me to kill you?"

Stacy continued looking through the crack in the door, confused. Aaron wasn't being forceful, he wasn't approaching the door, he didn't seem threatening at all. "What's stopping me from calling the cops right now, weirdo?"

"Nothing," Aaron answered. "I'm not threatening you at all. Just simply asking. If you say 'no', I'll gladly go back to my apartment and we can go on with our weekends."

"Why would you ask that?"

"I want to do something with my life. I've been where you are. I know how sad and lonely it can be. I've been through it and know how much easier it'd be if it were all just over, but that it's hard to do it yourself. I'm better now, and I just want to do something with my life. Helping you would give me some sort of purpose."

Stacy continued staring at Aaron through the small opening. She had been sad and lonely, and has often thought about how much easier it'd be if it were all over. She has been feeling like she doesn't have anything to live for. She knew she had no family nearby, and no friends. She had no desire to date. No desire to find a hobby. She had given up on almost everything. "What makes you think I'm sad and lonely?"

"I accidentally threw something away the other night that I needed," Aaron began to explain. "And I had to go through the trash can outside. I ended up opening a bag from your apartment, and in it were at least five suicide notes that you crumpled up and threw away. So, I just assumed that it's something you want, but that you can't get up the nerve to do yourself."

"Maybe it was for an art project or something," Stacy tried to deflect. "How do you know you have the whole story?" She didn't know why she was being so defensive. She did write those notes. She did want to go through with it, but just couldn't.

“It’s a Yes/No question,” Aarron asked again. “Would you like me to kill you? You can write the note. I’ll make it look like you did it. It’ll be just like you did it, but you won’t actually have to do it.”

Stacy stared at him, knowing she should slam the door shut and call her landlord or the police or anybody. This was so odd and not right. Was she in danger? Should she be afraid? She wasn’t. Aarron wasn’t physically imposing. If he did try to force his way in, she was confident she could fight him off. Aarron seemed calm and she truly believed that if she said ‘no’ he would go back to his apartment and they’d both go on like this conversation has never happened. “I can’t answer that right now.”

Aarron smiled as Stacy shut the door. “OK,” he said a little louder to ensure she’d hear him through the door. “I’ll be right here when you’re ready to answer.”

THE NEXT MORNING

Stacy woke up and went through her normal Saturday morning routine. Shower, cereal and banana, brush teeth. Throughout her whole routine, she couldn’t help but think about how weird last night’s conversation was. Maybe Aarron was drunk. Maybe he went back to his apartment when she closed the door and forgot all about it when he woke up. This was probably just a random one time thing and they won’t speak again just like they haven’t for the previous 18 months since she moved in.

Before putting on her regular morning workout video, she looked over to the door and noticed it was still chained. She never chains the door, as the building is in a safe neighborhood. Last night while talking to Aarron was the first time she’d ever latched it. She decided to go over to the door and open it again without undoing the chain just yet.

The second the doorknob turned, Aaron popped up from the floor and put his face where the opening would be. "Do you have an answer yet?" he asked as soon as Stacy's face appeared in the opening.

"What the hell?" Stacy said, startled a bit. "Did you stay outside my door all night?"

"I wanted to be ready when you made up your mind."

Stacy knew she should have been pretty creeped out by the stranger from downstairs being outside her door the entire night as she slept, but part of her thought it was somewhat sweet. "Do you want a banana?"

Aaron smiled and nodded his head. Stacy shut the door for a brief moment, before reopening it and handing a banana out the opening.

"Thank you," Aaron said politely as he grabbed the banana.

"I'm still not ready," Stacy said before closing the door again.

A FEW HOURS LATER

Stacy had done her normal Saturday afternoon chores and fixed herself a small lunch. She really had no plans for the rest of the day. She knew she couldn't leave because of the weirdo parked outside her door, but it didn't really matter. She didn't like leaving the house anyways, and rarely did on weekends. She took a look at her door, knowing she should stay away from it, but she couldn't help herself.

Aaron's ears perked up as the door began to open. He stood up to face the door.

"How you holding up?" Stacy asked through the door.

"I'm good, thanks," he answered. "That banana will keep me going all day."

“So what’s your deal?” she asked, realizing it sounded rude worded that way, but she just had to ask.

“Nothing really.”

“You rarely leave the apartment. Do you work?”

“Not really, no,” Aaron answered. “I had some thing a few years ago, a bad reaction to some medicine. I got a decent amount of money as a result. Not enough to be rich, but enough to not have to leave the house. What about you? You rarely leave this place either, except for work through the week.”

Stacy didn’t really want to have a conversation. She began wondering why she asked him in the first place. She avoids any conversations she can as she’s not much of a people person at this point in her life. “My fiance died a couple years ago.” Stacy caught herself off guard. She didn’t mean to say that, but it just came out. That’s the first time she’s said that out loud, despite thinking about it every day.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Aaron said sympathetically, his kind eyes showing genuine sorrow. “Is that why you are how you are?”

“I don’t think so,” Stacy answered. “I started to get this way while he was still here. He was growing more and more miserable. I wasn’t the girl he fell in love with anymore. He’d have left eventually anyways. One way or another.”

Stacy couldn’t believe that she was talking about this with another human being. For the first time in a long time, she felt safe. She continued opening up, telling Aaron about moments of her childhood she’s never shared with anybody. Aaron listened attentively to every word, and shared plenty of moments in his life that he’d never shared with anybody before. The conversation went on, and kept going. Even though Aaron was on the other of the door, this was the closest Stacy has felt to anybody in years.

Hours went by before Stacy realized how late it had gotten. "Oh, my. It's late," she said with a smile. "I really should get to bed. I have a big day tomorrow of not going anywhere or doing anything."

"Me too," Aarron chuckled. "But this is more important, so I'll be right here if you need me."

Stacy's smile slowly faded away. "So, why do you want to do this? If you really wanted to help, wouldn't you want to talk me out of it or cheer me up? Try to convince me there are things worth living for?"

"Is there?" Aarron asked.

"Well, no," Stacy responded. "But shouldn't you be trying to convince me otherwise? Wouldn't you feel more useful if you made me want to live instead of helping me end it all?"

"I've been in the dark spot that you are. I wanted it over. I didn't want convinced, because I couldn't be. If I'd have ended it when I wanted to, what would I have missed? This amazing life I live where I'm afraid to go out and see people? Where I have no friends? I finally feel better, but I still have nothing to look forward to. If I help you, it gives me purpose. And it hopefully gives me what I need to want to start living again. I need to know I lived for something."

"You don't think there's any other way?" Stacy asked. "For either of us?"

"I don't know," Aarron answered, resting his head against the wall outside her door. "I guess I'll have to figure that out after you give me an answer."

Stacy sat there silent for a moment. Despite the odd circumstances, this was one of the better days of her life, and definitely the best conversation she's had in years. "Good night, Aarron," she said, closing the door.

THE NEXT MORNING

Stacy barely slept through the night. Part of her had hoped Aaron had given up and went back down to his own apartment. The other part of her felt a weight lifted off her shoulders. Talking about everything felt good. It made her feel at ease.

She showered, had her cereal and banana, and brushed her teeth. And for the first time in years, she randomly smiled. Today felt like a new day, a new everything. It all seemed so clear for the first time ever. Stacy felt whole. She felt complete.

Stacy looked over at her door, the chain still latched. She stared at it for a few minutes, smiling. She walked over to it and reached for the chain. Aaron popped to his feet when hearing Stacy on the other side. The chain fell against the door. Stacy turned the knob and opened the door wide. Aaron stood surprised on the other side as it swung open. Without saying a word, Stacy turned around and walked back into her apartment.

Aaron smiled and followed her, closing the door behind them.