

# Good Neighbors

A Short Story

by Cathy Ryan



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**I AWAKEN IN THE MIDDLE** of the night. At least I think it must be the middle of the night. The room is dark and there's no street noise outside. My wife snores softly beside me, casting off her bit of warmth. I lie still so as not to disturb her. Perhaps I can fall off to sleep again.

The cat isn't buying it. She sleeps at the foot of our bed. She begins to purr, rises and picks her way between us to the head of the bed. She sniffs my hair. I continue to feign sleep. Really, I'd rather sleep through to morning, but she knows as well as I do that it's futile. She purrs closer, her mouth open now and pats my cheek, her claws not fully sheathed. How does she know? A change in my breathing, perhaps.

I wonder what time it is, but my right eye, the one that can see the clock on the nightstand on my wife's side of the bed, that eye isn't opening yet. Give it time.

I have to pee. I think of the woman downstairs. She doesn't like my early-rising ways although I try to be quiet. I don't really have to pee, I tell myself. Ignore it.

These creaking floors don't hide the fact that we live very close to each other. She complained to the Super this week that I get up too early. She told him she can hear me walking around upstairs and she can't sleep.

"Can you keep it down?" he asked me.

Honestly, I don't know if I can be any quieter than I already am. I don't even put my shoes on. I make coffee and sit in the kitchen reading the newspaper until daylight, or I go back to bed again. The screen door squeals whenever I open it to fetch the paper. Maybe she hears that squeal and it wakes her up.

I still have to pee. There's nothing like ignoring that particular need to make it worse. She's been ill practically since she got here, so I try to cut her some slack. But now, I simply must get up. I shuffle off to the bathroom, aware that I'm walking above her sleeping head, and try to make no sound that might awaken her. Still, the floors creak. I raise the water level in the commode a bit and close the lid without flushing. That much noise I can postpone. I shuffle back to bed.

What now? Get up or lie back down? Maybe it's the percolator in the kitchen that disturbs her. It's a wheezing, whistling relic. Ah, my right eye opens. I look across the shadow-mound of my slumbering wife to the clock. One A.M.

I lie back down. Can't turn on the light here and read. That would wake up my honey. I stroke the cat and think about the situation with the lady downstairs. She wants her cousin to move in here, him and his wife and child. But we moved here over thirty years ago after the kids moved away. They went to the four corners when they moved, too. Julia, my honey, said we raised them to be free and unafraid. She's right about that. Still, I wish - never mind.

Change. It seems to get harder every year. This is our place and we don't want to move again. Not ever.

I remember when she first moved in down there. That was before her first surgery. She was bad about throwing her trash out the window, but I told her we don't do that here. I showed her the trash can and explained how the town will pick up once a week if she'll put it out. She caught on after a while and now I take her trash can down with ours and bring it back up again and there's no more litter. When my grandson comes, we go to the park rather than stay inside. He likes that and it doesn't disturb her rest.

Maybe she just wants more company. I could make her a pan of my world-famous paella. Everybody likes that. No lactose. Gluten-free. Seems like everybody is allergic to something these days. Makes it hard to cook for them. Gotta keep the peace, get along. Make it work.

This is home. Later today, I'll make the paella.



**THE TOWN TRASH TRUCK** whines and clatters and that's when I realize I'd fallen asleep again. "Rise and shine," I say and pat my honey's hip. I throw my legs out from the covers and fall face first out of bed. The fall knocks the breath out of me and my cheek begins to swell against the hardwood floor. I lie there a minute until my right eye, the one that can see, opens. It's daylight.

Thump. Thump. Thump. I feel the end of her broomstick beating on the floor under my cheek. "You okay up there, Mr. Thomas?"

I push up onto my elbows and shove onto one hip. I look across the narrow empty bed. Wife and cat are both long gone. The pain of knowing that again chokes me so I can't answer her question right away. I untangle my useless legs and find I've pissed myself in the night.

"Mr. Thomas?"

I don't want her to see me like this.

"I'm coming up." She has a key.

"No, don't come. I'm alright." She'll probably come up anyway.

Still lying on the floor, I shuck off the sodden pajama bottoms and pull on a dry pair from the drawer behind me. I grab the wheelchair to pull it closer and just sit a moment

before prying myself up into it. I'll strip the bed first and then make up a batch of paella for the downstairs lady, an apology for her early morning fright. Change gets harder every day and she's a good neighbor.

THE END