

DAN VANVIK

The Enemy Next Door

“You’re not going to say anything to him, right?” Marcie asked her husband. She was sitting at her stool at the black granite kitchen island, Sunday paper spread out in front of her. Pen in hand, she was halfway through the Sudoku puzzle, her Sunday ritual.

Her husband was standing at the condo door, down the short hall from the kitchen, one eye peering into the peeper. No reply. He simply reached behind his back and vigorously waved her off.

She persisted, “Please, John, don’t start trouble with the neighbors.”

Again, no reply. She flipped up her middle finger to the general direction of his backside and resumed her puzzle, sipping coffee from a chipped and faded mug that read ‘Teacher of the Year’. She introduced this unseen one finger salute about a month into the pandemic, nine months ago now. *The Bird* somehow served to assuage her anger and she regretted not using it in the earlier decades of their marriage. It might have helped to avoid petty bickering.

John finally turned back from the door and began his usual grumbling about their condo neighbor, “Damn! I missed him again! Since the mask mandate, he’s apparently been skulking around like a cat burglar, even closes the door more quietly. I’m having a hell of a time catching him maskless—even when I sprint to the peeper.”

“C’mon John,” Marcie said. “The email from the association said masks are a ‘recommendation’. You’re getting all riled up about nothing.”

“Nothing? Look, an unmasked face is like an unholstered gun, a

threat to us as well as the rest of the people in the building. Keep in mind the infectiousness, who knows how many people his political beliefs are putting at risk?”

She agreed with most of John’s rantings but didn’t tell him outright, fearing he might take it as an endorsement and actually act on one of his threats. Instead, she pushed back a bit.

“Political beliefs? You’re just guessing. Maybe he can’t wear a mask because of a preexisting condition.”

“I doubt it. He looks to be in pretty good condition, I’d say early fifties, and if he has a condition, it’s either a bad case of machismo or runaway Trumpism. Either way, anti-maskers and virus deniers are sick fucks and if they get Covid they should either get their health insurance premiums doubled or lose their citizenship because they don’t give a fuck about their fellow citizens.”

John’s use of F-bombs—not a common occurrence—put her on red alert and she stopped sipping her coffee and placed it back on the countertop too quickly, slopping a bit on her paper in the process. His unsettling anger was scrambling up the same steep slope as the soaring death toll.

“That’s crazy talk, John,” she said. “Whatever happened to the mild-mannered man I married? Please, let’s not get on bad terms with the neighbors. They’ve been here just a few months and they’re pleasant enough when I see them in the lobby.”

“I’m going to talk to him,” he said, as he turned to walk back to the condo door. “He can run, but he can’t hide.”

She looked him over as he turned away, wearing his 24/7 uniform of grey University of Minnesota sweatshirt over red plaid flannel pajama bottoms. White tennis, unlaced. Matted grey bed hair. Once a week he had what he called a ‘spa day’, when he showered, shaved his stubble and changed to his other quarantine uniform—the blue flannel pajama.

“Are you going like that?” she asked. “Maybe you can at least put on a pair of jeans?”

“Why?” he said. “I’ve got underwear on. It’s not like I’m going commando here.”

“Crude, John. At least don’t forget your mask.”

He gave her a look, but pulled an N95 mask out of a pocket. “If I

contract Covid,” he said, as he put it on, “I’m taking our unneighborly neighbor down with me.”

She spoke, more firmly now: “So, you’ve tried the anonymous note on their door and glaring at him in the hallway, and now you’re giving up on the civilized approach?” She folded the paper over the sudoku, her peaceful ritual violated.

He gave her a look but opened the door without answering and let it slam behind him as he stepped out into the hallway.

She flipped him off again. Soon she heard John’s knock on the neighbor’s door followed by unintelligible voices.

She turned back to concentrate on the puzzle, but her thoughts soon drifted into recalling the months in lockdown. The minor thrill of pandemic perks like scant traffic and abundant parking spaces in the city, had waned early on. To break the monotony, Marcie planned ‘contactless’ day trips to Minnesota state parks and wooded hikes around scenic towns along the St. Croix River. She also tried the smaller pleasures more frequently, like candles at dinner or flowers delivered from Trader Joe’s.

As high school teachers—he math, she biology—they only considered the guidelines of science and medicine, not the buffoons, not the conspiracists, and they frequently reminded themselves that their circumstances were less dire and more comfortable than most of the world.

The guidelines were necessary, but irksome, particularly when they visited their daughter. Hugs were prohibited. Their daughter banished them to a corner of the backyard, safe-distancing in matching lawn chairs, mere grandparent yard ornaments, barely acknowledged by the grandkids playing at least six feet away at all times. Their son quickly followed suit, suggesting they use the same protocol when they visited him.

When Minnesota’s weather prohibited lawn visits, they grudgingly settled in to Zooming with family and friends and hunkering down with books and Netflix.

As the epidemic dragged on, Marcie was surprised to realize she was faring much better than John. He became more taciturn and, when he did speak, he was quicker to anger, especially when he yelled at the news clips of the president peddling falsehoods about

the pandemic or making dangerous comments about ingesting Clorox or comparing Covid to ‘a bad flu’.

Marcie finally returned to the sudoku but, unable to focus, soon gave it up and turned back to the front page of the paper and the overwhelmingly bad news she was trying to avoid—Covid, racial unrest and the uptick in shootings and general violence in Minneapolis. After reading a couple of pages of negative headlines, she fell back to worrying about her husband. As the long months passed—death toll ticking up relentlessly—his dark eyes had grown dull, the quote mark frown between them deepening. Seemed to her that he was either angry and in a very dark place, or he was listless, a sail without a wind, a face without a smile, a chin without a shave.

She felt his anger stemmed from the huge scope of the pandemic and the fact that he couldn’t directly help his family to escape the virus. He simply couldn’t get his arms around the problem—too many versions of the truth, too many people disputing the facts. He was accustomed to the absolute truths of discrete, tidy problems and there were none to be found in the politics of the pandemic. Too many people were listening to fake news, like that spewed by the talking heads at a particular network who all agreed that the coronavirus was ‘nothing more than a bad cold or flu, nothing to worry about’.

John needed a specific target to vent his anger, not the politicians in Washington DC, and not the intangible virus itself, spread through invisible respiratory droplets by the unwitting to the unwitting. He eventually was able to parse the problem down to the anti-maskers and, more specifically, the convenient target living right next door.

When she heard the key in the lock, Marcie snapped out of her musings and looked up as John entered. He closed the door quietly behind him, and began moving down the condo’s entryway, shoulders slumped, mouth slightly agape, and pallid as she’d ever seen him.

“So, what happened?” she asked.

“Dead.”

“Dead!” she said. “What did you do?”

“Hold your horses. I did nothing. Covid killed him.”

“But what happened,” she said. “You talk to his wife?”

“Yeah. So, his wife’s crying when she opens the door, tears soaking her mask, and there’s a couple of bouquets of flowers on the countertop in back of her, so I figure right away that he’s sick or dead, so I ask how he’s doing—in that sort of concerned way—and she says, ‘He died of Covid two days ago.’”

“My God, what did you say to her?”

“I said what people always say, ‘I’m sorry, my thoughts are with you...et cetera.’”

She gave him a long look.

“Seriously,” he said. “I felt sorry for her.”

Marcie nodded her head for a moment without changing her expression and asked: “But how do you feel about him? And please don’t say anything about ‘just rewards.’”

“I have to think about that for a bit,” he said quietly, moving past her toward the study.

Death seemed to have mollified him, as it often does, to the enemies left behind.

She returned to her sudoku still shocked. But also relieved, and hopeful that the neighbor’s death might mark John’s first steps back to his pre-pandemic self.

She decided against flipping the bird.