

THE NEIGHBOURS

By Dylan Brenneis – February, 2017

Sally and William Jones were moving out of the house across the street, and I watched from my living room window as they methodically packed box after box from the rickety front step into the back of the moving van. I briefly considered going out to see them off and perhaps help move a few boxes, but a glance at the scarlet thermometer on the front porch quickly dashed that idea to the back of my mind. Even from across the street I could see the beads of perspiration gathering on Will's expansive forehead as he heaved a particularly heavy looking box onto the truck from the hand-cart.

I had never much liked Will. He was the sort of fellow who would slap you on the back just a little too hard, pretending to be the best of chums at whatever backyard barbecue or block party was going on that week. He'd borrowed my hammer last December, and I still had yet to see it back. Ten-to-one it was stuffed away in one of those old cartons he'd salvaged from the recycling depot to save a few bucks on the move.

As I absent-mindedly cranked the dial on the air-conditioner, I watched the waves of heat dance on the pavement, looking like small pools of water... certainly not a good day to be lugging boxes. On some level it seemed like justice that Will should be condemned to manual labour in heat like this, but I have to admit that I felt sorry for his poor wife. She was a kind person, and often babysat our kids when Carol and I went out. She was not built for this kind of work, and was clearly struggling with all but the lightest boxes. Again that compunction returned, compelling me to go out and help. I even started to open the door, but the California summer air slapped me in the face like a moist washcloth, and I quickly retreated.

A while later I saw that they were more or less done with boxes, and starting to move the heavy furniture. When they emerged from the house holding the sofa one at each end, I knew something bad was going to happen. Sally exited first, which put her on the downside of the four-stair descent. Will, that jerk, took the lighter job at the top of the stairs, and was calling out directions to his wife below, telling her to "move a little left, now down, twist a little... that's it," when all of a sudden the unimaginable happened.

Will vanished into thin air.

I stood in complete amazement and shock, unable to process what had just happened. Only when the sofa came crashing down to earth pinning poor Sally beneath it did my body finally kick into action. I bolted out the door, barely noticing how thick the air felt with the heat, and sprinted across the street without even looking for traffic. When I got to the scene, my heart jolted and I had to look away for a moment. I put the back of my hand across my mouth, feeling like I might be upset. Things did not look good for Sally.

I heaved the sofa off to the side, and it landed with a thud in the flowerbed. Sally took a sharp and rasping breath in. There was a gurgling sound in her throat that made me think she must have broken a few ribs... perhaps more than a few. She lifted a weak and shaky hand, and I took it, staring into her wild and frightened eyes. She was trying to say something.

"Don't talk," I interrupted. She needed to take it easy. "I'm going to call an ambulance; you're going to be okay." I couldn't help feeling like that was a lie. Things really didn't look good. I fumbled for my cell phone, and began to dial 9-1-1.

"No," she croaked. I was surprised she could make out any words at all.

"No?" I was confused. And with her dying breath she replied,

"I've lost my Will to lift."